

D/s as Political Theory

Richard Ostrofsky
January, 2002

“Ethics. Sometimes it seems like all the ethics have left politics and entered slavery. Did you ever consider the philosophical and sociological implications of that? That slaves might someday be the most honourable class in a society and leaders the least?”
The Slave, p. 241, Laura Antoniou

Power is a dirty word today. We think inequality an intrinsic evil, to be eradicated wherever found. The fact that some people have more power than others is considered scandalous. Though well aware of its shortcomings, we make a fetish of formal democracy, rarely allowing ourselves to ask whether the government it provides is competent to the needs of our society, or optimally accountable to the public will and interest. We quote Acton’s dictum that “Power corrupts. . .”–which is true enough as far as it goes –neglecting to weigh this very real danger against the corrupting effects of anarchy.

Against this mainstream attitude that power is intrinsically a social evil, more than a few people today are consciously experimenting with relationships involving some deliberate gift or *exchange* of power. In these D/s relationships (as they are called), one of the partners accepts to be submissive, allowing the other to be Dominant. Though I’m aware some people have trouble with the distinction I would make here, please take my word that consensuality, love and caring distinguish these relationships from exploitive or abusive ones. In true D/s, the submissive of the relationship promises, (usually within carefully negotiated limits), to serve, obey and accept punishment from the Dominant. This Dominant, for his or her part, accepts a corresponding responsibility for the submissive’s safety and well-being. The arrangement has strong echoes of the old feudal bargain in which a vassal swore service and loyalty to receive the lord’s sufferance and military protection. What we today should not allow ourselves to forget is that this bargain, as originally conceived and implemented, was greatly advantageous to *both* sides: The lord extended his resources of reliable labour and fighting men. The vassal achieved a secure place in the world: a plot of land to work and live on, and membership in a group that could fight as one entity if any part of it were threatened.

As the happily collared consort of a gracious and loving lady, I bear witness here that an erotic, domestic, version of this old feudal bond can be successful and deeply rewarding for both parties. But it is no part of my purpose here to apologize or proselytize for the lifestyle¹. My project instead is to attempt a few generalizations from

¹ For works that do this pretty well, see *Different Loving* by Gloria Brame, or *Screw the Roses, Send Me the Thorns* by Philip Miller and Molly Devon.

what might be called the philosophy of Dominance/submission, drawing a few political lessons that may have mainstream relevance. The fact that such “kinky” activities and living arrangements are sought, and that some people enjoy and thrive on them, should give pause to the most dogmatic proponents of market society with their insistence on economic liberty and formal, legal equality.

The classical theory of market society, first articulated by thinkers like John Locke and Adam Smith, stems from a characteristic idea of human nature, with ethical conclusions that seem to follow. Centrally and crucially, it is assumed: that all adult persons are and want to be autonomous pursuers of their own self-interest and happiness; that all enjoy—or, ideally, should enjoy—a formal equality of rights in that pursuit; and that free, market competition of persons (as of products and services) is the ideal basis for the organization of work, and for society as a whole. The D/s world has issues with each one of these assumptions, though the quarrel is less than may at first appear. What D/s suggests, I think, is an important correction or clarification of classical liberalism, not a basic contradiction.

Still, with the ideal of radical individualism and the pursuit of individual self-interest, we have this fundamental problem: The project of a D/s couple, with more or fewer reservations, is to constitute itself as a single, coherent polity with the Domme² as its sovereign—in the process, stretching, and somewhat dissolving the separate individuality of Domme and sub alike. The fewer the reservations, the more such a relationship comes to have a single ego amongst its several members, with that ego in the Domme’s keeping. In effect, that is what the political idea of *sovereignty* means, and what it has always necessarily meant.

Accordingly, the idea that all men and women are motivated to function as sovereign agents and interest maximisers is just false to Scene people’s experience and fantasy as Dominants and submissives. Having come to know ourselves a little, and relating what we’ve learned to the lives of “straight” people outside our world, D/s people tend toward a more complex view of human nature. Quite simply, we (meaning all us humans, not just Scene people) want to have our cake and eat it here. Of course, some people lean more strongly one way, some the other; but we all seem to want it both ways: We want to be autonomous, freely self-actualizing pursuers of personal self-interest and happiness. But we also want to belong—to feel securely part of larger wholes. We want to be trusted, and feel able to trust each other. We want to actualize as individuals, and freely pursue our individual interests, but we also want a sense of community. This ambivalence about personal autonomy—well-nigh universal, I believe, though more acutely felt by some than others—has implications for political theory and

² Because it is my own situation and to avoid awkwardness, I will write consistently about a male sub with a female Dominant or “Domme.” Though D/s relationships seem to take on a different colouring depending on the genders involved, what I have to say in this essay holds just as well for any other combination.

for actual political systems. Accordingly, in this essay I seek to develop a few suggestions from the D/s lifestyle for political theory at large—first, for those who are subject to power, then for those who wield it, and finally for political systems in which both wielders and subjects of power participate together, albeit on unequal terms.

