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The Anatomy of Power

From Instinct to Illusion

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About This Edition

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Contents

Introduction. The House We Build Above Ourselves	4
Part One. What Holds the Building Up	6
1. Before There Was a Right	6
2. The Price of Peace of Mind	9
3. The Voice People Believe	13
Part Two. The Closed Rooms	18
4. The Person on the Top Floor	18
5. The Tower in Your Pocket	21
6. The Institution That Performs Work Instead of Doing It	25
Part Three. Exits and New Foundations	29
7. A Place for the Word “No”	29
8. Living Together After Refusal	32
Conclusion. The Right to Rebuild	37

Introduction. The House We Build Above Ourselves

Power is easiest to notice at the moment of collision. Someone gives an order; someone refuses. A door closes, a decision takes effect, another person's will changes our life. Yet long before the collision, power is already present in the arrangement of the room: in who may speak first, whose signature is required, who sets the agenda, and who was not invited. Sometimes it is so familiar that we mistake it for the air.

We create it to reduce our dependence on chance. We need roads we can travel, promises we can trust, rules that allow strangers to live beside one another. We want the strong to be prevented from taking whatever they please from the weak. A common force emerges for that purpose. Before long, however, another question arises: who will protect us from that force itself?

So begins a story without a final chapter. People assemble power out of their fears and hopes, then discover that the building they have raised is blocking the sky. They alter its arrangement, open windows, remove walls, sometimes demolish it altogether. On the cleared ground, they must once again agree about water, bread, safety, and the right to have the last word.

This book considers power as an arrangement for living together. We will be concerned not only with a ruler's desires but with the stairways down which decisions reach everyone else; not only with violence but with consent; not only with solemn promises but with the quiet habits of an institution. Every such arrangement has an anatomy. Some parts are visible to everyone; others reveal themselves only when they stop working.

First we will examine how differences between people become lasting advantages, and how the need for order establishes grounds for obedience. Then we will explore the ways power explains its own right to rule. After that, we will enter its closed rooms: the places where control ceases to serve a purpose, ritual replaces results, and a person who has reached the summit can no longer distinguish themselves from the office they occupy.

The final part concerns ways out. Leaving one room is not enough if the entire house follows the same plan. Yet the dream of immediately building a perfect society can also become the beginning of a new coercion. Between submission and final deliverance lies a space of concrete acts: refusal, mutual aid, limited authority, the right to argue, the possibility of replacing those entrusted with a decision.

Neither biology nor history supplies a ready-made verdict. Power can turn protection into dependency, but that does not mean every act of protection was a deception from the start. It can hide behind the law, but that does not make law invariably useless. We must take the mechanism apart precisely to see distinctions that disappear inside an explanation that is too elegantly complete.

We will move from instinct to illusion without treating either as the last truth about humanity. Between them lie work, fear, imagination, agreement, and the ability to revise agreements. That is where the essential action takes place.

Part One. What Holds the Building Up

1. Before There Was a Right

Sooner or later, a forest appears in any conversation about power. We seem to be invited out of the city, with all its laws, to witness a primary scene: the strong take the best place, the weak yield, and everyone else remembers the arrangement. Parliament, the crown, and the director's office then look like decorated extensions of a single ancient struggle.

There is a recognizable measure of truth in this picture. Human beings are living creatures; vulnerability, rivalry, attachment, and the search for safety belong to our existence before any political theory does. We feel it when we are pushed aside and take pleasure in the growth of our influence. Social position is experienced through the body: tension, sleeplessness, relief, confidence in movement.

Yet a considerable distance separates this observation from the claim that power is written entirely into the organism. Talk of a “hormone of dominance” cannot bridge it. Research on primates shows that the relationship between position in a group and stress changes with living conditions and the stability of social relations. The top rung does not confer a permanent certificate of calm, and the bottom rung does not explain the entire fate of the creature occupying it.

The image of a leader who needs only to be the strongest is particularly tempting. But influence also depends on alliances, experience, and the ability to maintain relationships. Even in an animal community, there is more to see than a contest between

two bodies. We should be more cautious still when applying that picture to human beings, whose life together includes memory, language, learning, and the deliberate alteration of rules.

Biology helps explain why recognition is pleasant and helplessness painful. It does not decide who has the right to levy taxes, how long a mandate should last, or why one person may humiliate another. An account of a feeling's origin does not yet justify a social order. The antiquity of a desire does not make it law.

Imagine a small group crossing unfamiliar country. One person reads tracks well, another knows plants, a third can find water. Their influence arises from the task and may change with it. Whoever leads in the morning asks for advice that evening. This is not a photograph of one universal prehistoric past, but a simple model of functional authority: people listen to the person whose skill is needed at that moment.

Such influence already contains the possibility of inequality, but it does not yet require permanent domination. Its basis can be examined: was the road found, was the wound treated, was the dispute settled or made more dangerous? Failure need not destroy trust, but the connection between trust and the work remains visible.

The turning point comes when an advantage outlives the task that produced it. Someone once saved the others and now expects obedience in everything. A son inherits the respect earned by his father. The right to distribute a shared catch quietly becomes the right to determine who owns it. The memory of a useful act turns into ownership of future decisions.

