

PROMPTINGQUERY / BOOKS



Why People Want Power

Its Nature, Pathologies, and Alternatives

2025 · Literary edition 2026

About This Edition

English translation of the Russian literary edition based on the 2025 text. Editing and translation: GPT, 30 September 2026. The original is preserved in the book archive. Material from the short essay is incorporated in the afterword.

Author of the source materials: Konstantin Nikolaevich Smirnov

Book archive — original versions

Contents

Introduction. The Promise We Hear	4
Part One. Where the Desire Begins	6
1. The Hand That Points the Way	6
2. Order and Its Price	9
3. The Person Who Is Not Enough for Themselves	12
Part Two. What Becomes of the Promise	16
4. A Right That Explains Itself	16
5. When the Hall Keeps Applauding	18
6. Power as Its Own Purpose	21
Part Three. The Possibility of Another Relationship	24
7. The Quiet Right to Refuse	24
8. Together, Without a Final Master	26
Conclusion. Remaining Human	30
Afterword. Where Power Runs	32

Introduction. The Promise We Hear

A person who acquires power rarely imagines that they are about to become someone else's misfortune. It seems, instead, that a way has finally opened to put things right. They know which decisions have been postponed too long, which people stand in the way, which rules ought to change. The world, previously stubborn and unwieldy, appears to move within reach. At last, something can be done.

There is truth in that feeling. Power does make possible things that would otherwise remain impossible: protecting people, organizing their efforts, stopping violence, bringing them together for a common task. Yet the ability to act comes with another, quieter promise. Now you will be noticed. Now your existence will have to be taken into account. Now, perhaps, the anxiety you have long mistaken for a shortage of opportunities will disappear.

It is this second promise that concerns us. Behind the discussion of powers, offices, and forms of government stands a person who wants to feel their own weight in the world. Sometimes they seek justice. Sometimes recognition. Sometimes they want only to be reassured that events can still be held in hand. These desires are so closely entwined that the person experiencing them cannot always tell them apart.

We condemn other people's hunger for power and readily find a noble explanation for our own. We resent an unexplained order, yet grow impatient with the need to explain ourselves when we are in charge. We dream of a free society and, in a moment of fear, look for someone who will decide for everyone. Power begins in this inward hesitation long before it acquires a seal, a security detail, and a private office.

The modern world has made the contradiction especially visible. Networks enable people to find one another and act together without a single center. Those same networks make it possible to gather information about them, direct their attention, and set invisible conditions for participation. Liberation and control grow out of the same technical possibilities. The question of power therefore cannot be left to historians of the state. It arises when someone opens an app, joins a working group, raises a child, asks for help, or receives the right to decide on another person's behalf.

This book approaches power primarily as a human experience. Historical forms matter, but no single period supplies a universal key. Psychological explanations are necessary, but another person's biography does not thereby become a medical record. The wish to lead should not be diagnosed in advance as an illness. What matters is recognizing the moment when a useful activity begins to sustain a dependency, and responsibility becomes a need for continual confirmation of one's own importance.

Our path passes through three regions. First come the foundations of power: life together, danger, scarcity, and the desire for recognition. Then come its inward difficulties: justification, the loss of meaning, ritual, and loneliness. Finally, we turn to refusal and self-restraint. There will be no promise of a society in which power disappears once and for all. There will be an attempt to understand how dignity can survive wherever people inevitably influence one another.

The question “Why do people want power?” also concerns the reader. One need not govern a country to encounter it. It is enough to have felt, once, the relief of getting the last word—and to linger over that feeling a little longer than usual.

Part One. Where the Desire Begins

1. The Hand That Points the Way

When people face a common task, differences emerge among them. One notices danger sooner; another knows the road better; a third can reconcile those who disagree. People begin to listen to that person's words. There is no office yet, but there is already influence; no one is obliged to obey, but one person's judgment carries greater weight.

No tragedy is predetermined in this difference. Life together requires coordination, and abilities are unevenly distributed. Trouble begins when a temporary advantage turns into a right that no longer needs to be renewed or demonstrated. The person who once pointed out the right road may decide that the road itself now belongs to them.

The temptation to explain this through biology alone is strong. Picture a pack led by its strongest male, and human history appears to acquire a simple outline. But natural communities are more varied than that image suggests. Observations of wolves living in the wild, in particular, show how much of a pack's life can be understood through family relationships and shared care, rather than a perpetual struggle for a throne. Nature has not issued humanity with a ready-made constitution.

