



Ritabrata Chakraborty (2022) *Steven Lukes and Michel Foucault: Exercising Power and Effecting Compliance*, London School of Economics Undergraduate Political Review, 5(1), 80-93

Steven Lukes and Michel Foucault: Exercising Power and Effecting Compliance

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Abstract

Central to political theorizing has been the concept of power. It is invoked in everyday usage while referring to interactions between social actors, institutions, or even nations. Despite its widespread usage, clarity regarding its meaning has remained largely elusive, and terms such as 'power', 'domination', 'compliance', and 'freedom' flow around freely in everyday discourse. With the intervention by Steven Lukes and Michel Foucault on this subject, there has been an immense proliferation of literature on this subject, accompanied by a conceptual expansion of power.

In this paper, I attempt to adumbrate the main features of their conception of power, gleaned from Robert Dahl's and Bachrach and Baratz's views in the process, followed by an analysis on the mechanisms of securing compliance in each case. This paper argues that the subtlety and efficacy of the means are inherent in the nature of power that operationalizes these means/mechanisms. The various facets of power presented also hold specific implications, and the potential for integrating them in the prevalent liberal-democratic framework of today is not only possible but also perhaps necessary.

Keywords: Political theory, Foucault, Lukes, power, compliance



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Introduction

Akin to most other concepts in the field of political science or political theory, the concept of 'Power' has been an essentially contested¹ one (Gallie 1956). Scholars have been highly subjective over its location, scope, effects, and several terms such as 'interests', 'freedom', 'preferences' and 'conflict', all of which are necessary to sketch the conceptual outline in any discussion on power. Thus, expectedly, the concept of power itself has elicited marked differences among writers, with little common ground being found. Beginning with a minimalist view of power of the behavioural school to an all-pervasive notion of power advanced by Foucault, the concept has experienced significant expansion in its scope- and a parallel broadening of the accompanying idea of compliance. Since a background exposition on the three faces of power (as propounded by Lukes) is essential before embarking on how each of them secures compliance, the first section addresses that, followed by a section devoted to compliance in each case with overlaps and subsequent extensions in its ambit. The following section explains what I argue are the difficulties confronting us while studying power and domination. The fourth section concerns itself with Foucault's view on power and how compliance works. The concluding section enumerates my observations from the study, emphasising on the similarities, interlinkages, problems posed, and implications for governance or organization of socio-political structure in general.

I. The Three Faces or Dimensions of Power

As propounded by scholars such as Robert Dahl, the first and the most restricted dimension focuses on behaviour in decision-making in issues over which there is observable conflict. As a "qualified critique"² (Lukes 2005, p. 24) of this view, Bachrach and Baratz advanced the second face of power which, in addition to the feature of the first face, also takes into account how establishment and reinforcement of "political values and institutional practices" (Bachrach, Baratz 1962, p. 918) limit decision-making to relatively safe issues,

¹ This term was introduced by Walter Bryce Gallie at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society in 1956. Since then, it has become a very generic term of reference with respect to terms that have different and contested meanings.

² He calls it 'qualified' because, taking non- decision-making as decision-making, Bachrach and Baratz have failed to completely depart from the behavioural model.

thereby creating an area of nondecision-making on some potential issues which are prevented from being brought to the forefront. After delineating these two dimensions, Lukes forwards the third or radical face of power. This is at once a “thoroughgoing critique” (Lukes 2005, p. 28) of the behavioural focus as well as a significant widening of the concept of power on multiple counts. First, he argues that power can be exercised by moulding, and in effect deciding, people’s desires and shaping the political agenda. Secondly, even an apparent absence of grievances by the people can contain an exercise of power “by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences” (Lukes 2005, p. 11), which precludes the very formation of grievances. Thirdly, and as I shall subsequently argue, most importantly, he adds to the discussion the concept of “real interests”³ (Lukes 2005, p. 28). The actual or objective desires and grievances of a certain mass of people are often clouded or suppressed by creating a facade that presents a series of subjective interests evident in their presence before us and sought to be sustained by the dominant class through manipulation, and socialisation. Besides the similarity with the Marxist diagnosis of bourgeoisie society, this additionally indicates how false-consciousness masks factual and objective interests in all situations of exercise of power, albeit in varying degrees. Thus, even an absence of perceptible and identifiable conflict can involve an exercise of power “sustained by the production of false needs in the underlying population in the interests of a dominant class” (Benton 1981, p.163). According to Lukes, it is the “supreme and most insidious form of power” (Lukes 2005, p.28) since it entails the presumed absence of conflict itself which is often considered as a requisite premise for the exercise of power, at the political, or even at sub-political or latent level.

