
Dimensions of Power: The Transformation of Liberalism and the Limits of 'Politics'

Claes G. Ryn

The Catholic University of America

Every age has its dominant intellectual and imaginative mind-set and corresponding pattern of practical striving. Deeply rooted ideas, hopes and fears shape desire, and desire in turn influences thought and intuition. Human beings perceive existence and set priorities according to this interaction of will, imagination and reason. The political arrangements of a society are but one of the ways in which a certain dominant approach to life articulates itself and in which a particular sense of possibilities is acted out. Whether a people will prefer limited, constitutional government or a comprehensive welfare state depends on what kind of predispositions and expectations have formed in that society. Not even dictatorial rule can be sustained without the grudging acceptance of a populace whose anxieties and other propensities incline them to submit rather than to rebel.

Any more than superficial inquiry into the meaning and sources of political power must consider the prevalent fundamental outlook of the society and larger civilization in question. What is the sense of reality and what are the deeper aspirations that have made a particular people prefer certain political modalities to others? Narrowly political conceptions of power stand in the way of adequately understanding political arrangements. Conceptions of that kind distract attention from what most fundamentally shapes human conduct. They obscure the moral-intellectual-

aesthetical dynamic behind social evolution. What follows is an argument for a more nuanced and subtle view of power.

The metamorphosis of liberalism

It has been the academic fashion in recent times to discuss central problems of society and human life as issues of "liberalism." It is assumed that liberalism lies at or near the end of humanity's search for enlightenment and well-being and that liberalism is the only possible context for discussing social and political problems. It only remains for intellectuals to identify the remaining weaknesses of liberalism and to indicate how to carry through on its promises. This way of thinking often reveals precisely the preoccupation with politics narrowly understood that was just alluded to, but it is never simply a political stance. Although a person may be only imperfectly aware of the assumptions that lie implicit in his political outlook, these constitute an entire view of human existence, however jerry-built or confused. Not least because the term "liberalism" is heavy with political connotations, it is important when exploring the meaning and influence of liberalism not to fall prey to the illusion that politics is an autonomous, self-generating, self-subsisting force that shapes all other aspects of society. It is essential to understand that political beliefs and institutions are expressions of an underlying attitude toward human existence, that they are in a sense secondary phenomena, having antecedents and roots in the life of the mind and the imagination.

In the last century what is called liberalism underwent a profound change. To explain that change as merely or primarily a change in political beliefs and practices would be simplistic. It stemmed from a metamorphosis of the basic outlook of Western man, which included the broad retreat of Christianity and the abandonment of earlier notions of moral good. The transformation of liberalism was one of the manifestations of a new sensibility, a new way of approaching life; changes in the moral, intellectual and aesthetical climate of the West made new political arrangements seem desirable. The older kind of liberalism can be said to have had the initiative in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century saw the spread of a world-view that gave the initiative to socialism. Liberalism followed its lead, though sometimes reluctantly.

Liberalism's change reflects new attitude to life.

*Liberalism
split apart.*

Thinkers familiar with the history of the West who are also not captive to current academic and journalistic prejudices have long known that what is typically called “liberalism” in the United States bears little resemblance to the body of ideas whose influence peaked in the nineteenth century. That older liberalism advocated limited government, the rule of law, constitutionalism, free markets and freedom for persons to cultivate their individuality and creativity. On the more conservative side, this older liberalism often had a strong sense of liberty’s dependence on historically evolved modes of life. It had such spokesmen as Edmund Burke, the Framers of the U.S. Constitution, and Alexis de Tocqueville. A strong attachment to a broad range of traditional beliefs and habits lay implicit in their political preferences. On the more radical side, liberalism’s advocacy of freedom and scientific reasoning formed part of a desire to break with old Western ways, especially Christianity. John Stuart Mill was here a paradigmatic figure. His dictum is famous: “The despotism of custom is a standing hindrance to human advancement.” Mill believed that unrestricted freedom of discussion and application of a Comtean, “positivist” methodology would eventually obliterate what he considered outdated, superstitious beliefs and behaviors. A new enlightened elite would usher in an era of rational consensus. A preference for social engineering, of which Mill is a pioneer in Anglo-American liberalism, eventually found a more serviceable outlet in social democracy.

As it severed connections with the classical and Christian heritage, liberalism was increasingly absorbed into socialism. Those of its original ideas that were not discarded outright were reinterpreted in the light of notions that had previously given momentum to socialism, such as Rousseau’s view of human nature and society and his belief in the need for a radical reconstruction of society. Here liberalism found more ammunition for attacks on traditional Western civilization. In America as well as in Europe the new liberals were sometimes more radical in their attacks upon old moral and cultural norms than leading social democrats, for many of the latter retained some attachment to a particular national tradition and to grass-roots working class values.

In America, “liberals” have long been virtually indistinguishable from European social Democrats or “social liberals.” The latter are dedicated to the Welfare State and moral-cultural radical-

ism but have a lingering preference for free, if regulated, markets as economically superior to a socialistic mode of production. In the United States socialist-leaning politicians and political intellectuals frequently hide their innermost beliefs because of the continuing presence of voters and competitors with decidedly more conservative opinions. The intellectual merging of liberalism and socialism was evident in academia throughout the twentieth century, a process that was facilitated by many socialists adopting more pragmatic economic views. That the initiative lay largely with socialism is suggested by liberalism's often heavy emphasis on "justice," a term that through most of recorded history had been understood as requiring inequalities of various kinds, but that now was interpreted as requiring egalitarian reconstruction of society. In the 1970s, for example, the liberal-socialistic trend was represented by John Rawls, whose theory of justice made use of the egalitarian implications of John Locke and Immanuel Kant. Rawls was but one in a long line of theorists, including Americans like Herbert Croly and John Dewey, who envisioned a centrally planned and administered society governed for the well-being of all. Only with difficulty do thinkers like Rawls maintain a connection with the original liberalism.