We are capable of competition and of cooperation. Fear of loss coexists with attachment; the wish to come first with the need to belong. Social arrangements emerge from these possibilities, from circumstances, and from what people teach one another. An appeal to instinct may illuminate something, but it may also spare

us an uncomfortable question: why do we continue to sustain this particular form of relationship?

Human power has a distinctive capacity to survive the absence of its bearer. The manager has left, but the instruction remains. A ruler has died, yet their name still determines who may speak. A crown, a signature, a seal, an entry in a register allow power to operate across distance and time. We obey a person we have never met because we recognize the sign of their authority.

A symbol makes an immense economy of force possible. There is no need to prove afresh, on every occasion, who is entitled to give an order. At the same time, the symbol conceals the origin of that entitlement. A seal looks calmer than the hand that pressed it onto the paper. Eventually, the correctness of the paperwork can begin to seem proof of the justice of the decision.

The history of states shows how these forms of recognition have changed. Power has drawn on military success, kinship, landownership, religious sanction, law, and representation. These foundations did not replace one another in an orderly sequence: they overlapped, competed, and returned under new names. Even the most modern institution may preserve family habits, while an ancient ceremony may serve thoroughly calculating administration.

Agriculture, stored surpluses, and increasingly complex economies strengthened, in many societies, the position of those who distributed and protected resources. Where a surplus accumulated, it became possible to control other people's futures. A store of grain meant more than food: obedience, debt, and a family's security could depend on access to it. The ability to coordinate labor gradually joined with the ability to appropriate its results.

Ancient Egyptian images of kingship linked earthly order to a sacred order. In the Greek polis, the question of who was entitled to decide could become a matter of public debate. Yet an assembly of citizens also held the power to judge and punish; the story of Socrates reminds us that a collective decision is not necessarily a correct one. Roman traditions brought together military command, law, and an idea of the state's greatness. Medieval understandings of service to God both elevated the ruler and placed above him a demand he could never entirely make his own.

Later, the languages of contract, citizenship, and representation offered different grounds for obedience. A ruler was expected to account for himself before other people. Yet rational explanation does not, by itself, limit force. An accurate system of records can assist a citizen and keep watch over them; a law can protect the vulnerable and give a convenient form to someone else's arbitrary will. The history of power therefore resembles no staircase on which humanity steadily ascends from darkness into light.

Its durability owes much to the genuine need for common action. In the face of danger, people may have to reach agreement quickly, assign duties, and entrust a decision to someone. From this experience comes a persuasive promise: obey, and we will survive. It is especially compelling when danger is close and time is short.

But an emergency can become the habitual explanation for ordinary life. The threat remains in the language even after circumstances have changed. Relinquishing part of one's authority is difficult: its bearer has already learned to see any objection as an obstacle to rescue. Concern for survival can thus become an argument against freedom.

The choice is not confined to complete fragmentation or permanent command. There are different ways to share responsibility, limit the duration of a mandate, and examine its results. They are difficult to sustain, particularly in fear. That is precisely why a simple distinction is worth remembering: the necessity of making a decision grants no one the right to rule indefinitely.

2. Order and Its Price

Chaos frightens us above all because it makes tomorrow impossible to count on. You do not know whether a promise will be kept, whether a rule will protect you, whether something you have made will endure. Even a small effort requires some stability: sowing anticipates a harvest, learning a future, friendship a memory of what has been said. People seek order because they want their lives to continue through their actions.

Power therefore receives an advance of trust before it has done anything worthy of trust. It need only promise persuasively that the street will be safe, an agreement enforceable, and tomorrow recognizably like today. Someone exhausted by uncertainty may accept a high price for that promise.

In Hobbes's political thought, fear of mutual violence becomes one of the grounds for common submission to a sovereign. This image helps us understand the force of the bargain: people restrain their own arbitrary freedom in the expectation that others will be restrained as well. Yet a philosophical model is not the record of an actual agreement. Most of us never signed the contract that determined our position; we were born into rules whose origins lay in other people's hands.

This makes the question of a broken promise of protection all the more urgent. If the established order itself causes fear, where can revision begin? Why does someone sometimes cling to a plainly unjust system? Habit alone does not explain it. In the balance stand the memory of suffering already endured and the uncertainty that change might bring.

