Structures of Power - The Absolute Military Monarchy

The second essay in this series is the first of a number that will address the fundamental power structures that have been, and are, used to impose the will of those who have power, on those who have not. Using the novel medium of a ‘Powergram™’ we can map and understand any power structure. Using this method, various power structures will be identified, described and examples discussed.

So what is a Powergram™? It is a simple diagram that maps where the seat of power lies, how power is distributed and controlled, where it flows and how it is maintained. Using shapes and colours we can immediately understand all these important aspects of power. We can quickly grasp how stable the structure is, and where it’s weaknesses lie.

Let’s start with a simple example. This Powergram™ shows the power structure for an absolute monarchy established and maintained by military force.

The colouring on all Powergrams™ always flows from green to red via yellow and orange. This represents the flow of power, from those who have it; green, to those who have little or none; red.

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One way to describe the different kinds of power represented by these colours is by indicating how power was acquired and is maintained, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Represents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Assumed/Seized/Usurped Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Granted Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Derived Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Little or no Power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is another way of categorising power, which we will look at later.

Having explained the colouring we can now look at the first Powergram™ and see how this applies to an absolute military monarchy, i.e. an absolute monarchy that has been acquired using military might and depends on that military might for it’s continued existence.

The pinnacle of the narrow upper triangle represents the absolute monarch. As the triangle expands, power flows down to those that assisted the monarch to take power and who sustain him in this position. The monarch usually grants favours to these people, in the form of wealth and influence. Often this takes the form of land or other sources of income. All of the income belongs to that individual, with sums payable to their master on demand. Typically the number of people involved is low, when measured as a proportion of the population being ruled. Those at all levels of this triangle will probably exert their power in a similar manner to the absolute monarch, depending on violence and fear to maintain their hold over those subservient to them. At the same time each level owes absolute loyalty to the level above, to those that granted them their power.

At the bottom of this narrow triangle, power is considerably diluted. However those at the bottom still derive some wealth and prestige in return for allegiance to their direct master, and ultimately to the monarch.

This structure is deliberately portrayed as being narrow and represents the ruling class in an absolute military monarchy. Note that no mention has been made of any bureaucracy in the above description. The absolute military monarchy does not require and does not depend upon a large bureaucracy to establish and maintain order. It relies almost entirely upon violence and fear.
Finally below the ruling class we find a wide base representing the ordinary people. Clearly from the earlier description, we can fairly describe them as the ‘oppressed masses’. This base is almost entirely red, representing an absence of power. There is a thin band of orange representing a strata in this section of society that has some derived power. Usually these are people who derive some power from those in the ruling class, but who have little or no loyalty to them, other than that which can be bought. Very often they are the first to turn against their masters when there is trouble and will happily take the pay of new masters when there is a change of regime. They are an important part of the overall power structure as they act as enforcers for the ruling class but are not part of that ruling class. They can be a destabilising influence if not managed carefully. We can think of them as the ‘bully boys’. This level is also the level from which the military footsoldiers are drawn. Being part of the military confers limited prestige over the rest of the population. It also gives some power as the soldiers will be those required to impose order on the general population.

Note the gap between the ‘ruling class’ and the ‘masses’. This represents the gap between those who have a vested interest in maintaining the current monarch, and those who have no interest in who rules them. It does not matter to the masses who rules them as it makes little or no difference to their lives, which are equally miserable in all circumstances.

Also note that the area of each block is intended to approximately represent the proportion of the population in each category. Thus the ruling class represent a very small proportion of the population relative to the masses.

Finally it is intuitively obvious from the shapes used in the Powergram™, that an absolute military monarchy is inherently unstable. It has a narrow base but has many levels above it. It appears to rest upon a large foundation of the ruled people, but remember that there is a gap between the two. Those who are ruled are not committed to their ruler in the way that the ruling class are. One can imagine that it does not take much for this structure to fall, and indeed this is exactly what we find.

Usually such power structures are destroyed by an outsider, using military force to displace the incumbent monarch. Very often the entire supporting structure of the original monarch will be replaced by the supporters of the new monarch. Supporters of the previous monarch are executed or banished, with execution being the preferred option and banishment being
used for those fortunate enough to escape.

Earlier I referred to a second way of categorising the power represented by the colours used in the Powergram™. This categorisation is based on the level of organisation within each category, as shown in this table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colour</th>
<th>Organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yellow/Green</td>
<td>Highly organised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/Orange</td>
<td>Completely disorganised</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is intuitively an implication that if those in the ‘red/orange’ category can manage to become organised, then they pose a threat to the ruling class. Simply put, there are more of them than there are of the ruling class. Again this is what we find in history. The ‘French Revolution’ is an example of such an event, (though the power structure is somewhat different, the concept is close enough to serve as an example). During the French Revolution the people became sufficiently organised to overcome the highly organised absolute monarchy. Note that the amount of organisation required does not need to match that of the ruling class. It is simply a numbers game, if the ‘masses’ represent 90% of the population, then it doesn’t require much organisation to topple the 10%, no matter how well organised and armed the 10% are. But it will always be a bloody affair.