Theorizing of this kind justified continuing major expansion of government to ensure the enactment and refinement of a redefined "justice." Such thinking would have appalled a nineteenth-century liberal, but soon, under the influence of postmodernism, feminism, the homosexual-rights movement, multiculturalism, etc., liberalism took unto itself additional assignments, becoming ever more intent on employing government to shape the conduct and thinking of individuals. The aspect of the new liberalism that may account for most of its appeal today is its commitment to liberating individuals from traditional moral and cultural restraints and letting them engage in previously disdained behaviors without fear of social disapproval and even without a bad conscience. One of the main attractions of up-to-date liberalism seems to be its portrayal of old notions of proper behavior as narrow-minded and inhumane and worthy of condemnation and punishment. Government is seen by many liberals as an instrument for rooting out traditional moral and cultural preferences and for installing new ones. In general, investing government with extensive responsibilities is an example of the practical enactment of a *Weltanschauung*.

New liberalism anti-traditional.

Telling proof of liberalism's transformation and the influence of its new intellectual and political configuration can be found in the way it is catered to by writers who claim to represent religion or moral universality but who also do not want to be left outside of the new liberal consensus. Such intellectuals present themselves as friends of liberalism, suggesting that it can be strengthened and deepened by acknowledging its religious or moral underpinnings. As the reigning liberal mind-set would dismiss out of hand a return to traditional religion or any analogous idea of moral universality, no such possibility is mentioned. Rather, what is proposed is a spirituality said to be compatible with liberalism's predominant trend. Rousseauistic sentimental humanitarianism provided much of the moral justification and inspiration for socialism. What is now said to be capable of reinvigorating a spiritually and morally stale liberalism turns out to be very similar to that older romantic sensibility, whatever theology is appended to it. The advocacy of this allegedly more spiritual liberalism illustrates not only the degree to which liberalism has changed, but the extent to which Christianity and moral speculation have been absorbed into the world-view whose political manifestation is liberalism-socialism.

Though the older type of liberalism survives and has staged some significant intellectual comebacks, the dominant intellectual culture is on a different wavelength. A new view of man and society has made a new conception of the role of the state seem persuasive. By the standards of the earlier liberalism, today's discussions of how government should administer society are blatantly illiberal. One does not have to disapprove of every aspect of the metamorphosis of liberalism to find this debate often less than intellectually rigorous. The blurring of important distinctions and the frequency of loose, ideological reasoning places the philosophical utility of this discussion in question.

The new "liberalism"

To gain some historical and critical perspective on the current debate, students of liberalism need to take several steps back. Much can be gained by reading Paul Gottfried's *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State*.^{*} The book is different and

^{*} Paul Gottfried, *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

provocative, an anomaly in an increasingly predictable as well as intolerant liberal America. To gain entry into the liberalism debate authors ordinarily present themselves, hat in hand, to the intellectual gatekeepers and make various signs of deference and obeisance. Instead of currying favor with the arbiters of acceptable academic discourse, Gottfried challenges many of their basic assumptions. His book goes a long way toward sorting out what is what in the bulging and messy repository labeled “liberalism.” Writers who, out of ignorance or opportunism, have assumed a basic continuity between early and late liberalism must here confront overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Gottfried pricks balloons, and he makes much of the current debate about liberalism look ignorant, superficial or disingenuous.

After Liberalism examines the political forms and ideas that have replaced the older liberalism in the Western world. Though representatives of the new orthodoxy sometimes pay lip service to old-fashioned liberal ideas like constitutionalism, the political system they favor is a highly intrusive administrative state run by what Gottfried calls a “managerial” elite. Supported by intellectual courtesans, this new elite pursues a forever expanding “therapeutic” agenda. The regime derives a nominal democratic legitimacy from periodic elections in which voters with government entitlements get to consider proposals for further expansion of their benefits. “Democratic citizenship has come to mean eligibility for social services and welfare benefits,” Gottfried writes. Once upon a time committed to limited and minimal government, liberalism has become the ideology of the virtually all-encompassing state.

*Liberalism
illiberal.*

Contrary to its own self-assessment, the new mind-set is not tolerant and open; it is highly partisan and selective in its affirmations. It is intolerant of traditionally held views and insistent on imposing its own opinions. Liberal multiculturalism, for example, may present itself as accepting of different cultural and ethnic groups, but the managerial elites are interested mainly in instrumentalizing particular groups that can be expected to undermine traditional religious, national, or cultural identities. The latter are under relentless government-sponsored pressure from groups claiming victimhood and demanding compensation for past wrongs. One of the roles of the managerial state, Gottfried argues, is to act “as an arbiter of victimological claims.” He cites other examples of liberal preferences that are so far from liberal

that they must not even be questioned, or cannot be questioned without serious detriment to a person's career or social acceptance. The old meaning of liberal has been replaced by an aggregate of the predilections currently in vogue in American intellectual circles, such as approval of gay rights, radical feminism, and unrestricted immigration. The term "liberal" has been "decontextualized" and "means what the user wishes it to signify, providing that he can browbeat others into accepting his definition." The new liberalism is to some extent a moving target, for its orthodoxy varies somewhat with intellectual fashion. Discussing the standard for liberalism in the Western world today, Gottfried suggests that to be a liberal is to hold whatever views are approved by trend-setters in the United States at a particular time.