In Russian discussions of power, memories of the upheavals of the 1990s have often served as such an argument. This is one historical example of how instability can continue to exert its influence after the crisis itself has passed. Yet the memory of calamity does not make every existing order good. Stability is valuable because it makes life and development possible. When it demands the surrender of the future itself, its price becomes too high.

Order also concerns the distribution of things for which there is not enough to go around. Land, water, housing, and access to education provide obvious grounds for conflict. Material abundance does not remove every scarcity: time, attention, and public recognition are unevenly distributed too. Whoever sets the terms of access acquires influence even without holding the resource in their own hands.

Every society offers a language in which inequality is supposed to become intelligible. One appeals to birth, another to merit, a third to common necessity. Merit attracts us with the promise of an open road. Yet starting advantages can be inherited as reliably as a title: education, connections, confidence in one's own judgment, the ability to survive a failure. When these go unnoticed, good fortune begins to present itself as moral superiority.

Distribution according to need poses a different difficulty. Who will define need and compare things that resist comparison: a hospital, a factory, housing, leisure? Concern for equality requires

decisions, and decisions confer authority. A system intended to reduce dependence can create a new center of dependence—the people who keep the records and decide whose request is more compelling.

The management of attention is especially visible in digital life. Between a person and the vast world stand the order of search results, a recommendation, a notification. Here, direction can appear in the form of a service. We are shown what is convenient, suitable, interesting; gradually we grow accustomed to a field of choice prepared without our participation. The question of power arises before we click on any of the options offered.

Neither coercion nor distribution can go for long without explanation. Power wants to appear legitimate. It speaks of divine ordinance, fidelity to ancestors, popular choice, historical necessity, professional knowledge. These explanations have different histories and different degrees of credibility, but all connect an order to something larger than the private wish of the person giving it.

That connection can restrain arbitrary action. If power is obliged to uphold the law, it can be judged by the law; if it promises representation, it can be asked whom it actually represents. But an explanation becomes dangerous when it cannot be examined. It then closes off discussion and turns disagreement into sacrilege, betrayal, or evidence of ignorance.

The promise of impersonal correctness is particularly seductive. Let history, science, the market, the machine decide—anything that will allow the human decision-maker to disappear from the field of responsibility. Yet people construct the model, people select the criterion, and people bear the consequences of error. The

complexity of a calculation does not cancel the question of who is entitled to command it.

Order becomes humane when it permits discussion of its own price. Trust in it rests on more than habit and success. It requires the possibility of objecting, receiving an explanation, and correcting an error. Without that possibility, security gradually becomes dependence, and the promise of a peaceful life becomes a demand for silence.

3. The Person Who Is Not Enough for Themselves

Not every wish to lead arises from a deficiency. Someone may seek power for the sake of a cause that needs protection, people for whom they feel responsible, or a decision that would otherwise never be made. This must be acknowledged, or every reflection on power will become an accusation prepared in advance.

But there is another kind of attraction. A person finds it difficult to feel their own significance without continual confirmation from outside. They are loved, respected, valued—and still it is not enough. Another person's agreement brings a moment of calm; an objection restores the old anxiety. Power promises to arrange the world so that confirmation arrives regularly.

An office gives this promise an everyday form. People wait for you, consult you, write down your words. Unfamiliar attention can be mistaken for the belated recognition of your personal worth. At first, this is an almost innocent error. Later, it makes you dependent on an order in which you are invariably placed at the center.

If one's dignity is confirmed by another's submission, disagreement feels like an attack. A discussion of a decision becomes a test of loyalty. The person is now defending not so much an outcome as the fragile construction of a self assembled from other people's looks. Hence the disproportionate pain caused by a remark, a joke, a delay.

This pattern is recognizable, but it is dangerous to turn it into a universal diagnosis. Stories about great conquerors supposedly compensating for their appearance or background often reveal more about our appetite for simple explanations than about those people's actual motives. Wars and repression cannot be reduced to a single complex, nor the desire for influence to low self-esteem. We can consider the possibility of compensation without presenting it as a law of human nature.