A story becomes necessary here. Lasting superiority is difficult to maintain through fresh demonstrations every day; it needs a

narrative that makes it seem natural. The leader is no longer merely capable but chosen. A piece of luck becomes a sign of destiny, a victory evidence of an exceptional nature. Defeat is explained by the disloyalty of others, leaving the essential belief intact: the victor belongs to a different order.

Heroic poetry lets us feel the force of this transformation. Achilles in the Iliad seeks more than practical success. Glory offers a continuation beyond the brevity of his life. The hero becomes someone people will speak about after his death, and that promise changes the value of every action. Victory no longer belongs only to the present day; it must secure a name in human memory.

The entire history of states cannot be derived from one epic. Yet it clearly voices a desire that will accompany power in many forms: to turn a limited human existence into something lasting. If a person cannot overcome mortality, they may try to overcome oblivion. Other people's lands, buildings, laws, and lives then become materials for a monument to the self.

In the figure of Alexander the Great, military action is closely joined to heroic self-presentation. In the figure of Genghis Khan, the unification of steppe forces is joined to a belief in a heavenly purpose. These cases differ and cannot be placed on a single ladder of development. They show something else: practical success can acquire such a powerful symbolic extension that further expansion begins to look like the fulfillment of a higher order.

Sacralization changes the relationship between an instruction and an objection. As long as a leader makes mistakes as a human being, someone can correct them. If destiny itself speaks through the leader, doubt becomes a disturbance of the world. The subordinate is no longer arguing about a road or a harvest; they are accused of failing to understand their place in the universe.

Even the most exalted power remains dependent on earthly things. It needs people to carry orders, collect resources, feed armies, and sustain loyalty. The image of an absolute ruler conceals numerous intermediaries. The more complete the ruler's independence appears, the more important the network that makes that appearance possible.

We have reached our first essential distinction. The desire to influence, useful authority, established privilege, and sacred right are not identical. They may turn into one another, but each transition requires conditions and actions. If we combine them all under the word “instinct,” we lose the very thing we need to understand: how the ability to lead becomes the impossibility of objecting.

A different argument awaits us in the next room. Power will speak no longer of glory and election, but of safety. It will invite us to look out of the window and imagine what would happen if it disappeared.

2. The Price of Peace of Mind

Fear of power rarely exists apart from fear of its disappearance. A person may hate arbitrary rule and still dread the day when all common rules cease to operate. They know a ruler can be cruel, but also that an armed neighbor may be no better. Between these dangers, they must seek an arrangement that does not demand daily heroism merely to sustain an ordinary life.

Thomas Hobbes brought this anxiety into sharp focus. His state of nature is a thought experiment about a world without a common force capable of securing commitments. Wanting peace yourself is not enough if you cannot be sure of another person's intentions.

Even a cautious person begins preparing for an attack, and those preparations become a threat to the neighbor. Distrust produces the violence everyone was trying to avoid.

In this model, the most destructive thing is not constant fighting but the impossibility of reliably counting on tomorrow. What you sow can be taken; what is promised may never happen; work loses its point when its fruits are unprotected. Fear shortens the horizon. A person becomes occupied with immediate survival and stops building things that require time and trust.

The experience of the English Civil Wars gave Hobbes's argument particular urgency. Yet *Leviathan* should be read as a political argument, not as an established chronicle of prehistoric humanity. His social contract explains why people might recognize a common sovereign. It does not report a meeting once attended by all our ancestors.

The proposed escape is to create a force greater than any individual participant. People mutually accept submission to a common decision so that promises no longer depend on goodwill alone. *Leviathan* inspires fear, but through that fear is supposed to release them from numerous lesser terrors. Its immense shadow appears to be the price of a quieter day.

A difficulty emerges here that no solemnity of agreement can remove. The common force can protect commitments, or turn its strength against those who recognized it. In Hobbes's argument, the sovereign receives exceptionally broad powers, although self-preservation remains a central foundation of the construction. Later political thought will contest the limits: which rights cannot be surrendered, how power's actions can be examined, and what makes resistance justified.

“Freedom in exchange for security” sounds like a transaction with a clear price, but both sides are usually named too broadly. Which freedom is to be surrendered? Who receives which power, and for how long? What counts as achieved security? Without answers, the exchange becomes an open account on which society keeps paying more, unable to establish whether the promise has been fulfilled.

After upheaval, the desire for order may outweigh distrust of a strong hand. Napoleon's rise allows us to see this combination of exhaustion, hope, and coercion. Legal and administrative reconstruction accompanied the concentration of power. Yet saying “the French chose order” would conceal the differences among them, the means by which dissenters were excluded, and the parts of the story that do not fit an image of unanimous choice.

Similar care is needed when discussing Russian politics after the crises of the 1990s. The promise of stability became an important language for justifying centralization. That does not mean everyone shared a single fear and desire, or that one cause can explain their behavior. Political explanation loses accuracy when an entire society is assigned a single soul.

These stories share a question that does not require a fiction of unanimity. How does a temporary emergency power become permanent? While danger is close, a restriction seems understandable. When the danger recedes, an apparatus already exists that has grown accustomed to administering the restriction. It can find new reasons to preserve its role. The door closed for the storm remains locked in fine weather.