II. Lukes and Compliance

Additionally, the preceding section explores the various means and mechanisms by which domination is employed and compliance is secured in each facet of power. What needs to be stated at the outset is a key point that acts as a loose point of convergence between the three faces of power as given by Lukes- in all cases of one entity exercising power over another, there is a pronounced understanding of who are the subjects in the larger field of power’s operation. This ceases to be a necessary feature once we enter into the Foucauldian terrain of power, since it obviates this generalised pattern, opting instead for a

³ There is a striking similarity with the Marxist diagnosis of society here in the invocation of real interests, as both Marx and Lukes point to how the masses are kept unaware of their real interests.

cyclical network with no overarching location where power operates, but in and through a multitude of interactions. I return to this aspect later in this paper.

Compliance in the First and Second Dimension of Power

In order to discern ways of securing compliance in the behavioural face of power, I refer to 'The Concept of Power' by Robert Dahl as the primary point of reference since it captures the essential thrust of this behavioural model of power and also acts as a broad blueprint for the studies of power which were, and have been, spawned by this line of theorising. For every case of A exercising power over B, the base or source of A's powers and the means or instruments used by him determine the scope of B's responses, the extent of A's power over B, and above all, whether it is effective in securing compliance (Dahl 1957). To take a typical scenario, if a police officer has the power to direct traffic at a road crossing, his *base* comprises a signal system, provision for fine/penalty, and power of seizing the car. This is coupled with the *means* of operating the signal. Using the threat of levying fines or seizing the car in the event of non-compliance, compliance is secured amongst the drivers plying through the crossing. While this may sound convincing, I feel that one of Dahl's preconditions listed under 'Properties of Power Relation' (Dahl 1957), viz. a necessary gap or 'time-lag' between A's actions and B's response, is not entirely consistent with the preceding exposition if one considers the implicit element of means giving rise to a patterned behaviour. Thus, if imposition of fines becomes a norm in case of someone breaking traffic rules, this fact becomes ingrained in the drivers even before they actually reach the crossing and decide whether to obey rules or not. An often unacknowledged recognition of the base and the means affecting the base gives rise to a pre-ordained course of action on the part of the drivers. One may also argue that this is beyond the scope of the actual, observable conflict, hence outside the realm of power. However, banking on the inconsistency just explained, it can be claimed that if A unfailingly prevails in decision-making scenarios arising out of actual, observable conflict, and henceforth this leads to a patterned response on the part of B, it is within the field of study, even if in an extended sense. Thus, the presence and possession of certain bases and using or threatening to actualize them through meanslike penalties and legitimate state force constitute the workable mechanism of securing compliance in this first dimension.

In the second dimension of power, compliance is mainly secured by consciously keeping certain issues or grievances out of the political system so that they are not discussed or resolved. For example, a city whose economy is mainly dependent on one industry (For example, Steel) and the elected mayor of the city has an *undeclared* collusion with the industry, peoples' demands regarding low wages or abysmal working conditions will often fail

to reach political articulation, leave alone resolution⁴. As Schattschneider put it, “All forms of political organization have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others, because organization is the mobilization of bias. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out.” (Lukes 2005, p. 6-7). Thus, the specific arrangement of the political structure, internal dynamics of the government, and its correlation with other social and economic forces within the society under study engender the prevailing political attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices that help to block controversial or problematic issues. Consequently, this effective absence of conflict on these secures compliance, though domination resting on that will last as long as this ‘agenda control’ (Lukes 2005) is maintained. In one way, it can be said that compliance in this dimension is secured in a pre-emptive manner- is compliance not inevitable if political discourse and resolution are confined to issues palatable to the powers that be?