1 D/s as a Theory of Power

Political theory in the sense intended here includes the management of private organizations as well as public sector government. In fact, what is at issue in this theory is the whole dilemma of power, leadership and authority. I say *dilemma* because it seems that no human enterprise, least of all sovereign government, can be organized except on hierarchical lines. The pyramid—tall or flat, with its top mindful or negligent of the rights and opinions those below—has been the icon of social organization since the pharaohs. It remains so today (and you will still find it on the back of the American dollar bill) despite everything that has been learned and thought about government since. Representative democracy and the “matrix organization” typical of high-tech project teams partly disguise and meliorate the pyramidal structure of society, but by no means overturn it. Discrepancies of power and privilege seem to accompany all but the most primitive forms of social organization, and grow *worse* as civilization advances.

Yet we also feel, and correctly, that “no one is good enough to be another’s master,” and that “all souls are equal before God.” Montaigne, said it better than anyone: “On the highest throne of the world, a man sits only on his own arse”—and there’s nothing like good, consensual whipping as a reminder of this fact. Under his clothes, the emperor is naked—just like everyone else. For this reason, all power, even the most brutal, has about it a conventional, make-believe quality. The boss must *play* at being the boss, and must assert his superior status in all kinds of artificial ways to keep the commoners suitably respectful and obedient—in his presence at least, whatever they whisper behind his back. This is still more the case if custom obliges him to play at being “just plain folks,” and “a regular guy.”

As a theatre for the enactment of sexual fantasy and a paradigm for real-life intimacy, the D/s conventions afford a kind of laboratory for studies in the chemistry of power. Therein, three of its subtler aspects are revealed with special clarity: first, the theatrical, ritualistic dimension of power, already alluded to; second, the creative, nurturing dimension of benevolent power without which no human being could survive infancy and which, in general, is the indispensable basis of any civilized society; third, the *erotic*, ontological dimension of power through which desirable parts of the world are appropriated, while identities are defined, projected and sustained.

As many writers have noted, even the most brutal forms of power bind their victims in part through a weird, erotic fascination with the tyrannizing masters. For highly *charismatic* leaders (as we call them), that fascination is crucial. Think of Hitler’s career as an example of charismatic power in an evil cause. Think of Gandhi’s

or Nelson Mandela's for an example for good. Apart from any motivations of fear or self-interest, people want to follow such leaders, serve them, sacrifice their lives if it comes to that, for some inexplicable psychic reward in doing so. People like myself, who find our way into full-time D/s relationships are strongly moved and interested in this dimension of power, and have learned to indulge our fascination in a positive way. Just how we do this is what I wish to explore and share.

The essence of D/s is its voluntary, contractual breaking of the presumptive symmetry of relationship. In effect, one person places himself under the protection and tutelage of another, thereby withdrawing his claim to equal status. That any sane person could do this freely—not under any dire necessity or compulsion—seems impossible to many. And of course, the concept of sanity can be adjusted conveniently so that anyone who does such a thing is insane by definition. Yet, I think anyone with some imagination can be brought to see why the sub's lot might be desired and accepted.

Submissives obey and take their licks because something within us responds to this treatment, because somehow, paradoxically, we feel liberated by it. In real life, people are forced to submit to others through fear of physical violence, or the necessities of poverty; but consensual subs submit because we want to. For just this reason, the consensual D/s relationship provides a suggestive model of the ideal polity. Specifically, what it suggests is that a subordinate role can hold more attraction and advantage than is usually thought. Correspondingly, it suggests that the role of Dominant—of any leader or hierarchical superior—is more demanding, disciplined and potentially creative than is usually understood. Most importantly, it suggests why the 'Invisible Hand' of the marketplace must be subject to a higher discipline of solidarity and love. It provides something like a rational basis for loyalty and *esprit de corps*. It reconciles the competing principles of love and contractual obligation more than is usually thought possible.