Power also arises around tasks that fear alone cannot explain. A shared canal must be cleared, a bridge maintained, a dispute about water resolved. If everyone takes for themselves without

contributing to common work, use of a resource can destroy the resource itself. Coordination is required, and the problem is real.

It does not follow that coordination must come from a single center. In the initial argument about the canal, an inevitable ruler appears too easily: because water is shared, someone must command everyone. Yet between the absence of rules and unlimited authority lie many ways of reaching agreement. Users can establish arrangements themselves, monitor compliance, and revise them when conditions change.

Elinor Ostrom's research demonstrated the importance of such forms of governing shared resources. They do not promise universal harmony: intelligible obligations, participation, and monitoring are needed. Their significance for our discussion is more modest, and more important, than a utopia. The need for order does not, by itself, determine a single permissible form of power.

The argument should therefore concern specific arrangements, rather than a choice between chaos and an all-powerful savior. Who knows local conditions? Who bears the consequences of a mistake? Who can obtain reconsideration? Who controls the information without which everyone else must take things on trust? Sometimes a common center is needed, sometimes a distribution of tasks, and more often a combination of levels of responsibility.

Security becomes a dangerous justification when it cannot be examined. The common good becomes an empty phrase when we cannot see who receives the benefit and who bears the cost. Even necessary power needs an account of its limits that can be invoked against power itself. Otherwise, necessity quietly turns into immunity.

We build order so that we do not wake each morning in an unknowable world. But a decent order must preserve the possibility of changing it without catastrophe. This is the difference between stability and immobility. The first allows life to proceed; the second demands that life continually adapt to preserving the structure.

Power that wants to endure is rarely satisfied with explaining its usefulness. It wants obedience to be experienced as a duty. Discussion of security thus brings us to another question: why does an order sound to us like a right, rather than merely someone else's wish?

3. The Voice People Believe

Two people make the same demand. One is obeyed; the other is refused. Sometimes weapons explain the difference, but often something invisible does: recognition of authority. We believe the first person is entitled to make the demand, even when it displeases us. That recognition forms an important part of what we call legitimacy.

Legitimacy should not be confused with moral blamelessness or simple legality. A law can be enacted without society considering it just; a popular leader can act outside the rules. Legitimacy concerns the grounds of recognition rather than granting moral approval to every recognized order. People can believe in injustice and doubt what is necessary.

Pure coercion is expensive. Every movement needs watching; disobedience has to be continually suppressed. Consent changes the arrangement: a person follows the rule themselves, explains it to their children, condemns a violator. Power gains helpers where

it would otherwise need guards. The struggle for the right to explain the world can therefore matter as much as the struggle for the means of violence.

One of the strongest explanations connects earthly order with the sacred. The ruler becomes part of the structure of the universe; loyalty becomes a duty extending beyond ordinary advantage. Ancient Egyptian ideas of kingship, religious justifications of European monarchy, and the Chinese idea of the Mandate of Heaven differed. What connects them is the possibility of speaking on behalf of an order higher than any individual.

The differences matter. The idea of a mandate could justify not only the reigning dynasty but its replacement: disasters and the loss of order were interpreted as signs that the right to rule had been lost. Sacred language does not always mean permanence. It can explain continuity and rupture alike, depending on who acquires the right to interpret events.

The European divine right of kings cannot be confined to one static medieval picture either. With Louis XIV, we are already in the early modern period, while the relations between monarchy, church, estates, and law never amounted to a single act of anointing. What matters here is the device itself: a political decision acquires additional weight when presented as the fulfillment of a higher will.

Another explanation dispenses with revelation. It says: this is how things were done before. Tradition means we need not debate every foundation afresh; repetition makes the world recognizable. Yet that same gift of continuity can sanctify inequality. Age becomes evidence of rightness, and a request for change becomes an accusation against the shared past.

Hereditary power makes this connection especially visible. A right passes with a name, and people know in advance who will occupy the vacant place. Such predictability can reduce one kind of uncertainty while fixing everyone else's exclusion. Symbolic continuity and actual governing capacity are not identical, however; in constitutional monarchies, their relationship is determined by the arrangement of the state, not merely by the crown's antiquity.

A third foundation forms around an extraordinary person. Max Weber called recognition charismatic when people believe in someone's exceptional qualities and vocation. This belief can feel like liberation from a lifeless order. Someone finally speaks words others had not dared to say, and scattered hope acquires a voice.

Charisma is not evidence of moral rightness. The ability to inspire appears among those who liberate and those who subjugate. A political ruler and a civil rights leader can both exercise powerful personal influence without sharing purposes or methods. Similarity of mechanism does not cancel difference of action.

Power founded on a personality faces a particular anxiety: what happens after that person is gone? Exceptional standing cannot simply be transferred on schedule. Followers try to secure it in doctrine, office, succession, or a school of disciples. A living promise becomes an institution. Sometimes this preserves the undertaking; sometimes it produces a system that retains the founder's name while changing the meaning of their words.

Finally, there is recognition of an impersonal rule. We obey a judge or an elected official because we recognize an established procedure and the limits of their jurisdiction. The person is not identical with their powers: they receive them under certain conditions and should relinquish them when those conditions

cease to apply. The office outlives its holder without becoming the holder's property.

