

## Power, love, possession, Montaigne and Machiavel

*Power has no limits.*

*Tiberius Caesar*

The word *power* emerges from the Indo European *\*poti* that indicated the figure of the *tribal chief* – who submitted other people. His *power* was not only a question of force because in physical terms a person is not able to submit a group of other ones.

The Indo European root of *\*poti*, *\*p*, indicated the idea of *purification* – from that we have our words *pure* or *opus* – as well as the Latin

Y  
T  
E  
I  
C  
O  
S  
R  
E  
W  
P  
W  
L  
O

0  
t  
a  
p  
i  
m  
e  
n  
t  
a  
o  
r  
i  
o  
s  
e  
r  
v  
i  
c  
e  
s  
d  
e  
m  
e  
r  
i  
t  
o  
r  
i  
m  
o  
r  
t  
a  
l  
i  
t  
y  
e  
m  
a  
n  
u  
e  
l

term *opera* that means *work*, but also *potency*, *peace* and *posterity*.

The idea of *purification* and with it that of the *tribal chief*, of the leader, indicates that *power* was generally established through the respect to whom assured a good relationship with the gods, that is: who detained a deeper knowledge of Nature and its way of work.

Power is control and, therefore, it is the clue for its understanding is in the principle of the *exchange*. Any power inevitably implicates an action without exchange, without equilibrium, without compensation.

Power is always asymmetric.

According to Marcel Mauss' thesis, there is no gift without exchange. Always when someone gives something to other person, he is automatically negotiating a kind of debt, even if not conscious and even if the phenomenon is

subtle and apparently inexistent. The joy of who receives implicates a debt, establishing laces of obligation, laces of fraternity.

Because of this, it is said that a person who does not manifest thanks for a received gift has no education, is rude.

But, this does not happen with *power*. With it there is no exchange, there is no debt to be paid, but only omnidirectional servitude. In power, there is no place for thanks, but yes for some kind of veneration, even if, sometimes, it happens in a subtle and hidden way.

When someone exerts power on another one through gifts and favors, the control through obligation indicates that there is disequilibria in the action, a debt.

But, it is not about a mechanical control, because power implicates volition. And any power also implicates some degree of numbing.

Following the steps designed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the nature of *power* is generally revealed through three paths, three great trends, or three great categories of thought: *quality*, *knowledge* and *possession* or *domination*.

In other words: emotions, especially in a kind of spectrum between terror and love; the capability to establish useful strategies to a person or community; or the possession of material goods.

Feelings and emotions are processed in the limbic system of our brains, our mammal neuronal sector.

In that universe of feelings and emotions, power implicates voluntary agreement or coercion – generally provoked by fear or love.

The called *punitive religions* establish *power* with the combination of those two faces: fear of

God but paradoxically manifested as infinite love.

Such double face of power – terror and love – was developed practically intact from prehistory to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as it is evident in Sumerian myths, ancient texts like Gilgamesh or even in contemporary history.

We have attended, along thousands of years, loved leaders and cruel despots – in all scales, from tribal societies to cities, inside schools, industries or even inside families – categories that non rarely are mixed inside human soul’s mysterious secrets.

In those two great quality tendencies it will always be a high degree of *identity*, of who detain power or of who is subject to it.

When power is established through terror paths, allowance brings in itself a structure of treats, hidden or nor, like a structure of potential dangers that numbs the capacity of reaction. In general, a society is non violent under the yoke of

a bloody tyrant. When a despot imposes himself, people lose, many times, the impetus of reaction.

Because of this phenomenon we have the old said “soft flesh in wolf’s mouth”, which works in the most diverse scales, from the order so vulgarly imposed by criminals inside prisons to the tyranny imposed inside some families, many times under the a treating father’s despotic command, revealing much of his biological origins.

Many times, when a predator irreversibly catches its prey, the latter immediately stops reacting – the prey knows that is inevitably lost.

People are numbed by fear and orient themselves in the sense of the despot, in his favor. Both the subjects and the bloody dictator have a strong identity, inside a complex where all human relations are differentiated, clearly identifiable – from the collaborative *lumpen* to whom is devastated but not able to react.

In this case, the game essentially is *zero sum*, in a dynamic chaining of losers and winners.

But there are people who freely submit themselves to a despot, for love.

Terrible dictators like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or Mao Tse Dong are interesting examples about how millions of people can feel love in terror.

There is no power without identity, without difference.

When power is established by *repertoire*, by *knowledge* – as Francis Bacon defended – there is another kind of numbness, more unstable, volatile and powerful.

Here, allowance emanates as a kind of free will of the subject and, if not everybody, at least many of us already experimented it together our most loved masters – it is another level of *love*.

When that happens, we have – also essentially – a *non-zero sum game*. There are no losers or winners in love.

The remote origins of the word *amour*, from the Latin *amor*, meaning *love*, can be found in the Indo European *\*kam* – which indicated, in its root, the ideas of *cosmic movement*, the *involvement of life* and also of *happiness*. Several words emerged from that old pre-historical root, like *cielo* and *caelum*, meaning *sky* respectively in Italian and Latin; *color* and *calorie*; and *amour*, losing the particle *k*.