Although the second face of power opens up a new vista of operation of power and compliance, it has its limitations and Bachrach and Baratz’s own admission (Bachrach, Baratz 1962) regarding similarities between the first and second face of power can offer an important clue- “As is perhaps self-evident, there are similarities in both faces of power. In each, A participates in decisions and thereby adversely affects B. However, there is an important difference between the two: in the one case, A openly participates; in the other, he participates only in the sense that he works to sustain those values and rules of procedure that help him keep certain issues out of the public domain” (Bachrach, Baratz 1962, p. 948). What becomes clear is that the second face is self-limiting by being restricted to the realm of conflict, either overt or covert, and issues, either actual or potential. It attacks the behavioural model of power for being too focussed on decision-making, but itself regards non-decision or inactivity as a decision to keep certain problems out (Lukes 2005).

Lukes’ Third Dimension

How this face of power highlights the inadequacies of the first two can provide a useful insight into the power-compliance linkage in this case. Lukes argues that both the first and second faces are excessively focussed on actual conflict and rule out the presence of power-exercises in situations without any conflict or decision-making. (Lukes 2005, pp. 26-

⁴ A similar scenario is a case explained by Lukes with reference to Matthew Crenson’s book, *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution: A Study of Non-Decisionmaking in Cities*. It shows how grievances regarding air pollution are not addressed in a city dominated by a single steel industry which acts as its chief economic vehicle.

27) Furthermore, taking a cue from Max Weber (Lukes 2005, p. 26) the assumption by both is that will is secured against the resistance of others⁵. Moreover, it does not comprehensively cover the third face as quiescence resulting in compliance is a common feature in both. In the radical view of power, there are myriad ways of securing compliance. The people see or imagine no alternative to the existing order, perceive it to be natural or divinely ordained, or think that it is unalterable. As Lukes says, "To assume that the absence of grievances equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat." (Lukes 2005, p. 28). These ways of securing compliance become effective because the focus is not precisely on the question of how people's preferences are supposedly reflective of their interests and are compatible with those of the power-wielders, but how the power-wielders shape the very preferences according to their convenience by suppressing and masking real interests. This is realized through multiple agencies not all of which are regarded as a part of the government *per se*. Besides the holders of governmental positions, the education system, the mass media, socialization through family, and possibly every source of dissemination and inculcation of norms are tailored to fit the motive of either suppressing and erasing grievances, and/or creating an external semblance of consensus through the generation of subjective, but acceptable mass interests⁶.

III. Compliance and Domination

As Lukes tries to establish conditions when compliance to power constitutes domination, he enters an excessively complicated arena—mainly because he tries to handle the question by, alluding to Spinoza, giving primacy to the argument that domination results in people being rendered less free to act as their nature and judgement dictates (Lukes 2005). What complicates it is that, by his own admission, nature and judgment are highly subjective terms which carry highly varied connotations in different cultures and countries. One may take a minimalist stance where freedom is diminished by preventing desires from being fulfilled, leaving aside their genesis and quality⁷, or one may construe domination as affecting the

⁵ For Weber, power signified *individuals* realizing their wills despite the resistance of others. This closes the possibility of both power as a function of collective forces and absence of resistance in certain cases.

⁶ Often, in order to ensure legitimacy, the presence of compatible subjective interests is preferred to complete erasure of grievances.

⁷ It is a shortcoming of the minimalist view that it understands freedom as letting people

rational cognitive ability, i.e. the ability to think for oneself and being true to one's nature or self⁸. The first case excludes the vital possibility of power's capacity to affect and influence generation of desires while the latter is susceptible to the rejoinder that there is no objective, universal idea of rationality as an 'inter-cultural bridgehead' (Lukes 2005). Human nature is also a very contentious term since we cannot pinpoint an essential notion of it, nor can we reach a consensus on it across countries and cultures. Lukes takes an innovative approach here by understanding human nature through the 'capabilities approach'⁹ (Lukes 2005, p. 117), where some primary conditions of living enable humans to perform such basic functions in life which command cross-cultural agreement as being absolutely necessary for human existence. The capabilities approach constitutes a (normative) theoretical framework that evaluates social arrangements on the basis of freedom of humans to achieve well-being as well as actual capability to realize their well-being. This does give an objective basis to human nature; however, the tremendous economic disparities between countries and marked differences in welfare provisions nullify the possibility of unanimity regarding what should constitute requisite 'basic conditions'¹⁰. For all practical purposes, domination as rendering people less free to act according to the dictates of nature and judgement displays a strong theoretical proposition but is implausible in the realistic realm.

do what they want or desire at a particular point of time, disregarding the fact that wants and desires are themselves products of certain social conditions.