A rational-legal order may seem undramatic beside a heroic story. Yet that lack of drama is a virtue: transferring power does not require a miracle. The procedure should work even when its participants do not admire one another. Law is needed, among other things, for the moment when personal trust has run out.

Written rules do not, of course, prove that those rules operate. Elections can be accompanied by the exclusion of rivals; courts can depend on the very people they should constrain; reporting can conceal what matters most. That is precisely why the difference between a rule and a decoration cannot be dismissed. If everything is declared an illusion in advance, we lose the language in which to demand that promises be kept.

In actual life, grounds of recognition are mixed. An elected leader appeals to tradition; a hereditary monarch observes legal limits; a movement with a powerful leader develops procedures. No one lives inside an entirely pure type. But distinguishing them helps us hear which argument is being used and why one sometimes replaces another: failure is explained by fate, a broken rule by the exceptional moment, an absence of results by fidelity to the past.

The subtitle of this book includes “illusion,” but it would be too easy to declare all consent a delusion. Sometimes people recognize an order because it really does protect them and permits correction. Illusion arises where recognition is meant to close off examination, where the sign of justice releases power from the obligation to be just.

We now see not one support but an entire system. Power acts through fear and benefit, habit and hope, symbol and procedure. The system can remain stable while connections between those supports endure. But what happens when the sign remains above the entrance and the work for which the building was constructed disappears from within?

Part Two. The Closed Rooms

4. The Person on the Top Floor

While power lies ahead, it promises completion. One more effort, and there will be no more asking, waiting, or dependence on someone else's whim. A person imagines the summit as the place where the noise inside will cease. But an office changes the range of possibilities; it does not automatically answer the question of what to live for. On arriving, one may discover that anxiety has climbed along too.

We are accustomed to asking what a ruler does to society, and less often what the arrangement of the ruler's life does to the ruler. Caution is needed here: a political decision is not a transparent window into a soul. We cannot declare every cruelty a consequence of loneliness or every ambition compensation for childhood injury. We can, however, examine conditions under which a person gradually loses the opportunity to hear an independent answer.

First, accidental encounters disappear. Then the speech of those nearby changes: doubt is softened, unpleasant news postponed, failure given a convenient explanation. People learn to anticipate what is wanted before it is said. The ruler thinks the world has become more harmonious when disagreement is actually being removed from view.

This is a dangerous kind of solitude. Many people may be close at hand, yet it becomes harder to tell who speaks from conviction, who for advantage, and who from fear. Ordinary human trust is replaced by the assessment of loyalty. The greater a person's

ability to reward or punish, the harder it becomes to hear words that are not part of a calculation.

The historical image of Tiberius withdrawing to Capri has long provided a setting for reflections on a ruler's estrangement. Yet the surviving accounts have authors, allegiances, and a distance from the events they describe. They cannot produce an indisputable finding about the person's inner condition. What matters here is the image itself: an immense territory obeys instructions while contact with living reality becomes increasingly indirect.

Literature can offer a more honest space for inquiry precisely because it does not present an imagined inner life as established historical fact. Shakespeare's Macbeth gains a crown but no peace. The murder that was supposed to end the struggle begins another. Now he must eliminate the consequences of his previous act, then those of the next. Power does not satisfy desire; it enlarges the territory of threat.

The tragedy is frightening not only for its bloodshed. It is frightening for the gradual narrowing of possibility. When a reign rests on a crime, admitting a mistake calls the entire structure into question. A person continues because retreat appears more dangerous than advance. The future becomes a security service for the past.

A less terrible version of this mechanism occurs in ordinary institutions. A leader has defended a project for years and can no longer acknowledge that circumstances have changed. Jobs, relationships, and reporting procedures have formed around it; abandoning the project means losing not merely an outcome but a familiar explanation of one's own usefulness. The error becomes part of a personality and is therefore defended more fiercely than the work.

Power begins to serve its own continuation. The original purpose is still spoken aloud, but actual decisions are tested by a different criterion: will they strengthen the position of the decision-maker? A useful proposal is rejected if it strengthens a rival. A poor one is retained if abandoning it would look weak. The instrument gradually chooses its own task—to remain in the hand.

There is a social side to this condition. People notice that solemn words no longer explain what is happening. A gap opens between official speech and daily experience. Mockery, exhaustion, and the habit of taking nothing seriously move into it. Society continues according to schedule, but inward participation diminishes.

In the late Soviet experience, we can see various forms of this divergence: ritual speech, private skepticism, jokes, cautious withdrawal into personal life. It would be wrong, however, to say that everyone stopped believing at once, or that disbelief alone explains the dissolution of a state. Economic, political, and social processes cannot be replaced by a single metaphor of an emptied hall.

The same caution does not prevent us from recognizing a similar gap in corporate life. Trust is celebrated on the wall, while mistakes bring humiliation. Quality is declared paramount, while only convenient reports are rewarded. A participant gradually stops expecting any connection between word and deed. They may perform their duties conscientiously while inwardly deciding never to believe again.

Emptiness does not always provoke an immediate revolt. Sometimes, on the contrary, it makes management easier: no one expects much, no one argues seriously. But this silence differs from consent. When a joint effort becomes necessary, the institution

discovers that it has preserved the forms of participation while losing the ability to inspire it.