2 The Submissive's Power

The central hint from D/s to political theory is that service, obedience and discipline can actually be valued and *sought* for their own sakes. Under the right conditions, subordination can be an honour and a pleasure; self-acceptance and contentment in a vocation of devotion and service can be empowering. Indeed, this point is well known from literature and common experience: It is a pleasure to work for a good boss, and to feel one's efforts have meaning because the organization and its mission are worth your loyalty. It is honourable to serve a cause and person worth serving, and a privilege to be given opportunity to do so. It is empowering to do something you do well for someone who appreciates your efforts. But, what comes out so clearly in D/s is the nakedly erotic dimension of this desire for an anchorage of identity through *personal* service and obedience. There is a glimpse here of the trust and passion with which a young child clasps a parent's hand on the busy street. If he could do so, he might say: "The world is a frightening place but with you, I am safe. Adults, of course,

rarely receive such unconditional protection and love; and seldom allow ourselves to be aware of the security we feel in being valued for our complaisance, and for the services we provide. In the Scene, such feelings are well recognized and prized by Dom and sub alike, but their echoes in “vanilla” relationships are clear enough.

The main obstacle, in the Scene as in the “straight” world, to the discovery and acceptance of a submissive vocation is the low esteem and status awarded by society to those whose calling is to obey and serve. This is a pity because the world needs good servants much more than it needs bad masters. The former are in short supply; we see far too many of the latter.

Novice subs enter the D/s world drawn by something we feel shamed by, but can no longer deny. From one perspective, the submissive truly is a misfit in our competitive society, which holds a marked contempt for persons who feel little urge to strive in their own self-interest, but are drawn instead to a life of loyalty and service (if we can only find something that deserves our loyalty). Mature submissives, coming to understand the positive aspects of our need to serve, have learned to value this quality in ourselves, and found an outlet for it. We take pride in service; in serving, we find a sense of honour.

Now, in a competitive society, this concept of honour is distinctly quaint. It has no place in a world where people are focussed on getting “ahead”; but it feels necessary to people who find and know themselves in stable relationships with others.

When “getting ahead” seems meaningless, your concern is just to do and be the best you can. Certainly, ambition and honour need not exclude each other: It is possible to seek greater challenge, recognition, and reward without feeling galled that one does not already have them. Unfortunately, the upwardly mobile society tends to teach its children that contentment in one’s station is the sign of personal inadequacy – a lack of “drive.” We get used to doing things only as well as we must to take the profit, or get the next promotion—but always in search of some personal gain, and as cheaply as possible. Scarcely anyone today can allow himself the luxury of doing something as well as he can, just for the satisfaction of doing so. Scarcely anyone allows himself to enjoy being just where he is, doing precisely what he is doing. Intrinsically rewarding activities, except as they further some ambition, are relegated to the spheres of play and leisure. Scarcely anyone insists that work should be made as rewarding as possible, and performed so far as possible for its own sake.

The submissive, preferring to belong and contribute, rejects this norm of self-interest and competition. We want to be part of something larger than ourselves. We want to be esteemed for what we are and do, and not for the status trophies we’ve won. We do not want to be feared or envied. We do not want to “get somewhere.” Though we enjoy spending money as much as anyone, we have little interest in getting rich. We want to find ourselves in our proper place—doing work we’re suited for, either for its own sake or for someone we care about. Work worth doing for its own sake is not so easy to find; but even scut work can be a pleasure when it is a labour of

love. The chance to be ourselves, doing something we're good at, in the service of something and someone we love, is our real ambition. Extra rewards are welcome if they come, but are not important.

Here D/s is at odds with the attitude and doctrine that sees self-interest and the pursuit of happiness in narrowly personal terms. The error in such *simplistic individualism* is its insistence that interest and happiness are essentially private, to be pursued by individual persons, sometimes in negotiated cooperation, but normally in competition if not outright conflict. In that mindset, separateness is the norm. Collaborative relationship (when it occurs) requires to be explained as a conjunction of the parties' separate interests. Relationship does not exist for its own sake.

But love relationships do exist for their own sakes almost by definition. To be sure, they are not free of competition, conflict and calculated alliance. They have their own political dimension. Yet, for the most part, our really intimate involvements with others are prior to all calculations of self-interest. Most people do not choose friends and lovers, or impersonal passions for that matter, on a reckoning of costs and benefits, though we may rationalize them that way after the fact. We discover that we are involved with someone or something, then re-align our other interests in support of that one, preserving a measure of autonomy as best we can.

In D/s, the political dimensions of love are not only rendered explicit, but (more or less) resolved through the understanding known as *consensual power exchange*. This phrase is precise. Any relationship will be abusive or manipulative if it does not reflect the desires and intentions of both parties³. Hence the concept in political philosophy of an implicit "social contract" through which the citizen surrenders a portion of his liberties to the sovereign power, so as to enjoy the remainder more securely under that power's blessing and protection. In D/s relationships these contracts are not mythical as in ordinary political life. They are spelled out in actual documents, carefully negotiated and signed.