⁸ Lukes further explains Spinoza's idea of rationality, '...we think of freedom as autonomy (broadly understood), that is as invoking the ideas of authenticity (being true to one's nature or 'self') and autonomy (more narrowly understood - thinking for oneself). On Spinoza's own account, living (authentically) according to the dictates of one's nature and (autonomously) according to the dictates of one's judgment is to be rational. Subjection to domination impedes the subject's ability 'to use reason correctly': "those whose reason is most powerful, and who are most guided thereby, are also the most possessed of their own right" (Lukes 2005)

⁹ For detailed (and original) work on this approach, one may refer to *Rationality and Freedom*, and *Development as Freedom*, both by Amartya Sen.

¹⁰ For example, pensions and unemployment benefits may be considered as basic conditions in a country with strong welfare traditions, but not in one which is much more tilted to a laissez-faire economic outlook.

IV. Foucault on Power and Compliance Thereof

In order to maintain continuity, I intend to outline the Foucauldian concept of power as an extension of the ongoing discussion on power, highlighting how it is, simultaneously, a critique of the existing notion and a radical broadening of the same. While his views in this regard can be gleaned from numerous books and papers and range across ideas such as, bio-power, discourse and truth¹¹, I here seek to present the broad and general features of Foucault's conception of power. The presence and operation of power can, and indeed does, occur at the most micro-levels of society and permeates levels of thought, perception, and action hitherto considered outside its scope. Moreover, there is a mutually complementary relationship between power and knowledge. In other words, no power relation can exist without knowledge and there is no knowledge without an underlying power structure.

As compared to the exploration of the power-compliance link, which I have attempted so far, it is much more complex and contentious to study the same when it comes to Foucault, not the least because his ideas are presented not as a concrete book on the subject (as Lukes does in 'Power: A Radical View'). At best, one can say that power is the concept that animates his thoughts and writings on diverse topics such as psychology, sexuality, etc. The question about compliance is complicated by his notion of power as all-encompassing, in that it is difficult, if not impossible to conceive of social relations between actors without an element of power. Also, the requirement in the three faces that power flows from a source is non-existent here since power operates at the margins and extremities. This is what he calls *micro-physics*, an ontology that regards power as not necessarily a distinct property, but strategic and evidently manifest in relations between people. This imperative to depart from the tendency to analyse power as a linear flow concept between actors or as a top-down phenomenon in a hierarchy is something Foucault recurrently emphasises. As he says, "Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization." (Foucault 2019, p. 505).

¹¹ For a complete understanding of the various areas explored by Foucault, see *The History of Sexuality, Discipline and Punishment, Madness and Civilization, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, etc.

The above statement further exemplifies the all-encompassing nature of power which refuses to conform to a distinct hierarchical framework. However, these should not dissuade us from identifying and studying it. To do so, one first needs to understand the Foucauldian idea of formation of subjects, and in this regard, I would like to deduce the central points from the “methodological imperatives and precautions” (Foucault 2019, p. 504) presented in his lecture on ‘Power, Right, Truth’. Intrinsic to this view is that human beings are social constructs formed by social norms and practices and historically explainable in their cognitive and behavioural evolution. The needs, desires, and interactions are governed by society's shared norms and values, which are the product of the broader discourse of truth, which is produced by the power relations in society. What we have here is a deeper glimpse of the structural setting- while power permeates all relations and practices, it itself is based, and dependant on a discourse of truth that legitimises and sustains it. This should not imply that this truth is transcendental, situated above all these factors; instead it is also a self-serving effect of the power. As Foucault says, “We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.” (Foucault 2019, p. 503), each system of power will inevitably have its own version of truth which closes the possibility of objective interests or some objective truth. All of this points to a core theme, viz. power is productive. It is in this regard that Foucault’s notion of power embodies an inversion of the prevalent theories of power. Prior to this, power had been mostly conceived as a “juridico-discursive” idea (Lynch 2019, p. 28), i.e. on modelled on law, sovereignty, punishment and prohibition. The law would stem from a sovereign and lay down the rules regarding what is right, what is wrong and the two halves of legal and illegal action. Thus, it works primarily in a negative sense, or “by means of interdictions” (Lynch 2019, p. 28), creating neat binaries as to kill or to let live, to prohibit or to punish. Here, the sovereign power is seen as one that can take away or appropriate lives, wealth, labour, etc., Foucault says, “It is this image that we must break free of, that is, of the theoretical privilege of law and sovereignty, if we wish to analyse power within the concrete and historical framework of its operation. We must construct analytics of power that no longer takes law as a model and a code.” (Lynch 2019, p. 30)

