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## POWER IN SPACE

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The natural language teems with expressions that link the quality of human relationships to spatial distance or orientation. We feel close to others we love, and the nearest friends are the dearest. When we part ways or move on, we become more distant, and eventually lose sight of one another. Spatial metaphors of liking, loving, and intimacy extend across the horizontal plane. Metaphors indicating power differentials, however, extend vertically. The dominant lord it over the submissive, talking down to them or even running roughshod over them. Power resides in high places and commands are handed down. To get power, we climb the social hierarchy, aiming for the top of the heap. Power evokes spatial imagery, and this imagery is expressed in the physical environment we construct to live in.

### Power Is Up

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the ultimate power resides with God. His spirit floated above the waters when He created the world. He gave his commandments to His prophet on a mountaintop. The prophet descended from the mountain to educate the children of Israel, who later built shrines on other mountaintops, and looked to the mountains for divine help. Soaring high, the gothic cathedrals of the late middle ages expressed this metaphorical return from the low earth to divine height. Priests would ascend to the pulpit and direct their homilies down to the laypeople. In synagogues, newly minted adults ascend to the *bima* (an elevated platform), and the Torah scrolls are taken down to be touched by the people. Above is power and influence; below is passivity and prayer.

Secular society understands the power of these metaphors and perpetuates them. The bosses roam the *chef étage*, peering through large windows down on a conquered world. The height of the office building represents how strong a claim to power is being laid. The business district of the average American city is a showcase of symbolic competition for power. Although governmental architecture has resisted the single-minded *Drang nach oben*, it nevertheless remains cognizant of height. The Rhode Island State House is tall, situated on a hill, and without nearby competition. In Washington, the nation's representatives symbolically and literally inhabit a grand edifice "on the hill." The comparative humbling of the Chief Executive in a mere lower-elevation "house" is historically significant, as an American President is construed as a sojourner, a person who must never be king. So it should be for, say, the President of a University. At Brown, the President's office is not on the top floor of University Hall, although the residence is suggestively located on Power Street.

The equation power = up almost seems too obvious to belabor. Examples are easy to find, and exceptions are easy to explain away (as in the case of the President). Can we say then that the equation power = up is a law of nature, on a par with gravity (n.b., power is impressive because it defies gravity), or is it a social construction, a peculiar product of our history and pre-occupations?

The case for the law-of-nature view is biological. As a general rule, larger creatures prevail over smaller ones when they are in physical conflict. As humans grow up, they live through years of knowing that their comparatively tall parents have both physical and economic power over them. Recognizing this evolutionary backdrop, Freud suggested that symbolic constructions, such as the Judeo-Christian religions, are little else but elaborated childhood fantasies.

The case for the social-construction view rests on cultural differences. If Western culture equates power with up, it does so because it has worked for a host of economic or political reasons, but it does not have to be this way. Cultures that attribute their origins to the earth and to growth from the soil, do not build lofty houses of worship. The *kivas* of the pueblo nations of the American Southwest literally burrow into the ground to connect finite and weak human-beings with sacred power. Caves have long served the same function without the burrowing.

### **Embodied Imagery**

A solution to the question of whether biology or economic-historical circumstance lies at the heart of the power = up equation is beyond the scope of this essay. It is, however, possible to ask just how deeply this equation has sunk into everyday consciousness. A recent set of experiments, published by Thomas W. Schubert in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2005, volume 89, pp. 1-21) is instructive. Schubert suggests that thinking and perceiving are “embodied,” that is, both rely in part on the same mental apparatus. Because of this entanglement, people automatically associate power with vertical size (height) and vertical position (above). The latter allows even small objects or people to appear powerful, as when a diminutive jockey controls the horse beneath.

Schubert’s tests of the automatic association of vertical position with power are simple and elegant. In one experiment, powerful words like *master* are paired with powerless words like *servant* and presented on a computer screen. Participants in the study hit a response button faster to identify a powerful word when it is presented above a powerless word, instead of below it. Likewise, they identify a powerless word faster when it is presented below a powerful word instead of above it. Even when words are presented one at a time, powerful words are identified faster when presented at the top of the screen. In a follow-up study, Schubert finds that participants express greater respect for powerful animals (e.g., lions, elephants, bears) when their names are presented at the top of the screen, whereas there is no such effect for powerless animals (e.g., hares, does, llamas).

### **Enter Trump**

The nature of these findings may not be surprising, but their subtlety is. If relatively minor changes in spatial arrangements are sufficient to call forth deep-seated associations with power, it should not be surprising that individuals who have power, or who aspire to get it, capitalize on their effects. As case in point, consider Donald Trump. Whatever eponymous

product he pitches is not only the best but also the biggest. His signature building, the Trump Tower, may not be as tall as the Empire State Building, but it has a sly semantic advantage.