The result, as already said, is a polity in miniature. There is a real *exchange* of power, which flows upward to the Domme and then back downward to its source: With the Domme installed as sovereign, conflicts are settled a priori: We will have things *her* way. We will both have them, though not necessarily in equal portions. I make my needs and wishes known, and I advise. But in the end she will decide. And just as I have promised to obey her judgments, so she has promised to decide in our joint interest—in the interest of our relationship, of the polity as a whole. The crucial

³ And just here, of course, is the point at which D/s far from contradicting liberal theory, actually leans heavily upon it—sharing its underlying assumption that individuals are endowed with personal desires and interests, and with the freedom to enter into binding contracts in their "pursuit of happiness." But classical liberal thought does not consider that this very separateness may be a source of anxiety or loneliness or alienation. Most people seem to find their deepest happiness and fulfilment in relationships which overcome, or at least blur their individuality to some extent.

point is that through this contract both parties are reconstituted as parts of something larger than themselves. As with any contract, there is a *quid pro quo*; but the sub, in particular, feels that in promising to obey, render service and deference, and accept punishment rather than contend against his Mistress' anger or displeasure, he is gaining something he much desires.

Context

The submissive orientation can be seen as part of a mental coping system used by everyone to some extent. In itself, the world around us is too vast and complicated to handle⁴. No one can swallow it whole; each person bites off a manageable chunk for his own chewing and digestion. Accordingly, the brain must work as a kind of filter, blocking out sensations, feelings and thoughts that might distract from issues of survival. And when you get right down to it, there are only two ways to reduce the flood of sensation to a simplicity we can handle: There is the method of abstraction and categorization, in which we deliberately ignore the individuality of things to concentrate on just those "essential" features that seem important to us. And there is the method of particularity, in which we concentrate on what is immediately before us and refuse to be distracted by any larger context. In practice, we all use both methods; but most people have a preference, seem to lean more one way than the other. Full-time submission takes the method of particularity to a logical conclusion, leaving it in another's hands to resolve the issues of context. Thereby, the submissive is not less but, paradoxically, much more free to focus on the concrete tasks and satisfactions at hand. This aspect of D/s relationship carries directly into the work-a-day world and the world of practical politics.

One function of any manager, boss or leader is to protect subordinates from unpredictable disruption of their routines, and to sustain a collective belief— amounting, sometimes to delusion — that all will be well if everyone does his job. The manager runs interference with the outside world, shielding his workers from irrelevant disturbances, and seeing to it that they have what they need to function. More generally, both in the private and public sectors, leaders relieve anxiety for their subordinates, maintaining for them the fiction that events are under control, proceeding as planned. Largely, this is a bluff— but it is a bluff we deeply need to believe. Whatever happens in the long run, we enjoyed (for now) an orderly, intelligible field for our abilities and efforts.

Influence in Obedience

A second pay-off for the sub is the influence that may be gained through a surrender of the actual power. In the real world of politics and business, it works much the same way: Unless you are so made as to love the exposure of command for its own sake,

⁴ See William James on the infant's experience of "buzzing, blooming confusion." and Aldous Huxley's famous essay, *The Doors of Perception*.

the fact is that influence is more comfortable than power, affording as much scope and more freedom for less personal risk and responsibility. With actual power, more of the self is on the line, leaving far less room for a separate, private life.

An advisor only has to be plausible and persuasive, and he can afford the luxury of being uncertain. To keep his job he must maintain a decent batting average, but no one expects him to be infallible. His boss, by contrast, must be right every time (even when clearly wrong)—and he must never appear uncertain. He or she must project the aura of leadership continually, and must sustain an illusion of total control as enemy troops storm the very citadel. Surrounded by flatterers, lobbyists, false friends of every description, the prince must struggle constantly against delusion, while the advisor only needs to see clearly, stay honest, and keep his wits sharp. That is why madness has been the occupational disease of rulers, while advisors have sometimes lost their heads but rarely their minds.