Gottfried's book provides a concise survey of the intellectual typology and pedigree of contemporary liberalism. The general character of the transformation of liberalism has long been known to many, but Gottfried's account is illuminating and thought-provoking. He supplies many valuable insights and pertinent specifics. His description of the emergence and operation of the administrative state has a great deal to recommend it. No honest intellectual after reading this book will, without introducing all-important distinctions, call advocacy of that state a natural and logical extension of the older liberalism.

The roots and antecedents of politics

This does not mean that Gottfried's argument could not be supplemented, deepened and refined. Sometimes his summaries of ideas and intellectual connections are too sweeping. He might also have attended more to the opposed potentialities of ideas. Most importantly, his analysis of the evolution and power of the managerial regime could be strengthened by considering additional historical forces and developments. No study of a major topic can deal with all relevant questions and sort out all of their intricacies, but there are issues that Gottfried does not treat or mentions only in passing that bear directly and significantly on his topic. The subject would also benefit from less reliance on terms and categories that, because they are too abstract and general, are difficult to pin down and potentially misleading. In Gottfried's book these include "administrative state," "state man-

agers," "New Class," "managerial" and "power." To the greatest extent possible terms and categories should be avoided that overly simplify concrete phenomena or draw attention away from important factors.

Though Gottfried is an intellectual historian capable of philosophical-historical reflection, much of his reasoning veers in a questionably sociological, quasi-mechanistic direction, becoming reminiscent of the flawed if not unproductive theorizing about elites of such writers as Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels and Gaetano Mosca. In the United States a similar approach was taken by James Burnham, author of *The Managerial Revolution* (1941). Following in the footsteps of Burnham and other positivistic-naturalistic theorists, Gottfried employs classifications whose meanings remain ambiguous throughout his work. It never becomes clear who in his view do and do not belong to the class that runs the administrative state. Composed as it is of many different types of individuals, the managerial elite is an amorphous category, and yet the people belonging to it are alleged to have a single, distinct, defining group interest that justifies the classification. An equally central and problematic term is "power." Although Gottfried's general thesis assumes "the primacy of power," he proceeds as if the term "power" were virtually self-explanatory. He regards managerial elites as powerful because they are in charge of government. But where does their power and the power of the government they control really come from? Gottfried apparently does not think that such questions have to be answered. He believes it sufficient to argue that state managers do dominate government and to show how they think and operate. But the questions do need answers. Here and elsewhere Gottfried's key conceptions are abstract in the sense that they simplify complex, concrete phenomena and are defined and named by drawing selectively from those phenomena. Even in the merely suggestive form in which Gottfried leaves them, terms like "state managers" and "power" can be useful, but they sometimes conceal and distort as much as they reveal.

Sociological concepts too abstract.

Instead of providing a systematic definition of power, Gottfried relies on the reader's gathering his meaning from how he uses the word. That usage shows him making do with a rather narrowly political notion, one that is not dissimilar to connotations of the term in everyday conversation: "Power" is associated with "gov-

ernment” and “politics.” Those in government have power but underpaid intellectuals do not.

A subject that Gottfried does not go into but whose exploration would have added importantly to the understanding of the influence of managerial elites is that “power” can mean very different things in different contexts, not least different political contexts. He contends that in the modern Western world a New Class is the ultimate power and source of power and is the decisive force in shaping society. Because he treats a single factor as the one truly significant explanation for what happens in society, and because he simplifies and shrinks social and political reality to accommodate his basic thesis, his general argument could be criticized for reductionism.

Gottfried often writes as if his state managers or “New Class operatives” held autonomously generated and well-nigh irresistible power. Analyzing how these elites govern modern Western societies, he prides himself on seeing behind appearances and smokescreens and getting down to brass tacks. “Any serious appraisal of the managerial regime must consider first and foremost the extent of its control,” Gottfried insists. Though state managers rule society, they do not want to acknowledge the state’s “coercive reach.” “The uninterrupted exercise of its power may depend upon not talking plainly about such unclean matters.” The governing elites conceal much of their manipulation of society in the language of caring and in nominal adherence to democratic procedures, but Gottfried is not deceived. They have the power to “shape and reshape people’s lives.” He calls it “worth the effort to look beyond euphemism to see how political power is exercised.” He chides other authors for not attending properly to issues of “power.”

*Need for
greater
realism.*

Though fashioning himself a realist free of illusion, Gottfried may be insufficiently realistic. It is not that he is simply wrong about the managerial elites—however they should be defined or whatever term may best describe them. Something like these elites does wield power across a wide range of activity in today’s society. Much of that power is, as Gottfried contends, hidden behind pretty phrases. He properly credits Irving Babbitt with long ago having unmasked “sentimental humanitarianism” with its professed “service to mankind” as perhaps the main way in our time of masking a will to power. The trouble with Gottfried’s analysis

is that it can be said to be focused on the tip of an iceberg or, to use another metaphor, on a mere slice of a large whole, and that he gives a truncated account of what he does study. A more complete, varied, nuanced, and hence more realistic picture of the managerial regime becomes possible when sources of power are included that, although Gottfried may not regard them as political, have everything to do with the power exercised by government.