Can this condition be escaped through greater authority? Sometimes that is exactly what people try. If others are insufficiently engaged, check more insistently; if words no longer work, demand more confirmations. A person who has lost contact with the work seeks evidence of their own existence in the controllability of others. From inner emptiness, a door opens into the next room—the room of observation.

5. The Tower in Your Pocket

Control begins with a reasonable need: to know whether a promise has been kept, whether work is safe, whether help has arrived. Joint activity is impossible without feedback. Yet a boundary separates checking a result from observing a person's entire life. It is easy to cross when each new piece of information seems useful and the cost of intrusion remains invisible to the observer.

In the late eighteenth century, Jeremy Bentham proposed an arrangement that became one of the best-known images of power. In his panopticon, the observer stands at the center and the observed are placed around it. The crucial point is not only that they can be seen. They cannot be certain whether anyone is watching at a given moment.

Uncertainty does part of the guard's work. If observation is always possible, a person begins to allow for it even in the observer's absence. The tower gradually moves inside. In place of a continuous order comes the habit of examining oneself through another's eyes.

Michel Foucault made the panopticon a tool for analyzing disciplinary power. He was concerned with connections between observation, norms, and the formation of behavior in institutions. This does not mean every school is a prison or all teaching concealed violence. An analytical image is useful when it distinguishes particular practices; it loses force when differences between institutions are treated as irrelevant.

A norm has a quiet advantage over a prohibition. A prohibition states what must not be done; a norm describes what kind of person one should be. Measurement, comparison, and classification can shape not only action but a person's understanding of themselves. They begin to see their life as a deviation from a scale devised by someone else.

In the totalitarian imagination, outward compliance is insufficient. Power lays claim to conviction, memory, and feeling. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* carries this claim to a literary extreme: obedience must culminate in inward acceptance of the person who inflicts suffering. The novel reveals the horror of a demand that leaves no hidden space even for disagreement.

A literary extreme cannot be mechanically imposed on every contemporary institution. Yet it helps pose an exact question: what is wanted from us—the performance of a limited duty, or the alignment of our entire personality with a system's expectations? Work can be completed; limitless loyalty has to be demonstrated again and again.

Digital technologies change both the scale of observation and the ways it is organized. A search, a purchase, a route, a moment of lingering attention leave information that can be compared. Some of that comparison really does make life easier. We find what we need more quickly, recover a lost route, receive a service without

queuing. Participation often begins, therefore, with relief rather than fear.

Yet agreement to one convenience does not necessarily mean understanding the entire chain of data use. A person may see the screen without knowing who else receives information or which decisions will depend on it. What matters most happens outside immediate experience: some options are displayed, others pushed aside, still others made practically inaccessible.

Omniscience is not required. An algorithm need not understand a person completely to influence what they see next. Systematically altering the conditions of choice is enough. That is why exaggerating a machine's ability to read souls obstructs analysis: it replaces a specific arrangement with an almost mystical force.

A similar inaccuracy arises when numerous administrative and commercial systems are depicted as a single universal account of human virtue. For an inquiry into power, it is more important to distinguish which information is collected, what consequences follow, and how a mistake can be corrected. A generalized frightening picture can sometimes conceal an actual, testable restriction more effectively than reassuring advertising.

Imagine that access to a service depends on an assessment a person cannot understand. They do not know which event damaged their result, who is responsible for the data, or to whom they can explain the circumstances. Even if the system was created for efficiency, an inequality emerges: one side classifies, while the other lives with the consequences. The question of justice begins where an assessment cannot be challenged.

Commercial personalization is not simply a form of care for the user either. When attention generates income, there is an interest

in retaining it. The order of display influences which impressions are available, and availability influences what seems widespread and important. It does not follow that every recommendation completely controls belief. It does mean we should recognize an interested party where an interface presents itself as a neutral intermediary.

The user is neither an entirely free master nor a powerless figure. They can choose, resist, and change habits; their opportunities depend on available alternatives and the cost of leaving. If work, loved ones, documents, and everyday services are all located within one system, “just leave” is easier advice to give than to follow.

In the older image, the guard was visible at least as an office. In a distributed digital environment, responsibility can dissolve between a service owner, a data supplier, a client, and a developer. Each explains that they made only a small technical decision. Yet a person encounters the combined result, and that result can certainly determine the boundaries of a life.

Decent oversight therefore needs limits, an intelligible purpose, and a reverse direction. The observer must also be open to scrutiny in the exercise of their powers. The right to know the basis of a decision, correct a record, or request human consideration can restore reciprocity to the relationship. Without it, transparency becomes a one-way window.

The danger is not exhausted by malicious intent. Convenience, safety, and economy can be honest motives and still lead to an accumulation of powers to intervene. Each new function seems a small improvement. Only later does it become apparent that the space between them has disappeared—the space in which a person

could remain unrecorded, unpredicted, and free from continually explaining themselves.

The tower in a pocket is not technology's inevitable destination. It is an image of one way of arranging it. We can argue about who owns the window, when it opens, and whether a person has the right to close the curtain. That argument begins by refusing to treat what is technically possible as already necessary.

6. The Institution That Performs Work Instead of Doing It

Some power is noisy, constantly demanding confirmation. Another kind is sluggish, familiar, almost drowsy. It promises no great future and needs no burning faith. It is enough for the right people to gather on the appointed day, say the familiar words, and fill in the appropriate boxes.