Recognition is not, in itself, a shameful need. It matters that one's work is seen, one's words heard, one's presence significant. The difficulty begins when recognition cannot be separated from obedience. Love, respect, and fear then start to look alike: everyone lowers their head, everyone says something pleasing, everyone tries to anticipate the mood.

In such a world, it is hard to know what others actually think. Sincerity becomes risky, flattery a convenient means of safety. The person in power receives more and more confirmation that they are right, and less and less information about the consequences of their decisions. The absence of objections seems like agreement; the silence of people who cannot afford a risk is taken as proof of contentment.

Isolation can also affect someone who comes to leadership with genuine talent. Duties consume their time, their circle begins to filter the news they are allowed to hear, their name requires

constant protection. A scientist risks losing the opportunity to investigate; an artist, the freedom to make mistakes without a public explanation. The very quality for which the person was once invited can gradually cease to function.

Power offers a still deeper promise: protection against helplessness before time. A decision changes other people's lives; a building will outlast its creator; a name can be inscribed in history. Influence seems a way of extending oneself beyond one's own finitude. Sometimes, the stronger the fear of disappearance, the grander the instruments brought against it.

Yet time does not obey a decree. Construction can be accelerated, but youth cannot be ordered to return. Loyalty can be demanded, but not the assurance that one is loved. A person gradually discovers the boundary between managing circumstances and managing existence. It lies much closer than it appeared from the lower steps.

Then a dangerous circular movement begins. Power is not enough to bring peace; therefore more power is needed. What has been gained must be protected by extending control. That extension needs a new threat to justify it. The position that was supposed to free the person becomes overgrown with duties, suspicions, and rituals without which they no longer know how to live.

An exit requires a difficult acknowledgment: authority may help accomplish a task, but it is not obliged to heal its bearer of every anxiety. Self-respect, the ability to be a friend, to endure an error, to accept one's limits require a different kind of work. If that work is imposed on subordinates, its price will be paid in their freedom—and will still prove insufficient.

The question of power thus returns to the person even before it reaches the design of institutions. What, exactly, do they hope to obtain from someone else's obedience? Can that desire be named aloud? And what will remain of them if others are one day entitled to say no?

Part Two. What Becomes of the Promise

4. A Right That Explains Itself

Power has a voice. It speaks in a ceremonial address and a brief note, in a textbook and a family explanation. In that voice it tells us why we should obey. Sometimes the answer is clear and open to examination: someone has received a mandate, possesses the necessary knowledge, acts within the law. Sometimes the explanation retreats so far that a question can no longer reach it.

Power that needs no explanation appears the most secure. It is there, like the weather or the changing seasons. A person does not ask why one individual decides for another: they have known the arrangement of places since childhood. Such familiarity saves a great deal of effort, but conceals a great many wounds. Something long accepted has not necessarily stopped hurting.

The arrival of a question disturbs that peace. Why this particular person? Why should their right be inherited? Why should consent, given once, remain binding without a time limit? Each question moves the relationship out of the realm of natural necessity and into that of human arrangements. And what people have arranged can be discussed.

A foundation of authority gives obedience an intelligible meaning. A citizen may follow a rule with which they personally disagree because they recognize the way it was adopted and retain the possibility of seeking change. Here legitimacy is separated from infallibility. Respect for an order does not require believing that every action of its representatives is good.

But a foundation can also decorate a seizure of power that has already occurred. First comes the ability to compel, then the story explaining why the compulsion is right. That story can be so persuasive that even those it disadvantages accept it. The familiar order begins to defend itself in their own voices.

It is difficult to distinguish a foundation from an excuse. Is a beautiful intention sufficient when its consequences are destructive? Is a useful result enough when the means deprive people of dignity? Power readily asks to be judged by one of these measures, depending on which is more convenient at the moment. The observer's task is to hold on to both questions and prevent one answer from swallowing the other.

A claim to moral superiority has particular force. An order gains additional weight when its bearer declares themselves the guardian of truth. The person who objects is no longer simply an opponent: they are described as corrupt, ungrateful, incapable of understanding the common good. A dispute over a particular action becomes a judgment on the dissenter's character.

Power teaches this language early in human life. A child learns who is allowed to ask and who is expected to answer. School shows which knowledge earns a reward. A family passes on its story of success; society offers an image of an important person. If importance is invariably pictured as superiority over others, the desire for power begins to look like the natural completion of growing up.