Perhaps especially when strong trends are discernible within civilization intellectuals are prone to general and comprehensive explanations. Although the cross-currents within civilization and the sheer intricacy of life might seem to speak strongly against interpreting human developments with reference to any single force or motive, reductionism is always a temptation. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw many examples of doctrines that seized upon and also rather willfully construed a certain part of reality, turning that part into the preeminent, decisive factor in human conduct. For instance, behavior was explained as ultimately governed by biological evolution according to the principle of survival of the fittest, or by sexuality, or by the way in which production is organized and controlled. The view that "money rules the world" spread far outside of Marxist circles. Common to these modes of interpretation is a willingness to force the complexities and subtleties of human action into certain categories of explanation. Varieties of empiricism, positivism and materialism were developed that admitted only evidence compatible with the propounded thesis. Sociology and psychology of various types generated a plethora of terms and categories that often did more to obscure than to illuminate reality. The schools of "behaviorism" or "behavioralism" with their "scientific" survey techniques and use of statistics provided particularly primitive examples of "the study of man." The very methods used excluded the evidence for a wholly different understanding of man and society. Though these various doctrines claimed scientific status, their more or less pronounced reductionism revealed a strong, if partly hidden, ideological passion.

*Reductionism
driven by
ideological
passion.*

As a learned and wide-ranging thinker, Paul Gottfried would be sharply critical of most of these forms of reductionism. But this general temptation can influence the best of minds. As if aware of the danger, Gottfried at times seems to pull back from his politi-

cal-sociological emphasis and to be about to qualify his argument by introducing new considerations, but the apparent departure from the general train of analysis turns out to be little more than a detour, which soon puts him back on the main road.

The source of strength and weakness.

The supplement and revision that Gottfried's general argument most needs is an exploration of what may be the greatest source of power of all for the managerial elites, which happens also to be the greatest source of their potential weakness. It is essential to recognize the extent to which the "liberal" managerial elites, as well as other elites, are creations and manifestations of an historically evolved moral, cultural and intellectual ethos and of the kind of practical inclinations that it fosters. The power of these elites is in fact severely circumscribed, dependent as it is on staying in tune with the ethos from which it springs. Only marginally can the state managers themselves affect the fundamental direction of civilization that made their rule appear politically appropriate.

Governmental elites rely for their efficacy and legitimacy upon the complicity of a great many institutions and individuals outside of government. These include the mass media, universities, schools, churches, the entertainment industry, publishing houses, and many other institutions that help shape society's mind and imagination and hence its longings and sense of reality. In institutions like these or in their vicinity are found the exceptional individuals who make others see and apprehend life as they do—novelists, thinkers, dramatists, painters, composers, preachers, screen-writers, directors, poets, *et al.* Over time, these members of non-governmental elites have great influence in shaping the thoughts, sensibilities and desires of society. These individuals wield a power that in some ways dwarfs that of politicians. People do after all live according to what they most deeply believe and desire. If managerial elites seem to Gottfried firmly ensconced in government, it is not because they have independently determined the general direction of society and persuaded the people they administer to follow their lead. Their role in government became possible in the first place only because civilization had long been moving in a certain direction, giving rise to managerial thinking and making it possible for individuals of that predisposition to ascend to positions of political authority. The basic orientation of society continues to be set by all of those who are able to mold a people's fundamental sense of reality and deepest longings and fears,

though the political ramifications of that influence may for a long time remain unarticulated or unspecified.

The managerial elites appear in this perspective as marionettes of sorts, at the mercy of the mind-set and the habits already formed and continuously forming in society at large. That underlying movement of civilization is reflected in various outlets of "the culture," notably the mass media. The tastes and preferences that they convey are echoes, recent and simple expressions of the more daring and subtle initiatives taken long before by the most powerful minds and imaginations of an era. Society's predominant ethos is not the creature of any single group, and it evolves over decades and centuries. Yet *it*, not some particular political regime, decides the basic outlook, emotional tone and practical propensities of a people. The present political elites are a manifestation of a moral, intellectual and cultural evolution long in the making, the same that produced the new liberalism. The institutions and the power of what Gottfried calls the administrative state may of course be called "political," but to do so under the influence of a narrow conception of "the political" is to note but one aspect of what they are and to risk misunderstanding their role.

*Elites
creatures of
social ethos.*

Varieties of power

Gottfried insists that "any serious appraisal of the managerial regime must consider first and foremost the extent of its control." Perhaps so, but then surely it is essential to inquire into the sources and elements of this "control"? Why is this type of regime supported or tolerated? According to Gottfried, it has to do with the regime providing entitlements. But that leaves unexplained why elites of *this* kind rather than some other kind should have become influential in the first place, why people should have become interested in entitlements rather than, say, independence from government or private control over economic resources. If democracy is said to have given precedence to people who prefer entitlements to independence, then the moral, intellectual and cultural forces that nurtured this form of democracy are a part of what gives power to the present form of government. To suggest that the ability to "control" others comes from being in possession of the government begs the question, for the power of government in any society needs explaining. In some societies government is weak

Different forms of power influential in different situations.

and ineffectual and even hard to define. Gottfried leaves the authority of his "state managers" and of government generally largely unexplained.