So, what does Foucault offer instead? He does not entirely discard the foregoing legal-juridico model but tries to discover elements situated outside this negative/subtractive realm that serves as compliance-securing mechanisms. It injects certain markers of identity and classification which we mostly take as given but are actually the function of power. Gender, sanity, sense of fashion, propriety -all these are ingrained into individuals and institutionalised through places seemingly perceived to be untouched by forces of power-

families, peer groups, schools, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, and others.¹² This becomes clear once we contextualize it with the locational aspect of power, which I would like to re-invoke. While disapproving of a top-down approach to power, Foucault harps on how micro-practices, exemplified as a “multiplicity of force relations” (Lynch 2019, p. 30), interact, intersect and sometimes overlap to give rise to macro structures or patterns. The norms, values and practices instilled and normalized at micro-levels give rise to larger patterns which are not always internally uniform or homogenous, but structurally complex and receptive to variations.

“Power develops in the first instance in specific, local, individual choices, behaviours and interactions. These combine in myriad ways to constitute larger social patterns, and eventually yield macro forms, which one typically thinks of when one thinks about “power” (societies, states, kings) – just as everyday objects are constituted by atoms and molecules. We thus have a micro-level of individuals (disciplinary techniques of the body) and a macro-level of populations (biopolitics).” (Lynch 2019, p. 34) This form of inducing compliance is arguably the most insidious and effective is borne out by the *perceived* immutable nature of the values and norm, which, mostly to our unawareness of their effect, steer our everyday thought-streams and actions interactions and practices.. To further enforce this argument, I would like to draw upon Peter Digeser’s point regarding the difference between autonomy and agency (Digeser 1992). According to him, autonomy refers to the quality or nature of our desires and agency is our capacity to form them. Following the framework of Foucault would mean that power relations affect our agency or the very capacity to form desires and preferences. As a result, incapacitating the capacity to form certain desires lies at the heart of securing compliance here as the prime mechanism.

Before drawing this discussion to a close, I would like dwell on Foucault’s insights into punishment and normalization a bit further with reference Charles Taylor’s presentation on the evolution of the core principle behind punishment from the classical age to the modern age in his essay ‘Foucault on Freedom and Truth.’ In the classical age, for a wrongdoing of a severe nature, punishment took the form of a public execution which may seem violent and horrific in today’s age. However, what symbolised its speciality was the fact that it was intended not just to punish the person concerned (and in a grisly manner) but also correct

¹² Foucault also asks us to ponder upon the fact that there is a palpable resemblance among schools, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers, all of which have a pronounced disciplinary element.

the wrong inflicted on the larger moral and political order as a result of his/her action. "They do not just represent damage done to the interests of certain other individuals or even of the ensemble of individuals making up the society. They represent a violation of the order, tearing things out of their place as it were. Therefore, punishment is not just a matter of making reparation for damage inflicted, or of removing a dangerous criminal, or of deterring others. "The order must be set right." (Taylor 1984, p. 154) With the decline of royal power and this notion of an order, individuals were seen not as beings serving towards a more significant political or cosmic order, but free and rational individuals who are ends in themselves. While Taylor claims, perhaps rightly so, that this can be mainly attributable to the rise of humanitarianism, Foucault directs our attention to the great difference in how criminals are treated. Physical punishments do remain in the form of death penalties or rigorous imprisonments, but the central idea, and intent, has come to become rectification, rehabilitation and restoration of the person to the societal mainstream. This reflects the requirement, or rather the responsibility of making deviants conform to the social norm-enabled by the perception that criminals are to be treated as patients. The macro-implication of this approach is that we now have governments that deploy mass surveillance and examination to ensure discipline¹³. Even schools and hospitals can be seen as extensions of this strategy of ensuring mass compliance, albeit in a crucially discreet and diffused manner.