One can imagine an upbringing in which the ability to care carries more weight than the ability to command. Leadership would then be understood as a responsibility requiring attention to another person's vulnerability. This image does not abolish errors or abuse. Care, too, can become a pretext for control. It needs limits, consent,

and the possibility of refusing help that has become unwanted supervision.

Protest is another source of power. A person acquires influence because they have managed to say what others feared to say. They are trusted as an opponent of an entrenched order. Success changes their position, however: yesterday's accuser gains an apparatus, a budget, supporters who now need a stable center. They must allow others to ask the very question that brought them to prominence: why should we obey you?

At this point, the cost of the original promise becomes apparent. If protest was a way of making room for oneself, the question will be suppressed. If it was a demand for human dignity, that right will have to be recognized in one's opponents as well. This is where a noble origin of power meets its actual test.

No foundation can replace that test forever. Neither remembered merit, nor the right name, nor sincerity of intention guarantees the legitimacy of every subsequent step. Power remains a human practice: historical, limited, capable of error. Its explanation is alive for as long as it permits an answer.

5. When the Hall Keeps Applauding

The meaninglessness of power rarely arrives in a single morning. First, words drift a little away from deeds. Then the report becomes more important than the result. Eventually, everyone learns to understand statements in a special way: a solemn promise does not imply an obligation, a discussion does not allow disagreement, unanimity says nothing about consent. The forms remain, while their inward substance gradually changes.

A life of double hearing emerges. A person hears the official speech and its unspoken translation at the same time. They know when to smile, where to remain silent, what to put in the document, and what to say after the meeting. This ability helps them adapt, but requires continual inward division. The longer it lasts, the harder it becomes to speak plainly.

The bearer of power also finds themselves inside the performance. They are assured of success, congratulated on decisions, shown carefully prepared evidence of well-being. Sometimes they suspect a substitution and demand more reports. Distrust thus produces new forms of apparent trust, and the effort to discover the truth increases the number of stage sets.

A system may endure because of the results it still delivers. It may endure because people fear change. Or because many have learned to extract private advantages from its defects. The loss of common meaning does not imply immediate collapse. Often it means a slow adjustment to diminished expectations.

A person stops believing that participation can make a difference. Their retreat is understandable: no one can give endless energy to a conversation whose answer is known in advance. Yet disillusionment also erodes the space for common action. Civic relationships give way to private means of survival—a connection, a favor, a way around a rule, a cautious silence.

Sometimes mockery is the first thing to restore a measure of freedom. Official grandeur proves vulnerable to an accurate observation. Satire notices the gap between gesture and reality, allowing people to recognize others who see it too. That recognition brings release: apparent agreement, it turns out, was never complete.

But laughter does not always lead to change. It can become a convenient compensation for powerlessness. People laugh at what they reproduce each day and gain just enough relief to return to their places the following morning. A distance remains between exposure and responsibility, and no witticism can cross it for us.

When an old explanation loses its force, power looks for a new one. The language of tradition gives way to progress, then to security, then to emergency survival. Each argument may deserve serious consideration in particular circumstances. What becomes destructive is continual renaming, in which the goal changes faster than its results can be examined.

The promised prosperity has not arrived—so independence must have been the true goal. Independence has not improved life—so another sacrifice is required for the future. The future recedes, while the obligation to sacrifice remains. A person gradually loses the vantage point from which they might ask whether even one promise has been kept.

Charisma can hold this construction together for a while. A personality seems to provide an answer where institutions no longer persuade. But a person is mortal; their presence cannot be repeated forever. If an order depends entirely on them, succession opens an anxious void: an office can be transferred, another person's charm far less easily.

Habit works differently. It requires no enthusiasm and therefore seems more dependable. Everything continues because it continued yesterday. But a habit closed to correction turns stability into immobility. Life changes around it, and the established form corresponds less and less to what it is meant to organize.

An exit need not begin with a great upheaval. It may begin by returning words to their ordinary meanings. A promise becomes an obligation, a report a description of what happened, a discussion an opportunity to influence a decision. Such work looks unremarkable, yet it restores a person's confidence that public speech concerns actual life.

6. Power as Its Own Purpose

At the beginning there is almost always a task. A city must be protected, production organized, a reform completed, people given the opportunity to act. Authority is created for the task, resources gathered, an order established. Over time, that order grows a life of its own: offices, relationships, fears, habits. It begins to defend itself as though its preservation had been the original purpose.