A philosophically inclined student of power looks for it in the concrete rather than in the abstract. The actual, historical world gives examples of power of many types. Particular forms are more or less influential depending on the circumstances. What needs to be asked is what types of power are most relevant or efficacious in particular situations? Is it the power of a loaded gun? Or of a great sermon? Or of setting the interest rate? Or of a beautiful woman? Or of commanding an army? Or of a philosophical treatise? Or of having a majority in the legislature? Or of a poem? Or of some combination of these? To contend that the managerial elites of Gottfried's study are powerful because they are in "government" is to substitute a word for highly complex reality. "Government" is just the kind of abstraction that, if left unexplained, will conceal how authority is actually acquired and exercised.

"Power" is mere shorthand for involved and many-faceted human relationships of give and take. Gottfried may appreciate some of that intricacy, but he does not let it complicate his analysis of the managerial elites and the type of government with which they are associated. Presumably, he considers his own approach more "muscular," more relevant to actual politics, than a philosophically oriented study that attends to the subtleties of power. He may regard his own sociologically biased perspective as sufficient for addressing questions of practical politics, but what impedes real understanding is detrimental also to intelligent practical action.

Left undefined and without concrete specifics, "power" is an almost empty category. It will derive its only meaning from connotations in the air. To say, for example, that "power" is what moves people to action is not to say very much, for that statement is in a sense true by definition, a pointless tautology. People who speak of the primacy of power and identify it with politics and government typically ignore the crux of the matter, namely, what will move people in particular situations. In order for an individual to move in a certain direction, his own inclinations must propel him. Nobody can act against his will. A person may choose to die rather than do as another would like. For a person to exercise power, therefore, he must gain the assent, the approval of the other person, even if that approval be reluctant or hate-filled. For

a person to act according to the wishes of another, doing so must have come to seem compatible with that person's own wishes. To notice about a power-relationship only that the one who is seeking to dominate another is a representative of government or that he is carrying a gun is to ignore that the person pressured to consent is always free to refuse, although he may have to pay a high price for exercising that freedom. The motives for consenting, or not consenting, may be very complex and mixed and will vary from person to person.

According to a commonly heard formula, government power is unique in that government has a "monopoly on violence." This formula may have a limited utility in some contexts, but it has no standing in philosophy. One of the reasons is that there can be no monopoly on violence in the first place. What the law may decree or how many weapons the government may have is here irrelevant. No government, not even a totalitarian one scrupulous in rooting out opposition, can monopolize violence and remove all physical threats to itself or its subjects. That a government could have by far the greatest potential for using violence (a "monopoly") also may, depending on the circumstances, be the least significant part of its ability to influence behavior. Power, including the possibility of using violence, would become merely formal if a people should simply deny the state's legitimacy and refuse to obey. In Western history there are examples of Popes using their religious authority and the threat of excommunication to neutralize power over armies. It is to miss too much of the give-and-take of all power-relationships not to recognize that people may impose restrictions on themselves that are far more important in explaining the power of a particular regime than any ability government may have to apply external force.

"Monopoly on violence" can be irrelevant.

From the point of view of exercising power, then, the greatest asset of Gottfried's state managers is widespread beliefs and sensibilities conducive to acceptance of their regime. Gottfried insists that the managerial elites "impose" values on society "in their role as guardians," but they would have a very difficult time imposing what is not incipiently palatable, in the air, waiting to be given specific political form. State managers can of course be loosely said to "impose" their values in that many dislike those values, but it is part of the regime's power that those critical of it can be counted on to keep their opposition limited. Gottfried's managerial elites

derive most of their power from acting within an already existing intellectual and imaginative mind-set with its corresponding desires.

In the abstract, "money" or "power" powerless.

Some who consider themselves hard-nosed like to say that money rules the world or that money is power. In the abstract, that formula has much the same plausibility as the claim that power is in the hands of managerial elites. It is only when the intricacies of power in the concrete are examined that it becomes possible realistically to assess which forces predominate in the shaping of society. What makes money powerful? Presumably what it can buy. But some things, including the assent of some people, cannot be bought. Money gives power only to the extent that what it can buy matters more to people than what it cannot buy. Money "as such," in the abstract, has no influence. The context is all-important. Moreover, few things of a tangible nature that can be bought are desired merely for a utilitarian purpose. They are deemed really desirable only if they are expected somehow to enhance the value of life. For example, few people buy an automobile simply for transportation. Has an advertiser of cars ever tried selling mere transportation, instead of some thrilling, life-enhancing new experience such as improved social standing, a better sex-life, great comfort, or just a smoother ride. Selling cars is, like selling anything else, in large part an attempt to appeal to some longing in the buyer, whether that longing be puny and mediocre or extravagant and sophisticated. The power of money comes not from money "as such" but from the hopes that people in some particular historical circumstances may attach to it. The same is true of political leadership. It can be "sold" to potential followers only to the extent that it is believed by them to contribute somehow to a more satisfying existence. For one in power to act contrary to the deepest sensibilities and desires of his constituency would be to risk political suicide, and not only in a democracy. Differently put, such action would render the person powerless.

To reiterate, political elites must act within moral, intellectual and cultural parameters already in place. They can only give specific form to intuitions stirring within a people. State managers cannot autonomously produce the most profound hopes and fears of a people. New political departures, too, must have some antecedents in the intuition of a people, or they will appear far-fetched, illegitimate or extreme. An audacious initiative is not likely to suc-

ceed unless the one launching it can make use of existing potentialities of thought, imagination and desire, which, though they may not yet have been much noticed, were nevertheless waiting to be mobilized. Great political leaders do creatively employ resources available to them and are sometimes able to take societies in unexpected directions, but not even such unusual persons can generate all the momentum needed to accomplish their objectives. Napoleon, for example, led his country in a new direction, but he was not himself the source of such elements of French energy and ascendancy as Jacobin nationalism and Enlightenment ideas.

