How Power Corrupts

A digest of Dr. Ricardo Blaug,
*How Power Corrupts: Cognition and Democracy in Organisations*,
“All special privilege in some way limits the view of those who possess it.”

(John Dewey)

For democrats, we do not manage our leaders well. Be they members of parliament or investment bankers, they endlessly misbehave. Ask anyone if they agree with Lord Acton’s observation that ‘power corrupts’, and they will nod knowingly. Then they will offer other examples, and perhaps a caveat. Before long they are holding forth on one of the classic problems of politics.

Corruption by power occurs so frequently we are barely surprised by it. Mad kings, psychotic dictators, insane warlords and self-satisfied politicians all attest to our collective inability to manage our leaders. On a smaller scale, and across our daily lives, most offices have their petty tyrants, families their martinets and children’s playgrounds their little emperors. Corruption by power causes widespread suffering, organisational mission drift, wasted effort and inefficiency. This is why it is not enough to describe corruption merely in terms of personal financial gain or promoting one’s friends. What we are here considering is a change in personality, an inflation of the self, a deep and moral degeneration. We see this when our leaders speak to camera. They are not lying when they say they are uniquely qualified to lead, and that they alone are all that hold us from disorder. They really believe it.

Gandhi said, “Possession of power makes men blind and deaf,” Dewey, that “all special privilege limits the outlook of those who possess it.” Corruption by power is an inability to see, a disorder of perception. It occurs when holding power over others changes the way we think. Organisational privilege, and indeed, unequal status of almost any kind, makes some things invisible.

* * *

When a colleague is promoted and begins to change, we say that ‘power has gone to his head.’ We watch warily as his confidence increases, he becomes more interested in ‘organisational goals’ and more irritated by his subordinates. As the arrogance sets in, we notice that he increasingly thinks what is good for him is good for the organisation; indeed, he begins to think he is the organisation; that it exists through him alone. Now surrounded by ‘yes men’, he becomes isolated and cannot be approached or questioned. Increasingly defensive, separated, casually cruel and reckless, he is utterly convinced of his own abilities, and so becomes dangerous. Like a miniature Caligula, Hitler or Stalin, like Thatcher, Blair and Gaddafi, from this point on he will need to be removed, probably by force.

When we ask how power corrupts, we partly ask ‘in what way does it corrupt?’ but also, ‘what makes it happen?’ To the first, we can answer: it corrupts by distorting our perception. The few studies that look at the problem suggest that these distortions include a:

- Growing personal aggrandisement, arrogance and loss of control
- Progressive contempt for subordinates, suspicion and arbitrary cruelty
- Gradual separation from others and choice of advisors who always agree
- Total lack of awareness that any corruption is happening at all.
Of these symptoms, it is perhaps that last that is most troubling, for it makes the other three very difficult to treat. The corrupted leader, be it of a country, an organisation or a family, becomes blinded by power, angered by those who point to what he cannot see and so unable to correct his mistakes. To criticise him is thus to risk one’s life or career. If he is to be removed, we must overcome our fear and lose the benefits of a quiet life. And so we try to tolerate him, to get by. It’s true he treats us like fools, and accuses us of shirking responsibility; true also that we never know when he will explode and punish. There is little point in trying to mend our organisation, as he does not listen. There is no appreciation for our efforts, and to survive, one must learn to watch him carefully. So, gradually, we become alienated, passive, dependent and lost in a world of his making. As he expands, we shrink back. In this way, we become collaborators, and power corrupts both leaders and followers.

Now we inhabit a completely dysfunctional organisation. We are no longer oriented to the common good, but to meeting the corrupted leader’s individual needs. The knowledge of subordinates is wasted; the leader cannot learn and although circumstances continue to change, we remain firmly stuck. Sooner or later, the castle will fall, to be rebuilt by yet another leader who will repeat the process. In this way, hierarchies replicate themselves: spoiling, wasting, separating and finally collapsing — with suffering metered out at every turn.

* * *

From this, we gain three lessons. First, that hierarchy is a dangerous way to organise collective activity. It threatens the corruption, by power, of both leaders and subordinates. This lesson has been well learned by many, for today, we mistrust our political representatives and our managers. It is for this reason that people smile knowingly and nod when asked if power corrupts. It is also why liberal democracy learned to separate political power, and to restrain it with institutional ‘checks and balances’. Hierarchy must be handled with great care, its costs closely monitored, for it has a strong tendency to separate, corrupt and to try to maintain itself beyond its usefulness. We are thus suspicious of hierarchy, and rightly so.

Yet now we confront a second, and entirely contradictory, lesson, for it seems that hierarchy cannot be avoided. Surely, a ship needs a captain, and an army, bereft of a chain of command, is chaotic. Real democracy is a nice idea, but it takes too many meetings. It’s all just talk, and eventually, a leader will emerge anyway. Power corrupts, but we will always need the efficiency that, apparently, only hierarchy can deliver.

In this, of course, we are mistaken. Most collective activity is not in fact organised hierarchically, but rather by informal networks and decentralised markets. In addition, hierarchy can be carefully managed and its damaging tendencies reduced. Here we arrive at a third lesson: that the best way to manage hierarchy is democracy.