One of power's most difficult paradoxes lies in this transition. An arrangement intended to deal with complexity can become an additional source of complexity. A procedure is created to check an action; a new authority to check the procedure. Responsibility is divided until no one can explain why something plainly necessary cannot be done.

The existence of rules is not an evil in itself. The absence of an intelligible order often leaves a person at the mercy of someone else's mood. But a rule needs to remain connected to its task. If that connection is lost, observing the form begins to justify any result. People do everything "as required," while suffering has no one to whom it can be addressed.

Something similar happens to personal influence. A person wanted authority in order to realize a purpose. Then keeping that authority required actions incompatible with the purpose. One

more concession, one more silence, one more inconvenient person removed—all to preserve the possibility of continuing. Eventually the possibility has been preserved, but there is nothing left to continue.

The higher the position, the harder it is to acknowledge this loss. Too many expectations have gathered around it; too much of other people's effort has been invested. Leaving feels like betrayal, changing direction like weakness. Power can therefore keep moving after it has ceased to understand where it is going.

The ability to distinguish a person from their function matters here. An office does not exhaust a life; relinquishing a mandate is not the same as disappearing. Where this distinction is absent, every limitation feels like annihilation. Keeping one's place becomes a question of existence, and a political disagreement a struggle for the right to be at all.

The possibility of departure therefore has moral significance. Changes of leadership, limits on tenure, and the distribution of decisions help more than the people being governed. They remind leaders themselves that a mandate is finite. They are responsible for how they have used their time, not for ensuring that time belongs to them forever.

Yet an external limit does not remove the need for inward work. One can observe every term limit and still imagine the world as an extension of one's own will. One can occupy a modest position and make the people closest to oneself dependent. Power is measured in more than territory: sometimes it fits inside the claimed right to decide, alone, which of another person's feelings are permissible.

No proper arrangement can abolish the temptation once and for all. But it can make the temptation visible, limit its consequences, and enable people to protect themselves. This is the sober dignity of institutions. They do not require every bearer of authority to be a sage; they assume that a human being remains human even in a high-backed chair.

Part Three. The Possibility of Another Relationship

7. The Quiet Right to Refuse

Refusal begins in the small space between a demand and assent. A familiar answer is expected, but for the first time the person pauses. Must I do this? What happens if I do not? Why does someone else's expectation feel like a law? In that pause a space opens that power has not yet occupied.

Not every refusal looks heroic. Sometimes it is a decision not to join in someone's humiliation, not to support a lie in conversation, not to present coercion as care. Sometimes it means leaving an office that cannot be held without losing self-respect. The price may be high, and it is easy to overestimate someone else's freedom to be brave from a safe position. Refusal requires an understanding of circumstances, not merely an elegant formula.

Stoic thought offers a distinction between what depends on our judgment and what we cannot command at will. That distinction helps us avoid placing our entire inner life under the control of chance and other people's approval. It does not oblige us to be indifferent to illness, poverty, or injustice. External things may matter enormously; what matters is that they should not become the sole judges of our dignity.

This is especially difficult in relationships of power. Another person's decision can cause real harm. Inner freedom will not cancel dismissal, punishment, or loss. But it allows one final distinction to be preserved: the wrong done to a person does not yet determine who they must become. Between pain and action

there remains the work of judgment, sometimes very difficult work indeed.

The Cynic tradition expresses refusal more sharply. In the familiar story, Diogenes asks Alexander only to stop blocking the sunlight. The historical accuracy of the story's details matters less here than its philosophical gesture: there is a good that need not be received from a ruler's hand. By declining to ask, the person changes the balance of power within the scene itself.

Yet independence founded on renouncing every need cannot become a simple prescription for everyone. A person has children, loved ones, a body, obligations. One individual's voluntary poverty may depend on another's unnoticed labor. Even the purest gesture therefore requires a question about its cost and who bears it.

Religious asceticism and retreat offer their own ways out of the race for possession and recognition. A person turns their life toward a good that cannot be measured by office, wealth, or fame. Yet renunciation of worldly power can itself acquire authority. Disciples, admirers, and rules gather around the ascetic. Freedom from one order does not make a person permanently immune to another.