The English word *love* has its Indo European etymological root in *\*leubh* that indicated the idea of *permission*, *consent*, and that generated expressions related to song and happiness.

On its turn, the distant Indo European roots of the word *amour* also generated terms like *canto*, which means “to sing”, unchained meanings like *music*, *respiration*, *alegria* that is a typical



Romantic word for *happiness*, produced the idea of *enlightened space*, revealed the word *action* and even expressions like *genesis* and *creation*.

Because *love* is that cosmic movement, involving everything.

In Greek mythology, the goddess of love was Aphrodite, called Venus in Rome.

According to the traditions, she was Uranus' daughter, personification of the sky, of the stars, of the cosmos, of what is *known* in Nature. Thus, Uranus was the fertile element. His sexual organs, providers of the potency of the beginning, amputated by Chronos, the *time*, fell in the deepest waters of the sea and from them, in the middle of unpredictable waves, Aphrodite appeared.

It was the potency of "birth of all things" that, once plunged into deep waters, made appear a goddess, a goddess of the wondering, of the total involvement, of the elimination of precise

boundaries. Nothing of that would be possible without *repertoire, knowledge*, which is provided by the time, in the figure of Chronos, which is elaboration, construction – because without the emergence of differential elements there is no time, no perception.

The same cut struck by Chronos – element of disruption, discontinuous movement – turned possible the potency of birth.

In love, the ideas of time, wondering, discovery, cognition, construction and repertoire are all interlaced.

*Repertoire* manifests, yet, two faces: a positive and a negative. *Positive* power emanated from repertoire indicates voluntary submission face to the admiration, to love. It happens when we are wondered with the *Other's* knowledge.

*Negative* power of repertoire happens when someone judges himself more important

than another person, considering himself more experienced and, therefore, superior. The consciousness of *knowing more* about something does not confer superiority. Many times, who judges himself in possession of such power is simply considered arrogant. The word *arrogant* means exactly who *calls to himself* values he does not have. The etymological meaning of the word *arrogant* is exactly that: to *call some value to himself*.

The fact that *repertoire* has two faces, a *positive* and a *negative*, happens simply because everything that *exists* has a dual nature.

This does not mean to say that the dominium of the repertoire automatically implicates *high power*. Many sages simply disappeared forgotten and never had any power during their lives.

*Positive power* emanated from *repertoire* will be in something that enriches the community, a friend, a leader – *content*, as literature evidenced

– or will be the *fame*, which is *presence without body*, superficial.

The Doric Greek expression *phama*, from where the word *fame* appeared, meant a thing that is *revealed, divulged*, and only later it would become myth, already in Rome, so magnificent illustrated by Ovid and Virgil.

*Fame* was, then, daughter of Gaia, Earth, our planet. She lived in a palace of sounds, totally made in bronze, with thousand holes through whose all information could be listened, amplifying everything what humans spoke. The goddess lived surrounded by *Error, Credulity, Seduction* and *False Rumors* among other mysterious entities. She had wings and, therefore, was linked to death – what, like *fame*, exists *without body*. Such freedom in relation to life permitted her to quickly travel to any place of the Cosmos.

*Fame* is the winged presence, free from its object – pure sign, pure communication, but also

pure superficiality.

A *famous* person has a disembodied power: he is what it is *spoken* about him, like what happened to *Fame*: when placed in front to her enigmatic, enchanting and ethereal presence, like the *voice*, many simply do what she desires, obeying without need of any exchange.

Contrarily to the superficiality that characterizes *fame*, the *repertoire* – while domain of ideas and strategies – implicates a continuous exercise of discovery, unveiling the relations between all things.

Machiavel said that «a prince must not be feared of the bad fame to be cruel, since through it he is able to keep his subjects united and loyal...» and put a serious question: «is it better to be feared than loved, or the opposite? The answer is that both things would be necessary; but, as it is difficult to join them, it is much safer to be feared than loved».

There is a third category of power that, in a certain sense, implicates the two previous ones: *possession*.

When a person is in possession of material goods, apparently he also owns what they *are* – and, in last instance, everything is knowledge.

It is an illusion because, as Marcel Proust poetically said, what we know is not ours. So, it is not properly about repertoire, but yes about material possession of elements of knowledge, without really *knowing* but *being*. Therefore, like *fame*, *possession* also essentially is a second instance process, a superficial phenomenon.

Because of that, when one gives a gift to other person and, in some way, the later did not return yet, he becomes in debit with the first and, in some sense, submitted to his power.

However, in the same way it happens

with *fame, possession* also implicates a kind of omnipresence, since everything that is owned brings in itself laces of signification with other things, traces of identity.

Beyond violence, a very common solution for the search of identity is consumption.

Because of this, many times, societies with low sense of identity among their individuals – in general more violent – many times unveil themselves to be strongly consumptive.

A fashionable car, for example, is part of collective imaginary, part of the intelligence network. Who owns many things becomes a true accumulator of references. When identified, those references are taken as indicators of knowledge, not in personal terms – because, in some sense, the objects become *content* of people.