Neglected power

For all of his intellectual scope and vitality, Gottfried largely avoids these more difficult issues of power. In his book, power is understood reductively. It flows in one direction and in one channel: from state managers through the administrative state. Since he traces the intellectual lineage of this state, one might have expected him also to launch an in-depth discussion of the power of ideas and of how the managerial state derived power from the fact that a certain intellectual outlook had gained ascendancy in the Western world. Gottfried actually does fault other analysts for not sufficiently appreciating the role of ideas. He recognizes that intellectual influences affected the evolution of the managerial state in particular societies. But his main reason for bringing up this subject is not to show that ideas can be a directive force in history and that the managerial state itself is a consequence of new thinking in the West. He only wants to point out that in the seemingly inexorable development of the administrative state ideas sometimes complicate and diversify its evolution. He leaves the strong impression that ideas are considerably less formative and salient than other, impersonal socio-political forces. He does not go into the kind of power that lies in being able to shape the thinking of others or into the implications of that ability for understanding the power of the administrative state. Even less does he concern himself with the power that lies in influencing the imagination of others. His primary purpose in writing an intellectual history of the managerial state is to set forth a sequence of events and to describe the kind of ideas that are associated with the emergence of the new order.

Ideas seen as products of other forces.

Though he is not entirely consistent on the matter, Gottfried

presents ideas as reflections or consequences of class interest. The ideas of the New Class are what they are because of the role of that class in today's society, just as, for Gottfried, classical liberalism was the ideology of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie.

That Gottfried does not attribute exceptional and determinative influence in history to ideas or rationality should not be held against him. A one-sided emphasis on the intellect as shaping human conduct would be another form of reductionism. The problem is his more general propensity to downplay or conceal the role of human choice and creativity as distinguished from the role of impersonal social forces and to emphasize the primacy of politics narrowly understood. For Gottfried, "culture" in the broadest sense is a product or accompaniment of other factors. It was the managerial state, he insists, that accomplished "the unraveling of bourgeois society." It was the same state that formulated and prescribed "an entire way of life." A rather different interpretation of the transformation of Western society and liberalism results from relying less on abstract and quasi-mechanistic sociological reasoning and more on philosophical-historical observation.

*Excercise of
power never
without give
and take.*

Gottfried does seem ready at one point to concede that the managerial state may not be able autonomously to generate its own power. He writes that "this state rests its power upon a multitiered following: an underclass and now middle-class welfariate, a self-assertive public sector, and a vanguard of media and journalistic public defenders." This comment could be read as implying that the managerial elites could get into trouble because of unruliness within this "following," but the statement turns out not to be about the precariousness of managerial control; it is simply a listing of the constituents of managerial power. Gottfried already has defined the components of the "following" as creatures or wards of the managerial state. What would be the origin of opposition to managerial elites, if, as he asserts, the coalition dominated by those elites have had their values instilled in them by those same elites? Presumably, within Gottfried's own schema, state managers could push their luck and make mistakes. Observers not confined to the political-sociological mode of analysis, however, can take full account of the actual nature of politics, such as the standoffs, tensions, exchanges and compromises that mark all real exercise of power. Will, imagination and reason play multifarious and politically relevant roles both outside and inside the channel

of power on which Gottfried concentrates. From a philosophical-historical vantage point it is possible to see, for example, that, as individuals are not automatons, obstreperousness and dissension can break out within the managerial elites themselves. Such a prospect may strike Gottfried as a contradiction in terms: a "state manager" does not act so as to undermine the administrative state. No, but a human being might.

"A discussion of government should be about control," Gottfried writes, but, as has been shown, control is a considerably more involved subject than his book acknowledges. When considering developments that might undermine or dislodge the managerial elites, Gottfried characteristically does not explore moral, intellectual and cultural trends within Western civilization that might create new inclinations among its peoples and produce elites different in character and sensibility from the present ones. He looks rather for political disturbances, such as populist movements that oppose the managerial elites and might confront them in the political arena.

The phantom of "class"

"The New Class" is central to Gottfried's analysis, but he does not dwell on the fact that what he so labels never could have emerged unless the spread of a certain moral-intellectual-cultural ethos had made a particular attitude towards life seem appealing and had given momentum to the evolution of something like the New Class. Equally problematic is that the sociological category of "class" has a merely abstract definition and clarity and is in actuality highly ambiguous. Though the term can be useful for some limited purposes, it cannot withstand serious philosophical scrutiny. The category begins to dissolve as the mind concentrates on concrete specifics and reveals the representatives of the alleged class to be real persons, whatever else they may also be. This means that, despite particular social and political allegiances and inclinations, members of the class participate in general humanity. They are simultaneously unique individuals. They are *human beings* with mixed motives and diverse interests and propensities. They are not reducible to a sociologically convenient classification.