The great trick for a subordinate, when it can be pulled off, lies in a combination of respectful license with ultimate obedience. The long collaboration between Elizabeth I of England—perhaps the greatest lifestyle Dominatrix of all time—and her Secretary of State, Sir William Cecil, is a famous example. Sir William, and later his son Robert, flourished exceedingly in Elizabeth's service, founding a dynasty of public service that has endured to this day. They had tremendous influence at the queen's court, precisely because they knew their place: Content with influence, they never challenged their Mistress' power. Essex, with no such happy discretion, sought actual power at court, backed himself into a political corner, staged a foolish coup that fizzled before getting properly launched, and left Elizabeth no choice but to have him chopped. So much for topping from below. But my point is that the partnership between the queen and her minister was not an equal one. In many ways, it was much like a good D/s relationship: gracious, clement power on one side, served by respect, loyalty, assiduity and intelligence on the other. Its success depended on the ability of both parties to understand and play their parts. Under these conditions, and probably only these, truth can be spoken to power – to the great benefit of both. Essex could have kept head and swelled his influence, had he but understood his role.

Freedom

The D/s sub retains one power that makes all the difference between freedom and literal slavery: His submission is, and remains voluntary – a free gift of devotion, obedience, and all that follows. If the sub were in any way prevented from ending the relationship, the element of consent would disappear and the arrangement would become abusive by definition. The same is true in ordinary life – as the law recognizes by making indentured service contracts illegal. But the corollary for political freedom is not so widely understood: The right to withdraw or transfer one's allegiance is the most fundamental of political freedoms, and the man who cannot bestow love, loyalty and service as he pleases has no meaningful freedom at all.

The difference between citizen and subject is not that the former has a vote, but that the latter cannot transfer his allegiance at will. The power of the state – very much including its domination of prevailing rhetoric – tempts us to forget this basic political truth, but in D/s culture it remains perfectly clear. A man discovers himself through his commitments, and the only use of freedom is to give it away. Yet it is not to be given lightly, and never irrevocably, because only the element of consensuality – conscious, voluntary, and constantly reviewed and renewed – makes bondage morally acceptable. The means of coercion are of little importance. The subtler forms are the more insidious – where the victim is left unable to recognize the constraints upon him, nor even the fact that he is constrained. Paradoxically, the more overt subjugation of D/s can be experienced as liberating. At least the sub can feel the rope that binds him and, within its strictures, explore and relish the freedoms that remain.

For human creatures, freedom can never be an absolute. Peace, order, prosperity, and physical security all depend upon a habit of obedience to mild, responsible power. One need only open a newspaper to see what happens when these prerequisites are missing. To this very basic political fact, D/s subs would add a comment: When obedience is extorted by fear and threats of violence, the submissive is a literal slave. When it is purchased, he is an employee or a contract worker. But when obedience is given as a free commitment, from a desire to be part of something larger than one's self, the sub is as free as any person can be.

And then too, we know from experience that obedience extorted under threat, corrupts the Domme, the sub, and their whole relationship. The only obedience worth having is voluntary and cooperative. Systems of enforced obedience break down. In the long run, evasion defeats enforcement.

3 The Domme's Training

The submissive's role affords more scope, dignity and freedom than a novice expects, or knows how to use. By contrast, the Domme's role is more demanding than expected. Everyone wants to enjoy the perks of leadership, and play at being a leader; and the Scene is full of novice Tops who like to wear fetish clothes, act bossy and swing a whip. In the real-world, it is much the same. But there is more to handling power than passing out orders – more even than knowing which orders to give. There are at least two further difficulties: Orders must be given in such a way that those who receive them will try to carry them out, and will be able to do so. And then they must be given by persons who can absorb the stress of command without losing either their humanity or their good judgment. History is full leaders broken by their own power; and there have been numerous attempts both to distribute the burden of power, to render it safer and easier to carry, and also to train future leaders to carry it well and safely.

Partly because it is so very personal, partly because of the typical ways our game is introduced and learned, I think D/s suggestive on this last point. Many Domes get

their introduction to the role by finding themselves in relationship with a submissive partner. Paraphrasing a little, we could say that they were not born Dommess. Rather, they achieve Dommess by having it thrust upon them. They have to learn to handle power – to enjoy it, and to use it wisely. On a much larger scale, of course, but with rather more preparation, Augustus, Charlemagne and Peter the Great faced exactly the same problem.

In fact, hierarchical systems have always grappled with the problem of training their elites; and a most interesting history could be written on the methods tried, and their political results. Much depends, obviously, on power's source and nature, and the ends for which it is wielded. The education of a CEO today is, and has to be very different from that of a Roman patrician, and different again from that of a feudal lord, a Renaissance prince, or a Chinese mandarin. Still, with due allowances, a history of education for power would turn up recurring themes – most of which can be seen under a stark, revealing light in the world of erotic Dominance and submission:

- To begin with, one prerequisite of power is to attract and hold your followers' attention; and the way to do this is to put on a good show. This is why Louis XIV built Versailles, and why Dommess wear kinky costumes. It is not just eroticism or fetish for their own sakes, but a key element of power's technology: to keep your subjects looking *up* at you – as the most thrilling spectacle in their field of vision. On this level, rule and government are a branch of show biz, and their art is a form of stagecraft.