Ritual itself is not an enemy of meaning. Repetition preserves memory, enables action without endless discussion, and makes responsibility visible. Danger begins when a form is protected regardless of its result. A meeting counts as successful because it took place; a document as useful because it was approved; a plan as fulfilled because the report describes it that way.

An entire additional body of work appears between work and its representation. People learn to produce signs of diligence, explain delays in acceptable terms, and select measures that can improve without changing the underlying activity. The more complex this language becomes, the harder it is for an outsider to tell where an action occurred and where there was only an administrative account of one.

C. Northcote Parkinson's satirical observations became famous because this world was so recognizable. An institution can keep people increasingly busy with tasks of its own creation. Satire does not replace inquiry into each organization, but it catches the moment when an apparatus stops distinguishing the needs of the shared undertaking from those of its own expansion.

Loyalty acquires a particular value in such an environment. A person who creates no difficulties is more convenient than one who reports a fault. Initiative is dangerous: it shows that familiar arrangements can change and thus calls previous decisions into question. The safest action is the one that leaves everyone in their accustomed role.

The leader is caught as well. They receive information prepared to confirm that all is well and may sincerely fail to understand the source of discontent. Subordinates, meanwhile, know that unpleasant news will demand explanations and create risk. Falsehood does not always emerge from a single conspiracy. The aligned expectations of many cautious people can produce it.

When political institutions are involved, the cost of this substitution is especially high. A parliament can exist as a building and a schedule of meetings without enabling real debate. An electoral procedure can retain the outward signs of choice while limiting the possibility of replacing those in power. Judicial language can conceal a dependent decision. What must be examined is not the sign above the door but the actions available to a person behind it.

The phrase “cargo cult” is often used for such imitation. Yet the popular story of people supposedly confusing straw airplanes with real ones too easily turns another society's complex history into a joke. Our argument does not need that caricature. A precise

example of our own is enough: an institution reproduces the visible signs of a working mechanism without creating the conditions that make it work.

A constitution does not make a court independent merely by existing. A report does not make an organization accountable if it cannot be checked and has no consequences. The word “participation” gives participants no influence if all essential decisions have already been made. A form acquires substance when it permits consequences inconvenient to those who created it.

Society responds to empty forms in different ways. Some withdraw into private life; others preserve the ability to laugh; others keep participating from habit or in pursuit of small achievable changes. Nonparticipation can express protest, exhaustion, disbelief, or a lack of time. A single outward gesture does not reliably disclose its inward cause.

Irony helps prevent falsehood from passing for truth, but it has limits too. A person can become so accustomed to mockery that they cease to recognize the possibility of honest action. Exposure then becomes a protective habit of its own: believing nothing is safer than being disappointed again. Cynicism preserves distance at the cost of participation.

Power sometimes benefits from that distance. The skeptic laughs at home but demands no explanation in public; the employee complains to friends but signs the document. An absence of belief does not always weaken a system immediately. It can become one of the system's stable conditions: everyone knows the proceedings are conventional, and everyone continues to play their part.

In a serious trial, however, the difference between consent and habit becomes visible. The system asks for trust and receives cautious calculation. It asks for initiative, while people wait for an instruction that will remove responsibility from them. What once looked like convenient manageability turns out to be a shortage of independent action.

Emptiness, excessive control, and ritual do not form an obligatory sequence of stages through which all power must pass. They can combine, reinforce one another, and recede when conditions change. Calling them inevitable deprives attempts at correction of meaning in advance. It is more useful to notice the specific gap between a purpose and an arrangement.

Sometimes the recovery of meaning begins with a simple but uncomfortable question: what will change for people because of our work? If the answer is only another report, we need to keep asking. If there is an answer, it should be made open to examination. Power returns to the work when it admits that the work may require power itself to shrink.

Yet a person cannot always change an institution from within. Sometimes the space for objection is closed, and participation requires acts they cannot accept. The question of good organization then becomes a question about the limits of personal involvement. We approach a word shorter than all the justifications: no.

Part Three. Exits and New Foundations

7. A Place for the Word “No”

Refusal need not begin in a public square. Sometimes it appears in an almost imperceptible pause between a demand and its habitual fulfillment. The person has said nothing yet, but has already stopped taking participation for granted. They ask themselves exactly what they are agreeing to and what that agreement will cost.

Power favors continuity: an assignment should pass into action without delay, a rule into habit, an expectation into self-assessment. Refusal opens a break in the chain. It restores the distinction between what happens and what is necessary. What everyone does becomes an action that can be judged, rather than a natural phenomenon.

Ancient philosophy offered different ways of seeking this distance. The Stoics drew attention to our judgments and to the distinction between what depends on us and what we cannot command at will. This is neither a promise of immunity to pain nor a demand for indifference to another person's suffering. A person is invited not to hand an external event the whole right to determine their moral choice.

There is discipline in this distinction, not magic. Illness causes suffering; violence remains violence; loss does not disappear because one thinks correctly. Yet a space for response sometimes survives between circumstance and action. It cannot be demanded

of a victim as proof of virtue. It can be cherished as a possibility that should not be declared destroyed in advance.