Identity generated by consumption is degenerated, a second instance phenomenon,

like what happens with metaphor and, thus, it is superficial.

All consumptiveness is superficial par excellence.

In a third instance, now while *content*, those objects indicate a potential capacity of *domination* – vulgarly known as *purchasing power* – and, therefore, they appear as potential indicator of control on other people. In different words, it is about the manifestation of the potential of control and intervention in the private life of thirds through possession of goods.

Even if such phenomenon had become vulgar and global, the power that emerges from the accumulation of goods is not common to all societies.

When, in 1562, Montaigne met three Brazilian Indians brought to Rouan, France, he asked them about the privileges to be chief. One of



the aborigines, himself a chief, proudly answered: the privilege is to be the first to walk to war.

In certain Brazilian tribes the fundamental rule of the chief is to own nothing. Thus, he becomes the exclusive receptor of all gifts to the tribe and assumes the function of *distributor* among the members of his community. He knows well each one, and can easily detect the most different needs among the most diverse personalities.

Accumulation of goods as manifestation of domination happens in a more evident way inside literate societies where *content*, *predication* and the *illusion of contiguity* are manifested as fundamental cognitive traces.

By this way, along thousands of years, such mysterious and complex phenomenon known as *power* has suffered the most varied combinatory articulations of all those elements.

However, there is another face of power,

even more subtle, which in certain way is related to fame but even more superficial: the simple *presence*. The quantity and quality of *presence* can generate another degree of *fame*, even more superficial.

It is about what Andy Warhol said when he argued that in the era of television everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes.

It is curious to remind some texts by Abraham Moles – like *l’Affiche dans la Société Urbaine*, wrote in 1969, and *Psychologie du Kitsch*, dated of 1971 – where he alerted to the phenomenon of an automatic association between person and object. So, more intense the love for the object is, more intense the love for himself will be, and vice versa – deeper the love to the object, more narcissism.

The relation between person and object would be, in this way, designed by a kind of more or less intense *loop*.

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai would reinforce the idea that consumption is founded on the principle of *repetition*, «because the body is intimate arena for the practices of reproduction».

The whole cognitive process is strongly based on *repetition* as Freud had already clearly demonstrated. Years ago, in 1983, I made some considerations about *repetition* as basic cognitive element in a small book about the history of the design of time.

However, much more interesting is to recall Appadurai's ideas about a biological and metabolic relation between the principle of *reproduction* – even the cellular reproduction – and consumption, all connected to *repetition*.

Existing, therefore, such a relation between *object* and *person*, more intense the exchange of objects is, deeper the sensation of rejuvenescence will be. Because of this, Claude Lévi-Strauss said that the Americans were like children always

looking for novelties.

So, the dispute for the nomination for presidential candidate of the Democrat Party in the United States in 2008 gave a great advantage to Barak Obama, who had the image of a revolted teenager, in opposition to Hillary Clinton, who made the old figure of the nation's mother. Obama learnt with Bill Clinton and his saxophone, and even with Richard Nixon when he appeared in television playing piano like a teenager showing his unexpected talents.

The *possession* of an object implicates a kind of *presence*. Because of this, consumption implicates power and generalized super consumption implicates low intensity power distributed in continuous flux.

This is the logic of the *low cost* universe, of digital real time networks of networks or of the global tendency of energy distribution – everything bundled in a same process.

To deal with *power* means to operate an intricate combinatory process between all its essential natures: an unstable complex non-linear process.

From the most superficial to the most complex, all faces of power indicate some kind of hierarchical structure.

There is no power without hierarchy, even in its simplest configurations. When power is largely distributed we have a kind of *explosion* of particles forming, in its whole, an unstable and volatile complex of *nano attractors*.

Because of this I wrote, in the beginning of the 1990s, about the emergence of a *nano decisions* society. For the same reasons, even before, still in the beginning of the 1980s, I wrote about the some interesting similarities between the medieval period and the hyperconsumption society; and also about the *end of history* – not

like Francis Fukuyama would defend, inspired on Hegel's ideas one century before, but about its overcoming while technology through super information.

On the other hand, *high power* – being from a liberal, totalitarian, democratic or religious nature – indicates the design of *history*, the emergence of the *personage*, the constitution and evolution of the city – what we find, for example, in the figure of Imhotep, in the ancient kings from the most diverse civilizations, in Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte, in governors, business leaders, artists and so on.

*As Theory of Games* teaches us, the structure of game determines the nature of power.

We forget, many times, that the structure of such a game nothing more is than an essentially esthetical question, because the order of what we perceive, the structure of what we know, is the general order of what we are, indicating the

nature of power and its possible combinatory articulations.

While for the Brazilian Indians visited by Montaigne the rule of the chief as *the first to be sacrificed* was perfectly natural – like what happened with Mahatma Gandhi when he argued that «president means chief servant» – Machiavel defended two basic ways for a prince to preserve the subservience of his subjects: through laws or by force.

Power is not substantive, but relational. When we deal with power, we always do it while relations, like what happens when we deal with language, not matter of what nature.