V. CONCLUSION:

Amid the elaborate analysis of the meaning, nature and means of effecting power across a wide spectrum, there are certain significances, common threads, and shortcomings that can be observed. Among Lukes's three dimensions, 'power over others'¹⁴ seem to be the rare unifying trait, signifying that those over whom power is exercised form the majority in any given situation. Conversely, regardless of the degree or nature of power, the people constituting the government/social actors/institutions exercising power are always significantly smaller in number compared to the target population. Detection of power, in all the three faces of power, suffers from the huge requirement of imagining a 'counterfactual'

¹³ A glaring difference is that while public punishments were conspicuous before the public eye, modern-day surveillance is enforced among the entire public, but subtly.

¹⁴ The concept of power over others can be contrasted with Hanna Arendt's concept of power to act in concert, wherein power is no longer instrumental, but a collective feature of the people which is empowering in nature.

(Lukes 2005), i.e. the scenario which would have been present without the operation of the power understudy- for it is only by doing so we can explain where and how power operates. This problem is compounded in the case of Foucault since the knowledge system and the discourse of truth themselves are functions of power. Despite the seemingly groundbreaking and radically new vision of power put forth by Foucault, it shares some common ground with Lukes's third dimension. Internalisation of norms, being internally and often unconsciously steered by it and behaving according to the norms is a feature of power relations highlighted by both theorists. While one may feel that the third dimension and Foucauldian conception of power, being much deeper in its reach, should be given priority while comprehending contemporary society, the second dimension has a specific significance too. In an age dominated by large corporates with colossal net worths and their interface with our lives at almost every step, their linkages with the government, often as *quid pro quo* favours, cannot be ruled out¹⁵. The two acting in unison can pose serious challenges to the public expression of grievances. The chief shortcoming or inadequacy, which again acts as another rare commonality binding all the power-facets discussed by Lukes and Foucault, is the lack of any future blueprint for remedying the inequalities and helplessness which so often characterises power-equations. They admit that the dominant group prevails in decision-making on most occasions, keeps certain issues off the political agenda, constrains options, suppresses real interests, infuses social norms to be conformed and creates a supportive (and dependant) discourse. However, for all these detailed dissections of social relations and interactions, there is an absence of concrete prescriptions of how to alter or overcome them, being aware at the same time that not all power relations have an adverse effect. Lukes goes to the extent of arguing that there is an empirical basis for detecting real interests, but that again sounds tenuous since doing so would require detachment from the existing omnipresence of power-induced values.

As Ian Shapiro observes in 'The State of Democratic Theory' concerning the existing literature on power, "It is more suggestive than instructive because for the most part its practitioners have ignored institutional arrangements. Either they have seen them as irrelevant to power's operation, or the preoccupation with epistemological questions has

¹⁵ A recent case in point can be the benefits that would have allegedly accrued to the corporate sector once the proposed farm-sector reforms came into place in India. Thus, one may view this as a measure in return for corporate donations to the ruling party. See <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/why-big-businesses-want-these-farm-laws-195905>.

diverted theorists of power from exploring the institutional implications of their own views.”
(Shapiro 2003, p. 35)

Something of this sort, in my opinion, is all the more needed if we acknowledge the fact that though a democratic structure is generally operating in numerous countries, power-forces do commonly permeate in an inequitable, insidious and undemocratic manner in the actions and relations of people populating them. Affecting greater transparency, democratizing the political *and* social spheres, maintaining the tendency to question and analyse the most obvious and seemingly natural social norms, and re-examining the facticity of these can go a long way in utilizing our learnings to harness further the potential of us as social and political beings.

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