In a democracy we choose and limit our leaders. Smart citizens are those that choose with care, and only when such choices become necessary, when circumstances require specialist knowledge or ability. The ones we choose are those we trust: those who understand the temptations of corruption, and who agree to do what they are told. Uncorrupted citizens appoint their leaders for only short periods, and watch them throughout like hawks. The general public make excellent leaders, and the more we alternate between leading and following, the more we learn. Methods by which we manage the negative effects of hierarchy, yet use it carefully when it suits us, are deeply democratic. Though usually hidden by the long cult of leadership, there are many excellent and practical examples of such democratic control. They can be found
throughout the history of republicanism, the labour and cooperative movements, in democratic activism and community organising. In republican Rome before the emperors, victorious generals were accompanied by a slave, who, among the adulation and tumult, repeatedly whispered in their ear: ‘remember you are mortal’. In ancient Athens, citizens demanded that their chosen leaders return to the assembly at the end of their period in authority, there to publicly answer for their actions. Today, we should develop and practice methods that actively manage those who act in our name, and prevent the formation of a settled, corrupt and self-regarding political elite. In this way, citizens avoid their own corruption and, in turn, that of their leaders.

We have recently seen that while power corrupts, investment banking corrupts absolutely. Those responsible for our economic crisis really believe they are not to blame, though in truth, we allowed this to happen. Standing before global capitalism, the cult of leadership and our stunted representative democracy, we are helpless, frustrated and dependent. Elites act with impunity; we work in hierarchic organisations and mostly do what we are told. If leaders are corrupted into tyrants, citizens are corrupted into blind obedience. It is therefore worth remembering – when we are ‘just doing our job’ or ignoring what elected leaders do in our name - that the most serious wrongs most of us ever commit are seemingly minor ‘crimes of obedience’. It is in this sense that we are all and regularly corrupted by power, either as power holders or as subordinates; often as both, switching effortlessly between them as we turn from one person to another

* * *

Again, to ask how power corrupts is to inquire not only ‘in what ways does it do so’, but also, ‘how does it come about?’ If corruption is a disorder of perception, what is its cause? Recent research into how the mind works gives us an important clue. Human thinking was once seen as a triumph of reason imposed on a ‘buzzing, blooming confusion’. Now we know this to be incorrect. Neurobiology and cognitive science show that our real genius is our ability to ignore. When we walk, reach for an object, solve a problem, we do so by selecting what is important from the confusion that surrounds us. Human thinking has thus evolved to simplify the world, to filter information and make rapid assumptions. To do this, we use chunks of information, mostly unreflectively. These enable us to make rapid short cuts, solve problems and move quickly through the world. A simple example of this occurs when we greet another, shake a hand, ask how it’s going. Our lives are made easier by learning these codes and processes, but easier still when they sink deeply into our minds. Now they become ‘automated,’ and operate beneath our awareness. When we stop at a red light, even though we are thinking of something else, we show our extraordinary ability to automate our thinking. In this way, we move effectively through a complex and changing world, and avoid being entirely overloaded by information. Sometimes, of course, we simplify by making assumptions too quickly, as for example, when we view others as stereotypes. When stereotypes become automated beneath awareness, used unthinkingly and with casual cruelty, we show that our ability to make cognitive shortcuts can sometimes be very dangerous indeed.

So it is with corruption by power. Upon promotion, you want to do things well, and the cult of leadership whispers to you, telling you how to do so, how to avoid failure, how to treat your new subordinates. You are elected, and brought into the elite village, taught its ways, wined, dined and given an expense account. You are working hard, holding responsibility and everyday, your relative power is recognised in the eyes of your subordinates. At the same time, you are absorbing cognitive shortcuts from your new surroundings. As these ways of thinking become automated and sink beneath awareness, you become more arrogant, annoyed, distrustful of others, and bold. Now your constituents or employees fade into the background,
only intruding when they complain or avoid responsibility. Gradually, you are separating. When someone suggests you are making a mistake, you hold it against her. Now you can look directly to camera and believe the nonsense you are saying to be true.

* * *

Corruption by power is a distortion of perception that operates beneath awareness. This is the case for both leaders and subordinates. Corrupted perception is a dangerous side effect of hierarchy, and also serves to maintain it, often well beyond its sell-by date. It can reduce leaders to petty tyrants, and subordinates to helpless followers. The stuck and separated hierarchies that clog our everyday organisational lives thus turn out to be parasitic on our innate tendencies to think in certain ways. As individuals, we benefit from our selective cognition, just as organisations benefit from the simplicity of hierarchy. But both have their costs, and both require us to drag our thinking back into consciousness, there to interrogate it. For this, discussion and disagreement are required, and the watchful eye of a suspicious public; which is precisely what democracy does best.

Corruption by power makes tyrants large and small, and in both our public and private lives. Yet the informed control of tyranny quickly makes us democratic citizens. We see them everyday, shouting, jumping and waving in the central squares of the world.