From this insight, we can immediately understand why the ruling class in an absolute military monarchy will go to any lengths to prevent the masses becoming organised, and why they strictly control the circumstances under which large crowds come together. Typical methods involve prohibiting assemblies greater than a certain size, absolute control of information (a theme we will return to at a later date), encouragement of pleasure and entertainment for the masses. For example, Julius Caesar banned guilds and professional groups, in order to prevent sedition and conspiracies. In medieval times ensuring that the masses remained illiterate was an effective method of controlling information. Officially organised, or sanctioned, fairs and games have been used by many monarchs to allow crowds to gather whilst offering a distraction that prevents them becoming organised. The Romans were famous for using games as a ‘release valve’ to prevent the masses from becoming organised and restless.

The advice for any aspiring absolute military monarch; controlling the masses is easy when you know how. Sadly the above methods are familiar
Now let us consider an example of absolute military monarchy. In fact, in the UK, we have to go back a long way to find examples, as most absolute monarchies are actually absolute bureaucratic monarchies. Perhaps the best examples come from the dark ages and early Saxon times. During this period this country was not ruled by a single monarch, rather by multiple kings. These kings would acquire power mostly through military force, and then maintain it by similar means. There was little attempt at government as we would know it. Their power was maintained by the ability to reward those who supported them. Loyalty was effectively bought and sold to the highest bidder. Consequently there was little stability. Over time smaller kingdoms consolidated, eventually leading to the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Anglia, Essex, Sussex, Kent and Wessex becoming established. Finally a united monarchy, under Alfred the Great, was established. This became necessary due to the threat of, and the actual, invasion by the Norsemen. As fractured kingdoms the Saxons were not stable enough to defeat the Norsemen. As a united kingdom, and perhaps even more importantly, as a bureaucratic monarchy, they could defend themselves.

This final point brings us to consideration of the differences between military monarchy, and bureaucratic monarchy. This will explored in detail in the next essay. Suffice to say, the establishment of systems of government, particularly by Alfred the Great, greatly increased the strength and resilience of absolute monarchy.

However we have not yet explored all the information we can extract from the Powergram™ and from the example. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons why the absolute military monarchy gave way to the bureaucratic monarchy. I believe one of the reasons is implicit in the Powergram™, and that is size. Intuitively we can imagine that there is a limit to how large the absolute military monarchy can become. The larger the population ruled by the military monarchy, the larger the upper ‘power’ triangle must become in order to keep control of the general population. It must become wider - drawing in more powerful supporting families at each level of command. It must also become taller incorporating more levels of command. Conceptually the structure simply becomes unstable, too tall and not wide enough to support itself. In real terms the instability comes from rivalries between the families and factions making up the ruling class, each seeking the favours of their
and factions making up the ruling class, each seeking the favours of their immediate masters; seeking more influence and wealth for their family and supporters. The pursuit of these rivalries becomes more important than their loyalty to the monarch. The addition of more levels of command also weakens the loyalty to the monarch of those families at the lower levels. Simply put, the structure simple collapses under it’s own weight.

It is tempting to think that this form of power was limited to the distant past, however monarchies in this form certainly persisted into the last century. In particular examples can be found in the Arab countries in the early 20th century. The nomadic kingdoms and sheikdoms of what was known at that time as ‘Arabia’, operated using similar power structures. It was these kingdoms that were exploited to great effect by TE Lawrence during the First World War. These kingdoms displayed all the typical characteristics described in this essay; a single powerful figure using military means to exercise power over an extended nomadic tribe. Each kingdom was limited in size, almost certainly driven by the constraints of geography and the practicalities of maintaining power over a large area with limited means. During the mid-20th Century these monarchies rapidly converted and consolidated into the bureaucratic monarchies we see today. This occurred as a result of, and in response to, the exploitation of the oil reserves found in those areas.

So far in this essay I have concentrated mainly on wealth as the driver for creating and maintaining the absolute military monarchy. However this footnote introduces another equally important driver; sex. By studying this particular form of power structure it becomes quite clear why there is such a strong connection between power and sex, a connection that again is seen throughout history, and in all power structures. The more complex the structure becomes, the less clear the connection may be, but it can be found none the less. This subject will be explored in greater detail in a later essay, but for the moment let us understand the simple reason why sex is important. One single word: genetics. The absolute monarch has unfettered access to the entire gene pool of those he rules, and to as many of those as he desires. Note I specifically refer to ‘he’, as it is an indisputable fact that most absolute military monarchs were men. If we consider this from the genetic perspective it is understandable. A powerful absolute male monarch can spread his genes across a wide proportion of the population without limit and often as he likes, thus ensuring that his genes are passed on to successive generations. A clear example of this is Genghis Khan, whose genes can allegedly be found in 1 in 200 men. By contrast the choices a female absolute monarch can make are limited by biology and time; she can only choose every 9 months, at most, and
typically only from those in her immediate circle. From this simple observation of the connection between absolute power and genetic persistence, much of the connection between powerful people and sex can be understood and explained. However much we may think we are civilised, we are still driven by the animal instincts of self-preservation and procreation.

This diagram summarises the essential drivers behind all power structures. There is one omission that will be added in a later essay.
In this essay the concept of the Powergram™ has been introduced and it’s use explained by application to perhaps the oldest form of power structure; the absolute military monarchy.

The following diagram is a comprehensive key summarising the use of Powergrams™ as a means of illustrating a power structure.

The next essay will look at the Powergram™ for an absolute bureaucratic monarchy and compare that form of power structure with the military monarchy discussed in this essay. This will help us to understand why the bureaucratic form of monarchy has been a more enduring style of absolute rule, and to start to understand the role of bureaucracy in the past and today.

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