In political life, refusal can become collective action. Nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience show that the capacity to command also depends on people's willingness to cooperate. In the struggle for Indian independence, Gandhi gave such refusal a distinctive moral and organizational form. But no historical success should be turned into a promise of easy victory: refusal has risks, contradictions, and limits.

Contemporary daily life presents less ceremonial, but recognizable, situations. Someone reduces their consumption,

steps out of continual career comparison, limits their time online. They are trying to recover attention that would otherwise be endlessly divided among other people's demands. What matters is not a fashionable image of simplicity, but the ability to distinguish one's own desire again.

Such choices are not free from traps either. Minimalism can become a competition in taste, digital rest another commodity, independence a reason to feel superior to people who are less free. Refusal retains its meaning while it helps someone live, rather than erecting a new ladder from which to look down.

A personal boundary is necessary, but it does not, by itself, repair a common arrangement. By leaving an unjust relationship, a person may protect themselves; someone else will take their place. The question of liberation therefore inevitably extends beyond private will. How can one join with others without allowing collective action to destroy the freedom for which it began?

8. Together, Without a Final Master

A horizontal community has an attractive point of departure: no one acquires the right to command merely by standing above others. Decisions are discussed, duties shared, participants remain people able to speak in their own names. This promise seeks to bring together two powerful desires—to belong and not to be possessed.

The anarchist tradition persistently asks about voluntary cooperation and mutual aid. It cannot be understood if “anarchy” is accepted in advance as a synonym for senseless destruction. The issue is the possibility of an order in which participation is not

reduced to obedience. But that possibility requires organizational work of a different kind, not an absence of work.

Collective farms and enterprises in parts of Spain during the Civil War were one historical experiment in this search. Their forms varied, depended on local circumstances, and existed under wartime conditions. What matters here is not a ready-made proof of an ideal system, but an attempt to give people a part in decisions that shaped their work and lives.

Similar questions arise in communes, cooperatives, ecovillages, and movements for local self-government. The Zapatista idea of governing through obedience to collective decisions demands that a representative remain the bearer of a mandate. In digital organizations, attempts to embody rules in code express a hope of reducing dependence on personal discretion. Every experiment has its conditions; a name alone guarantees neither equality nor freedom.

This is why Jo Freeman's warning about the tyranny of structurelessness is useful. Abolishing official positions leaves informal connections and unequal influence intact. When these are hidden, participants find it harder to understand who decides and how to challenge them. A transparent structure may restrain power better than an assurance that no power exists here at all.

Even around a round table, some people are interrupted less often. Someone knows everyone, someone has time to spare, someone knows how to make a private wish sound like a common interest. Another has a job, children, fatigue, little practice in speaking before a group. Formal equality of votes does not erase these differences. If they go unnoticed, free discussion quietly becomes the privilege of those with the most availability and confidence.

Horizontal relationships therefore need clear procedures. How is an issue raised? Who sets the agenda? Can a decision be reconsidered? How is a dissenter protected? Who is responsible for carrying something out, and how does that mandate end? These questions may sound prosaic beside the dream of a free society. Yet it is through them that the dream acquires an everyday form.

Trust makes cooperation easier, but should not require blindness. The possibility of checking expenditure does not insult an honest steward; a clear term of office does not deny their achievements. On the contrary, scrutiny allows respect to rest on action rather than an endless guessing of intentions.

The size of a community and the complexity of its tasks change the conditions of interaction. What can be discussed face to face is hard to reproduce among many strangers. It does not follow that every large organization is doomed to despotism. It follows that different levels of participation, accessible information, distributed responsibility, and ways of correcting errors without destroying everything are needed.

A technical solution can assist this work, but cannot replace public choice. Code executes what has been specified; it does not make the criterion itself just. A vote does not answer for those excluded from voting. A transparent record does not ensure that people have the strength and knowledge to read it. Freedom requires attention to the conditions of participation, not merely to an attractive procedural form.

The search for horizontal relationships remains valuable even when it yields no perfect model. It prevents the existing arrangement from being declared the only imaginable one. Every successful practice shows that some familiar coercion can be replaced by agreement, and some hidden influence made visible.

Perhaps the future of power lies precisely in this capacity for limitation. An institution's strength is revealed not only in what it can demand, but in what it can relinquish. A leader earns trust not through permanent indispensability, but by enabling others to continue the work after they have gone.