Trump shows his adeptness at manipulating space most effectively on his show “The Apprentice.” His entrance is always spectacular and mindful of space. He swoops down on the waiting contestants by helicopter, or, more prosaically, descends on them by escalator. He never emerges head first on an upward-bound escalator. But it is the dreaded boardroom that holds most of the clues to his spatially crafted authority. The contestants have to go up to the boardroom, but in it, Trump’s only vertical prop is the time-tested high-rising backrest (which he never uses because he leans forward into the contestants to maximize the impact of his trademark “You’re fired!” line).

In the boardroom, the savvy Donald goes beyond mere verticality. The conference table is long and narrow. The contestants file in and sit in a long line of up to 16 on one side, facing Trump’s lieutenants, George and Caroline, who are already there. Trump enters through a special door in the back, a door that spells privilege. Only he can use it and he arrives late. Power does not wait, it let’s others wait. Trump, scowling, sits down on the high back-rested chair, virtually enthroning himself. He is at the center, his lieutenants on either side are wing men (or, in Caroline’s case, a wing woman). Their placement at the far corners of Trump’s table is significant. It accentuates the centrality of the chief, and, consistent with the military imagery of high-powered, Sun-Tzu smitten corporate culture, shields him from encirclement by the restive but frightened contestants. At the end of the show, the unlucky firee must shoulder the burden of representing failure, rejection, fall from grace. The elevator takes the firee down to the street—always at night—to a waiting cabbie. This urban equivalent of ancient Charon takes the ex-contestant to an even lower destination: the shadowy world of people whose one moment in the spotlight has passed. For the man in power, there is no exile on the far side of the River Styx. After the commercial break, Mr. Trump is back as a seer, letting us catch a glimpse of next week’s power play.

### **Counterpoint: The Theater**

Cathedrals or corporate headquarters, power rises up and talks down. Power can exhort and command, or it can tell you you’re finished. But power does not entertain. Trump may entertain the American viewing audience, as Letterman would say, but he does not entertain the contestants. Entertainment affords different spatial arrangements. The architectural prototype of entertainment is the Greek amphitheater. This is Trump’s world in reverse. The audience rises up high, row after row. What is more, it virtually encircles the performer. Being able to see the audience on the opposing side of the stage magnifies the collective experience. The actors on stage are trapped in a sort of pit, having to project their voices and gestures at a steep angle. To control the audience, they cannot use any of the regular tools of power, such as carrots or sticks. Subtler methods are needed. The actors must find ways to get the audience to identify with them. To the ancient Greeks, the arousal of pity was crucial. They regarded identification with the tragic hero, and the realization of his fate’s inevitability as a purifying experience. Their architecture afforded these sentiments. The fallen hero lay below and pity went well with bowed heads (Try pitying Oedipus while craning your neck!).

Occasionally, the themes of power and entertainment mingle resulting in uncertain space. College professors are caught in such a space. Forget seminar rooms. Seminar rooms are architectural non-entities, little boxes to contain the teachers and the taught at little expense. The interesting spaces are the lecture halls that are presumably laid out with purpose and aspiration. What do they communicate? Combining the theatrical with implied military discipline, the European model features stadium seating in straight rows. In my own neighborhood, Carmichael Auditorium in the Hunter Laboratory of Psychology is a good example. But then there are the more modern lecture halls that return to the amphitheater prototype. Macmillan 110 is gorgeous, large, and steep. An Epidaurus on Thayer Street. Next to it is Macmillan 115, which seats 120. It is wide, but less steep, and not as many rows deep. This is where I introduce students to social psychology. I love the location, but I am mindful that it curtails my power. In the spirit of the times, it casts the college professor as an entertainer. Jokes are told and illustrative anecdotes enliven scientific data. No divine wisdom is imparted and no one gets fired by a pointy finger. There are no lieutenants to protect the professor/entertainer from encirclement. There is only the lone but stalwart teaching assistant in the first row.

We are creatures in space. We (and our architects) shape it, and we are shaped by it. Most of the time we give it little thought, remaining unaware of Schubert-like associations. When we have power that we don't want to lose or attain power that we don't have, it is worthwhile taking a look around and learn from those who design space and those who use it to their advantage. Both are integral parts of the equation.

#### Reference

Schubert, T. W. (2005). Your highness: Vertical positions as perceptual symbols of power. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89, 1-21.