This fact involves democratic leaders today in all but hopeless contradiction. They are expected not to put on airs, to be just plain folks like everybody else. Also, to get elected, they need to be as bland as possible so as to offend no one. On the other hand, they still need to gather and hold the audience – if only to reassure the stock market and public that the ship of state is not adrift. Only the rare politician can meet these opposite demands with style.

- A second issue is that for sane people, the exercise of power raises feelings of guilt. Many novice Dommess, probably all who will eventually be good ones, face this issue at the beginning. Being served and deferred to, giving orders, lashing a whip across a lover's back – all make for anxiety instead of pleasure. “What gives me a right to do these things?” the beginner asks, (the fact that the lover wants it done not being enough of a reason). “What kind of a person must I be that I enjoy doing them?” Out in the real world, an executive's decisions may deprive people of their livelihoods; a lieutenant's may send them to their deaths; a statesman's may affect the lives of millions. Such choices ought not to be made lightly, but we accept that they must be made. Education for power must train incumbents to manage their guilt somehow, and preferably not by becoming numb to it, nor by revenging “the sting of command” from their cadet days on their

present-day subordinates⁵. Either they must learn to bear up under the guilt, or must transcend it somehow.

But it will not do if our leaders are too comfortable with their power. They should feel enough guilt to retain an acute sense of responsibility in their positions of command, but not so much that they are paralysed by it. What makes the Domme's position especially interesting here is the special license she has to enjoy her power shamelessly – provided she can keep it under control.

- Consistency is another problem for the inexperienced Domme. Capriciousness is fine in little things. Whim is a technique of play, to keep the sub alert and hopping, and make the game more fun. But, in anything important, inconsistency on the Domme's part just makes for confusion and anxiety. The sub wants to know where he stands, and what the rules are. That's a big part of the pay-off in being a sub; he wants some structure in his life, and counts on the Domme to keep things clear. Rules that cannot be understood, that are not enforced, that keep changing are not rules, and provide no structure. The sub feels frustrated, and the relationship breaks down.

In real-world government, the same principles apply. A leader's will acts as a kind of die or stamp, impressing itself upon his subjects, and thereby laying down a stable pattern to which they can adapt, in relation to which they can form their lives. The manager who cannot do this confuses his subordinates. The regime that cannot do it creates disorder in society.

- Groups, even small groups, even couples, have leaders because they need them. The prerogative of leadership may be situational, flowing smoothly from one person to another depending on the skills and knowledge called for at the moment. But in D/s relationships as in any formal organization, the prerogative of leadership is assigned to one party who (it is understood) will draw upon the other's skills and knowledge as needed, but is entitled to the last word. As already noted regarding Elizabeth and Cecil, this ability to consult with subordinates without needing to be the expert on everything nor diminishing the prerogative of command – is one of the crucial skills of leadership at every level, from project teams to

⁵ See Elias Canetti's account in *Crowds and Power* (in the section called "Discipline and the Sting of Command, p. 315 in the Continuum edition) of being trained to give orders by taking them. I think Canetti is both right and wrong here: What he describes is education for power at its worst. It is certainly true that cadet officers are trained by being made to take a lot of orders and a lot of shit. But the point (if it is done properly) is not simply to turn them into authoritarian arseholes when their own turn comes to revenge themselves by transferring "the sting of command" to their subordinates. This effect, admittedly occurring much too frequently, is an undesirable side-effect. The real point is to train cadets in the self-discipline and *esprit de corps* that will **legitimate** their giving of orders.

empires.

In D/s this familiar issue of consultation appears in acute form with characteristic wrinkles of its own: More often than not, the novice Domme will find herself taking instruction from a submissive partner who may be more experienced than she is – and who must, in any case, supply much needed information about his own needs and limits. This sort of “teaching from below” is not at all the same thing as “topping from below.” It is one thing to learn from your submissive, another to let yourself be manipulated by him; it is one thing to respect your sub’s limits, another to tolerate his wimping out. A good sub gives himself freely, and lets himself be taken to the very limits of his endurance before using his safe word. A good Domme knows how to draw the best from her sub and then a little extra, teasing and scaring him with his own desire to be taken further. She can listen to her sub and learn from him, while keeping him firmly in hand.