The Cynic tradition makes refusal more visible. In the story of Diogenes and Alexander, the philosopher needs only the sunlight the powerful visitor is blocking. The truth of every detail in the ancient anecdote is not a condition of its meaning. The scene overturns the familiar order: someone who can give a great deal encounters a person who, at that moment, needs none of his gifts.

Reducing needs changes the terms of dependency. If recognizing one's own life as successful requires ever more possessions, status symbols, and approvals, the number of potential gatekeepers grows. Someone defines prestige, someone admits us to what we desire, someone continually reminds us of what is still missing. Simplicity can release some space, but it does not abolish material needs or obligations to others.

In religious traditions, asceticism and withdrawal acquire a different meaning: worldly success is renounced for a higher spiritual purpose. A monastery or community can testify that the familiar ordering of values is not the only one. Withdrawal from a secular hierarchy does not, however, mean an absence of rules or obedience. A new way of life must also be examined in its actual arrangement.

Political refusal turns a personal boundary into collective action. Practices of nonviolent resistance associated with Gandhi show the strength of organized nonparticipation in an unjust order. Boycott, civil disobedience, and the public violation of an unjust requirement can alter relations between the governed and their governors. India's independence cannot, however, be explained by one person or a single method of struggle: the history involved many forces and circumstances.

What matters in nonviolent refusal is not an absence of effort. It requires organization, endurance, care for others, and readiness to face consequences. Calling it merely passive misses the work through which individual disagreement becomes a public fact. Power encounters a limit to cooperation rather than mere silence.

Not every act of nonparticipation communicates that limit clearly enough. Abstention from voting may be a protest, or it may disappear among many other reasons for absence. A political act is judged not only by sincerity of intention but by how it becomes intelligible to others and what possibilities it creates. Sometimes withdrawal weakens an unjust order; sometimes it clears space for it.

In everyday life, refusal takes less ceremonial forms. A person changes jobs because the old one demands continual betrayal of their values. Another consumes less to avoid spending all their time maintaining consumption. A third limits time online, recovering attention that had been scattered according to someone else's schedule.

These choices should not become a new moral ladder. Not everyone can leave a punishing job, move to the countryside, or stop using a necessary service. People have different resources, obligations, and costs of failure. Freedom to refuse exists under specific conditions; contempt for someone who cannot yet leave reproduces power in the language of liberation.

A digital pause is useful not as a ritual of purification from a bad modern world. Its purpose is to recover the distinction between one's own intention and continual reaction to a signal. A person can notice why they opened an application, how long they intended to stay, and why they remained. Such attention does not

solve every social problem, but it makes participation less automatic.

Minimalism faces a similar fork in the road. It can reduce dependency, or become one more demand for a beautiful life. If simplicity is purchased as a prestigious image, the old race returns inside a bright, empty room. Liberation is measured not by the number of objects in a photograph but by the person's ability to direct their life.

Refusal also needs a positive purpose. What is the saved time for? Who will receive the recovered attention? Which relationships will become possible? If no connection with the world follows the word “no,” independence risks becoming isolation, which must then be defended against every request from another person.

A personal boundary is therefore a beginning, not a completion. It allows someone to stop participating in what they cannot accept, but it does not organize a shared life for those who have made the same choice. People still need care, work, ways of settling disputes, and the passing on of experience. Beyond the door of the old institution, they encounter not emptiness but the task of building relations in which refusal remains possible.

8. Living Together After Refusal

A free community is easiest to imagine on its first day. People recognize a shared desire in one another, speak without familiar caution, and willingly set to work. The absence of the old boss feels like proof that everything essential has already changed.

Difficulties come later—when opinions diverge, someone grows tired, someone does more than the others, and shared resources begin to diminish.

It then becomes clear that removing an office does not remove the tasks associated with it. A decision must be made, duties distributed, the quiet person's interests considered. The old way of deciding can be rejected, but necessity itself cannot be ordered to disappear. This is where the dream meets the arrangement.

Utopia helps us approach that encounter. It allows us to look at the familiar from outside and imagine different arrangements of property, work, education, and participation. Plato's Republic and Thomas More's Utopia belong to different historical worlds and are not projects for the absence of all hierarchy. Yet both enlarge the space of the question: must the world be arranged only as we found it?

When reading a utopia, it is important to attend not only to its inhabitants' benefits but to the dissenter's place. Who defines the good? Can someone leave the community? What happens to a person for whom the shared image of happiness does not fit? A perfect plan becomes dangerous when a living person is treated as an obstacle to its fulfillment.

Anarchist thought posed radical questions about coercion and voluntary cooperation. Yet Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin do not offer an identical answer that can be reduced without loss to a claim about natural human goodness. A critique of domination connects them; their understandings of property, organization, and social transformation differ.

Historical experiments in self-organization matter precisely in their variety. During the Spanish Civil War, collectives emerged in some regions where workers and residents attempted to manage production and local life jointly. Practices of exchange and distribution differed; it would be wrong to describe all these

territories as one society with identical rules and money abolished everywhere.

War, internal conflict, and external violence constrained the experiment. Its defeat does not automatically prove the impossibility of mutual aid, just as particular successes cannot yield a finished model for all times. Historical experience requires us to distinguish what failed from within from what was destroyed by force.