Even in Gottfried's own terms, "the New Class" is an amorphous category. It spans a broad range of occupations and func-

tions—just how broad remains unclear. The managerial elites must also interact with and therefore to some extent blend with the groups that constitute their following. They must, in other words, take unto themselves some of the attributes of those other groups. The leaders of those groups can, depending on the context, be said to be or not to be part of the managerial elite. Because of the give and take of all actual human relationships, no such sharp boundaries can exist as are assumed in sociological abstractions like “class” and “elite.” That such groupings are said to be, for example, “managerial” or “therapeutic” does not remove the diffuseness, for any alleged special attribute refers to something more intricate than is allowed for by the sociological label. The chosen term draws attention to some particular trait that is also reductively defined. One of the results is to obscure what gave prominence to that trait in the first place.

*Abstractions
have only
limited utility.*

The upshot of this discussion is not that definitions of this sociological type are useless. In some circumstances they can be indispensable, as when lack of time permits only broadly suggestive hints or when the intellectual purpose of the moment does not require greater precision and subtlety. More generally, terms of this kind can be helpful as long as the one using them is aware that they are approximative abstractions, reifications of what is actually human and living. It is not possible to explore in depth the meaning of every term in every discussion. The emphasis has to be placed somewhere. But sociological abstractions tend to acquire a life of their own, a kind of permanent, independent existence, and then they start to dull the mind, distracting it from concrete, historical reality.

*Philosophy
tries to
express
real life.*

A central role of philosophy is to sharpen our awareness of what is actually in human experience and of how the latter differs from roughly constructed conceptions. Not even philosophy itself can do without tentatively formulated abstractions, but its job is to replace them as much as it can with concepts faithful to life. “Will,” “imagination” and “reason” have been mentioned here. Although this is not the place to do so, they can be shown to be very different from sociological or psychological reifications: they are attempts to articulate what is in immediate human self-experience.

To attribute to a large number of people a single, distinct and inexorable interest is to ignore or minimize the importance of the

capacity of individuals to transcend their own groups—morally, intellectually and aesthetically. As that capacity is central to what it means to be human and a part of a society and civilization, it needs prominent consideration in any study of humane subjects. Reifying conceptions of “class,” “interest” and “power” distort and conceal concrete reality. For that reason they also obscure actual possibilities for change. That sociologically biased terms are central, not marginal, to Gottfried’s reasoning about the managerial state points to the need for supplementing and deepening his argument.

Preconditions for political change

A feature of a sociological category like “New Class” that may make it appealing to some is that it lets people deeply dissatisfied with present social trends focus their pent-up anger and frustration on a particular group. It allows them to think that removal of that group from government is the solution to the problems. A more subtle analysis makes it harder to fix the blame, indeed, leaves few without blame. Attention to the “non-political” dimensions of politics rules out the possibility of quick, “practical” remedies to deep-seated, far-reaching problems. If the social and political phenomena bemoaned by Gottfried are in fact but the most recent products of centuries of thinking, acting and imagining, and if they can be genuinely changed only in proportion as the fundamental patterns of civilization change and different elites start forming, then the appropriate response is to try to transform civilization. This is a work for generations, though it should be kept in mind that at particular moments in history the time can be more ripe for dramatic change than appears to the human eye. Daring and courage may uncover possibilities hidden to caution and cowardice.

*A focus for
anger.*

The import of what has been argued here is not that politics makes little difference in the evolution of society. Politics can make a terrible difference—as when totalitarians assume that the time has come for remaking the very terms of human existence, or when “moderate” totalitarians believe that they can benevolently administer all of society or—why not?—the entire world. But totalitarianism, too, was fostered by a certain type of thought and imagination and a related restlessness and hate. When politics

makes a difference for the better, as when government protects society's higher aspirations and freedoms, a certain moral-intellectual-cultural propensity will have produced that benign influence as well. The point is that, whatever the quality of political action, it can be efficacious only after the ground has been prepared so that the action will seem at least tolerably acceptable.

*Human
dynamic
shapes
politics.*

To summarize the reasoning so far, political events and arrangements are preceded, structured and constituted by the subtle and ceaseless interaction of will, imagination and reason. For good or ill, that human dynamic shapes civilization itself, giving it its salient features and corresponding elites. In individualized ways it stirs continuously in the souls of persons, forming their sense of reality and creating the background and inspiration for new choices. In comparison with this broad, far-reaching, and often unpredictable movement of humanity, particular decrees of the administrative state are trivialities, faint and tiny echoes of an outlook on life that was long in the making and long in developing its various practical implements. Sociologically oriented studies of power tend to ignore the heart-beat of real life.

Gottfried sees himself as applying Carl Schmitt's notion of the "primacy of the political." That this notion contains an element of truth and can be useful in some contexts should not be denied. But it easily becomes an invitation to reductionistic thinking. As has been argued here, "politics" and "power" are far more complex than most political theorists assume, to say nothing of students of "practical politics." To stress the "primacy of the political" without fully appreciating the intricacy of power and of life more generally is to compound error. The distinction between "friend" and "enemy" that is fundamental to Schmitt and Gottfried is another example of a reifying theoretical construction that may be useful for some limited intellectual purposes, but it threatens to obscure that "friends" and "enemies" are also human beings capable of overcoming or mitigating differences.

Treating the ability to find a common higher ground as if it did not exist or were unimportant to political analysis, means indulging and reinforcing man's partisan propensities, in politics and elsewhere. Doing so undermines a central purpose of civilization, which is to foster the kind of character and sensibility that strengthens men's shared higher humanity and enables them to rise above conflicts.

To the extent that Gottfried can be said to offer a solution for the problems of the managerial state, it is to try politically to unseat the New Class, to remove it physically, as it were. But the reasoning above should have demonstrated that, in the absence of some marked change in the basic course of civilization, removal of a particular group of state managers could be but a freakish interlude. Society's dominant mind-set would soon replicate the deposed political elites and overwhelm the interlopers.