- Withal, the skilled Domme is a giver of permissions; and that is the basis of her power: She allows her sub to do what he most desires. In return, she receives from him a recognition of authority that gives weight to her permissions – gives them value and meaning. Thus, men visit a pro-Domme to explore aspects of their sexuality that their own wives cannot accept, or that they themselves are ashamed and afraid to share with their wives. Probably, this lady’s most important function is to help her clients come to terms with their own desires; and they are glad to worship her because she can do this. In much the same way, nations install regimes that start the wars they want to fight, or end the wars they’ve had enough of – and not only do these things, but dress them in appropriate rationalizations and rhetoric. The leader articulates his people’s passions, and receives their adulation in return. To some extent, a similar bargain is found at the core of all authority relationships. We place ourselves under the leaders who not only help us get where we collectively want to go, but reassure us that it is OK to go there. Sometimes, such permission is more important than choice or coordination, or any other of the functions of leadership.

The ceding of authority for needed permission can amount to nothing more than a mutual admiration society – an association for mutual flattery. But it can be much more than that, because all authentic teaching relationships depend upon it – and a truly great leader is a teacher as much as anything else. His problem is to bring out the best in his people, knowing it all too easy to bring out their worst. Just consider the difference between Nelson Mandela and Yasser Arafat. Think of FDR, and his “fireside chats.”

The final dimension of a leader’s training (usually on-the-job, with little chance to correct mistakes) is his education in the creativity or destructiveness of power. A bad leader makes a bloody mess. A great leader sees what each person is good for, and evokes that good – sometimes teasing and provoking, sometimes

demanding, sometimes rewarding or punishing as appropriate. A great leader channels the energies of his group (perhaps just a group of two) toward that collective outlet, or expression in which it finds a genuine fulfillment. A great leader helps his people to feel – and feel correctly – that under his leadership they became something more and greater than they had known themselves before.

All but universally, in regimes with any tatter of legitimacy, it has been understood that power and command mean something more than a habit of getting your own way. There is a discipline to power, more severe than that on its receiving end. One must learn to project its aura, so that deference and obedience remain credible. And one must learn to deploy power effectively, creatively, advantageously, so that it earns interest and is augmented over time, rather than live on the dwindling capital.

The problem is to use power confidently, boldly, but always in exactly the right way – as in aikido, for example, where technique is refined over a lifetime of practice to achieve a maximum of control for a minimum expenditure of effort. The secret (if there is one) is that people will tell you what direction they need, if you can ignore the chatter and listen to what they are really saying. In D/s relationships, where power is a free gift and submission is wholly voluntary, this point takes on a special clarity.

D/s couples are not much different from others, except in their underlying agreement that the Domme can require obedience when she chooses. Her actual use of this prerogative is up to her, within the limits of the couple's contract. How extensively and minutely she uses that power is a matter for experience and negotiation, and will be different for each couple. She is not more or less a Domme because she does (or does not) micro-manage her sub in the details his existence. Nor is he more or less submissive in asking to be so managed. Rather, it is the Domme's acknowledged *right* to require obedience – however she chooses to invoke it – that makes a D/s relationship. And what we are discussing here – what I am claiming has implications for political life in general – is the understanding needed to use that right wisely and well.

That understanding, quite simply, is that subjects or “subs” are asking for effective leadership and need it. You may have to defend your turf from rival Dominants – in real-world politics, you certainly will have to do so – but the subs themselves will accept your right to rule so long as you are half way convincing in the role. Your decisions are sought because decisions are needed, and you alone possess authority to make them – with consultation as time permits, but with finality so that they stay made. It is on this level, I think, that D/s makes its contribution to political theory: to reassure both ruler and subject that one can live well at either end of power's rod, so long as its sting is applied and accepted with love, intelligence and discretion.

4 Political Order and the Good Life

The idea that everyone should try to “better himself” by rising to a position of leadership must be among the silliest in our political culture. The corollary notions that all should

have an equal chance to do so, and that there is something shameful about being or remaining in a subordinate position are both deceitful and destructive. To begin with, no conceivable legislation could abolish the crucial differences of talent, power-need and luck on which careers depend. Though artificial barriers on the playing field can and should be levelled, the inequities of Nature will remain. Then too, very many people – most of us, probably – are more fulfilled and productive doing a definite job well than directing the work of others. And finally, if everyone is trying to lead then no one can actually do so, for want of followers to help him.

For all these reasons, the good life must mean something else than controlling more wealth (which is not at all the same thing as living more comfortably, never mind more interestingly or meaningfully), still less mounting higher on the chain of command.