Small communes and ecological settlements face less grand but stubborn questions. Who does the unpleasant work? How are children raised? Who owns what shared labor produces? How is a new member admitted, and what does a departing member retain? Answers to such questions reveal whether equality exists beyond the shared declaration.

Consensus can protect a minority from a hasty decision, but it requires time and attention. If discussion continues indefinitely, people with more free hours and a habit of speaking gain an advantage. If the most active decide everything for the sake of speed, an informal executive group emerges. No method removes the need to observe how opportunities to participate are distributed.

In the Zapatista experience of community self-government, a familiar principle can be rendered as “governing by obeying.” Its meaning is that a delegate depends on those who entrusted them with the work. What matters for our argument is this reversal: authority is granted to fulfill a defined responsibility, not to appropriate other people's voices. The concrete forms of such arrangements change and should not become a static postcard of an ideal community.

Digital organizations add new means to an old search. A smart contract can make some rules of execution explicit; a distributed record can make unnoticed alteration harder. But code does not choose justice in place of people. Someone sets the conditions, receives the right to update them, distributes resources, and decides which vote counts as valid.

If voting weight depends on the number of tokens held, formal openness can coexist with concentrated influence. If only a few specialists understand the conditions, technical competence becomes a political advantage. If participants do not vote, an active minority decides. A new instrument changes the surface of power without abolishing the question of its distribution.

Jo Freeman described the danger of structurelessness: rejecting explicit offices can leave the influence of informal circles without accountability. This is an important warning for a free community. Power that cannot be named can be particularly difficult to limit.

An unofficial leader need not issue orders. It is enough to frame the problem first, decide who is invited, distribute information, and treat some objections as reasonable and others as inappropriate. People sense the boundary of what is permissible, although nowhere is it written who sets that boundary. The absence of a seal does not mean the absence of privilege.

The solution need not be the return of a boss appointed indefinitely. Roles can be made explicit, powers limited, tasks divided, turnover provided for, and information made accessible. These measures require work of their own and guarantee no perfection. Their purpose is to let disagreement concern a visible arrangement rather than guessed-at personal relations.

A community also needs a way to survive conflict without declaring it treason. People can desire a shared undertaking while differing over risk, fairness, or the pace of change. If unity means the absence of differences, freedom will end with the first serious dispute. Trust is tested by the ability to remain in a conversation when agreement is not given in advance.

The right to leave matters no less. Formal permission offers little help, however, to someone who loses housing, resources, relationships, and the means to continue living by leaving. Voluntariness must be assessed through conditions, not a single word in a charter. The more expensive departure becomes, the more closely we must examine the power of those who remain to determine the rules.

Perhaps no community will free itself from every inequality of influence. It does not follow that the attempt is useless. Dependency can be reduced, decisions made more intelligible, a voice restored to someone previously unheard. An alternative has value not only as a promised perfect world but as a practice that makes another way of living possible within an imperfect one.

The final master does not disappear by solemn announcement. That figure returns in the habit of trusting without examination, the convenience of someone else's final decision, the fear of open dispute. A free arrangement therefore requires attention after its founding day. It should be judged by whether a person retains the right to participate, object, and leave once the festive confidence has passed.

Conclusion. The Right to Rebuild

We began with the house people build above themselves for protection. Its supports and closed rooms are now visible. Power arises where there are differences in ability, a need for coordination, fear, and hope. Recognition strengthens it; it can then begin to protect its own continuation as the highest good.

This is a possibility, not a law of fate. Distinctions between useful authority and domination, observation and intrusion, ritual and empty imitation have consequences for life. One accusation against all power can easily erase them. It is much harder to preserve them in a specific dispute when a convenient explanation is already at hand.

We have seen why a person can desire obedience: it promises release from some uncertainty. We have also seen the reverse—why acquired power brings no final peace. Uncertainty cannot be eliminated by concentrating authority. Sometimes it is merely removed from view, to be encountered later in a more difficult form.

Refusal restores a boundary, and collective action makes it possible to build a life beyond that boundary. Yet no word—“freedom,” “horizontality,” “reason,” “code”—automatically makes an arrangement just. Each can become a sign above a doorway when the possibility of examining what happens to people behind it is lost.

Artificial intelligence likewise acquires no impartiality merely from being nonhuman. If it is entrusted with distributing opportunities, we must ask about purposes, input data, mistakes, and responsibility. Delegating a decision to a machine remains a human decision about the arrangement of power. Relief from

work does not yet mean relief from the obligation to answer for consequences.

The future should therefore not be imagined solely as a choice between an omniscient center and a complete absence of rules. It is formed from many ways of limiting, distributing, and revising authority. Sometimes the best sign of an institution's strength is its ability to acknowledge an error and voluntarily make room for another solution.

Awareness alone does not save us. A person can understand the mechanism of subordination perfectly and still lack the means to resist it. But understanding helps distinguish where a personal boundary is needed, where collective organization is needed, and where a rule must operate against the strong as well. It does not replace action; it makes action more precise.

This book offers no plan for a house finally completed. It asks that doors, windows, and the right to alter the plan remain. People should not spend their entire lives serving a structure built to serve their lives. As long as they can say this aloud, be heard, and bring about change, the history of power remains a history of freedom too.