Conclusion. Remaining Human

We began with the desire to acquire the ability to act. Along the way, we found that care, fear, vanity, responsibility, and an attempt to face one's own finitude can meet within that desire. None explains everything. Their combination changes from person to person, from situation to situation, sometimes within a single decision.

Power can protect and injure, give people a common language and deprive them of a voice, join their efforts and appropriate the result. Its dangers are not confined to bad people. Even a worthy purpose can become surrounded by an apparatus that begins to live for itself. Hope for a good ruler therefore needs something more: clear limits, accountable responsibility, and the right to disagree.

Individual refusal restores a person's inward space. The common search for alternatives allows that space to take a social form. Both paths are imperfect. Refusal can lead to loneliness, a community to a new hierarchy. But imperfection does not make the attempt meaningless. It requires the ability to notice consequences and continue making corrections.

Perhaps the most important change begins when a person stops expecting power to provide final proof of their own worth. They can lead, make difficult decisions, defend convictions—and still acknowledge that another person does not exist to confirm that they are right. That acknowledgment contains the basis of a relationship that cannot be exhausted by command.

Freedom, too, is not given once and for all. It must be sustained in language, in the organization of common work, in the possibility of

being heard, in one's own willingness to listen. It calls for resistance and patience, and sometimes for the modest act of giving up the last word.

When we ask why people want power, it is useful to leave the question open long enough to hear our own answer. What do I want now: to protect a cause, escape fear, gain recognition, make another person fall silent? The answer will not always be pleasant. But it is where the possibility of choice begins.

Human dignity does not require complete freedom from dependence. It requires that dependence should not consume the person entirely. That a face should remain behind the role, the possibility of an explanation behind the rule, the right to bring a mandate to an end. And that whoever is entrusted with a decision today should remember: before them are people who will have to live with its consequences.

Afterword. Where Power Runs

The short original essay on the desire for power contains an idea that extends the discussion beyond the figure of the ruler. Power exists in relationships. It connects people, institutions, rules, and expectations; moves among them; gains strength in one place and loses it in another. If we look for it only in a high office, much will go unnoticed.

Its presence can be recognized in the distribution of possibilities. Who is entitled to name what is happening? Whose testimony is considered sufficient? Who needs permission, and who sets the conditions of access? Such distinctions develop in a family, a school, a hospital, an editorial office, a company, a state. Each place has its own language and its own ways of making that language seem natural.

Power needs an environment. Crisis, inequality, and dependence on a single source of assistance can intensify its concentration. Trust, self-government, accessible knowledge, and the possibility of choosing another path can limit it. But no environment offers a permanent guarantee. Even an open community can gradually close if it stops noticing who finds it difficult to speak.

Its boundaries are not drawn only on a map. They lie in ideas of permissible intervention, in the right to privacy, in the possibility of refusing an imposed explanation. Law makes some of those boundaries visible. Others are sustained by culture and personal dignity—sometimes firmly, sometimes almost invisibly to the person crossing them.

Law, money, information, religion, armed force, and technology do more than accompany power. They can strengthen it, constrain it,

challenge it, and take it over. A media organization can explain a ruler's actions and examine the ruler's words. An expert can assist public judgment and shelter a private interest behind the authority of knowledge. No institution is permanently assigned a single role.

Within these relationships, intermediaries, allies, critics, executors, and opponents emerge. Their influence depends on access and on the connections they maintain. Sometimes a person who holds no formally elevated position determines much more than the one whose signature appears beneath a decision. To study power is therefore to attend both to the visible structure and to the way it actually operates.

It has declared tasks: coordinating, protecting, resolving conflicts, distributing. It also has consequences that may not belong to the announced intention: exclusion, dependence, the habit of silence, the displacement of responsibility. Those consequences allow a promise to be compared with life. The right of people subject to power to describe their experience in their own words is particularly important here.

If we accept that forms of relationship have a history, it becomes possible to imagine others. Not every possibility is practicable; not every one is desirable. But thinking about them releases the existing order from its claim to eternity. Power becomes once again a matter for human judgment—complex, necessary to understand, and open to change.

This is the point of returning to the question. Not to find a single word that explains every ruler and every society, but to learn to notice the relationships we enter, the price of consent, the consequences of a decision, and the share of freedom for which we can take responsibility ourselves.