Without this basic understanding, people are forced into a restless clawing for advantage, where only dupes bestow real loyalty. Social institutions come to be led by ambitious fools who value power and status above all other human goods. They waste their lives struggling to positions of leadership, only to find they have no real vocation for it, and that their leadership is meaningless because they have no preference for one direction over another. In private life it is the same. Couples battle each other to a stand-off, and then break up, finding their relationships sterile. It might be better for everyone if simple-minded demands for absolute equality were abandoned for a more sophisticated ideal of complementarity and fairness.

4.1 In Favour of Inequality

As a matter of experience, some of our closest relationships are unequal and complementary in nature – the interlocutors not dealing on equal terms, but bringing differing powers and prerogatives to their dialogue, as well as differing wants and hopes. The relationships of parent and child, teacher and pupil, the gentleman and the gentleman's gentleman (e.g. Lord Peter Winsey and his "Man," Bunter) might be examples. The distribution of power is unequal – yet the relationship may be most satisfactory and rewarding to all concerned when the superior's power is used constructively and with restraint.

I must take care not to sentimentalize here: I know quite well that the archetypes of Good Lord and Faithful Servant can cover any amount of exploitation and resentment. Lord Acton's warning is well taken. Political theorists and practitioners both are and must be centrally concerned with "checks and balances" – with precautions against the corruptions of power. Yet there is another danger as well: Misjudged rejection of more or less benevolent and responsible power leads to a vicious circle of futile, nest-fouling rebelliousness matched by a power elite that increasingly loses touch with its authentic mission – less and less interested in the creative use of its power, but more and more with the protection of its tenure and the lining of its pockets. Such trends are visible everywhere today and are, I think, one reason why D/s holds such fascination. People want to be able to feel devotion and

loyalty without feeling exploited, without feeling like fools. And even apart from this desire, a stable power system is needed to create and sustain a public space – whether a safe play ground, or a stable market. The outcome without it is not liberty, but civil war – as Hobbes pointed out long ago. The problem then is not to abolish or weaken power, but to domesticate it – render it clement, balanced and accountable.

4.2 Hierarchy and the Loop of Accountability

Hierarchy in itself, the bare fact of rule and subordination, is neither a good thing nor a bad one, but simply an effective and necessary device for mobilizing and coordinating human effort. Everything depends on whether those mobilized are justly used and fairly compensated, and whether their efforts are deployed in some intelligent and productive way. That groups will arrange themselves hierarchically when they are serious about getting something done is simply a political fact whether we approve or not. Accordingly, there is need for an ethic of obedience and discipline whereby positions near the bottom of the chain of command are accountable to those above.

But, just as much, there is need for an ethic of duty and responsibility, whereby positions near the top of the chain are accountable somehow to those below. Now, some ethic of *noblesse oblige* is familiar enough in hierarchical systems. It has evolved many times, because its necessity is obvious. But it is constantly betrayed too, because keeping it in the long run takes more self-discipline and class discipline than is available.

The problem is to institutionalize a closure the loop of accountability, so that governing authorities are kept accountable to those beneath them, as much as the other way round. Representative democracy is one crude arrangement along these lines that does not go nearly far enough. The fragging of gung-ho lieutenants (widely practised in Viet Nam, and other unpopular wars) is another crude implementation that goes perhaps too far. What is needed is a concept and mechanism of *mutual* accountability – more pervasive, more responsive, and very much more intelligent than either of the examples just mentioned; and D/s practice with its negotiations, contracting, periodic reviews and “safe” words suggest how such schemes must work:

There is indeed a prerogative of command, and an obligation of obedience. But there are agreed limits on the orders that can be given, and a mutually understood responsibility for the sub’s safety, health and growth. There are regular peer-to-peer discussions, to review the course of the relationship and revise the contract as necessary. There are conventions in place that allow either party to call “time-out” at need – together with a strong ethic that one does not call time out without a very good reason. Above all, there is understanding that the relationship is collaborative and mutual, not adversarial: To make a D/s relationship succeed takes care, consideration and a strong desire on both sides.

Finally then, the suggestion of D/s to political theory is that the old formula, “government with the consent of the governed,” is incomplete. “Consent” is just too passive as a basis for effective citizenship. The political ideal is not just a cowed

acceptance by subordinates of rule by some established power elite. The ideal, rather, is a true “power exchange” in which self-respecting submissives freely give service, obedience and trust to Dominants who re-earn their status every day on a continuing basis. Such an arrangement can be liberating for everyone – allowing leaders to lead and followers (whose interests and talents lie elsewhere) to freely serve in a polity that fully includes and enriches all members together. It need not enrich all persons equally, to be sure. Rank has its perquisites and privileges. But these are kept within bounds. They remain, in the end, no more than fair compensation for the commitments given.