Nothing that has been argued here contradicts the possibility that intelligent, imaginative and audacious political leaders might arrest, complicate or redirect particular socio-political trends. One of the reasons they could do so is that the broad stream of Western civilization contains countercurrents and eddies that can lend support and credibility to such departures. It is sometimes possible to gain the political initiative by articulating potentialities that mediocre politicians were not able to discern or bring to the surface. But not even the most creative and resourceful leaders could hope to achieve major and lasting change unless a different spirit of civilization, a new or a reinvigorated older outlook, were at the same time gaining momentum among those who shape the fundamental beliefs and tastes of society. This would mean that new elites of various types were emerging.

Creative leadership can mobilize hidden or new resources.

What might alter the heartbeat of society is not possible to say specifically in advance. No one can know what resources are actually available at any time and which developments are most likely to spur a different dynamic of civilization. It is only possible to indicate in general terms the origins of such a change. Novelists, philosophers, religious visionaries, composers, painters, dramatists, script-writers, directors, poets, sculptors, architects, inventors—they are the kind of people who, perhaps together with unsettling historical events, can trigger a transformation of society by inspiring it with a new sense of possibilities. Only when guided and strengthened by a new movement of civilization can politicians and political intellectuals opposing present political trends begin to hope for some real and enduring success. In that kind of historical situation the best among them can play a central role in translating fresh perception and intuition into practically efficacious initiatives. This is an indispensable and sometimes decisive contribution, however much it may owe to others having made the time ripe for new political leadership.

*Humanism
seen as
outdated.*

Gottfried is sympathetic to liberals in the twentieth century who warned that liberalism and democracy would decline without an attempt to invigorate the aristocratic notion of leadership and the more general humanism that was sometimes associated with the older liberalism. He especially discusses Walter Lippmann, whose *The Public Philosophy* (1955) sought to revive an older conception of politics and civilized life. Lippmann, who had once been a socialist but had come under the influence of Irving Babbitt, among others, directed to American liberals what Gottfried calls "a desperate plea to change political course." It fell on deaf ears. Gottfried's comment on this failure of persuasion is illustrative of his way of thinking about politics. He says of Lippmann's plea that it may have been "too little too late" and that Lippmann invoked "a humanistic ideal of leadership that may have grown obsolete." Lippmann's was a lost cause in as much as "social scientists and therapists were setting the tone of government." What Gottfried does not discuss is that liberalism and government had evolved in this particular direction precisely because the older idea of leadership and humanism gradually had been replaced by other notions, notably rousseauistic and collectivistic ones, first in the arts and in intellectual circles and then in the counsels of government. Already at the end of the nineteenth century Babbitt had begun to identify ominous moral and cultural trends that would eventually result in the kind of political developments that Gottfried describes in his book. Significantly, Gottfried regards the humanism for which Lippmann was hankering in the mid-twentieth century as time-bound and anachronistic for the period for which it was proposed. In keeping with his tendency to treat moral, intellectual and cultural phenomena as manifestations of class interest, Gottfried views Babbittian humanism as belonging to the era of bourgeois ascendancy. With the triumph of the managerial state and mass democracy its time is past.

*Humanism for
no particular
era or group.*

Yet genuine humanism, as understood by Babbitt and many others, is for and of no particular class, though the high demands it places on the individual tend always to make it the province of a relatively few. Neither is humanism for any particular time. Its lineage can be traced far back into Western and non-Western civilization. It encompasses the religious heritage of mankind in an ecumenical manner. Its spirit of ethical and cultural discipline can be made relevant to all historical circumstances. Its chance for hav-

ing an influence is obviously far less in some historical situations than in others, but those who embody it will try as best they can to humanize the circumstances in which they find themselves, however discouraging they may be. This means trying to buttress the capacity of human beings for transcending mere group partisanship. At its best, the moral, intellectual and cultural life belongs to nobody in particular but strengthens and enriches what humanity holds in common. Is it even out of the question that members of Gottfried's managerial elite might be humanized by this higher life? That would mean that the administrative state started to shed or modify some of its attributes, indeed, that it was changing into something else. The spirit of humanism cannot be artificially created, and in unfavorable circumstances it can be kept alive only through strenuous and protracted effort, but there is no substitute for such effort if civilization is to develop its more humane possibilities.

Looking to politics for ways of breaking present trends, Gottfried surveys populist reactions against the administrative state. He seems to be searching for political allies. But since the populist movements are either not sufficiently to his liking or too weak to be politically successful, he sees little hope for the dismantling of the managerial state in the foreseeable future. Hence the melancholy of his book.

Melancholy, as well as cynicism and bitterness, begin to set in when hopes and efforts that were unrealistic and misdirected to begin with are defeated by reality. To avoid this debilitating predicament it is necessary to forego illusions about shortcuts to social improvement, to recognize the depth and scope of existing difficulties, and to be willing to make the best of actually available opportunities. This can be done in awareness that the prospects for success may be a good deal better than they appear. The developments that are in this moment already shaping the future are to a considerable extent unknown. But whatever the still-hidden favorable opportunities, politics in the narrow sense is not the crux of the matter. For action, including political action, to be redirected in the Western world, a new moral sensibility and a new view of life must create and inspire new elites.

*Desire for
shortcuts
debilitating.*