

BOOK REVIEWS by BRIAN MARTIN

Power and Corruption

The Powerholders

David Kipnis

University of Chicago Press, 1976; second edition 1981

Technology and Power

David Kipnis

Springer-Verlag, 1990

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” So said Lord Acton, and most anarchists would agree. Any hierarchical system provides positions of power which are sought by the worst sort of people, namely the ambitious, unscrupulous and ruthless. Furthermore, even if by some chance sensitive and honest individuals obtain positions of power, they can quickly become corrupted. This is the experience with governments, corporations, churches, political parties and other institutions.

But why does power corrupt? For the answer, it is worth consulting the excellent work by David Kipnis, a professor of psychology at Temple University. He has carried out numerous experiments showing just how power corrupts.

For a person to be autonomous is widely considered to be a good thing. It is a feature of being fully human. When a person exercises power over others, the powerholder gains the impression that the others do not control their own behaviour or, in other words, they are not autonomous. Hence, they are seen as less worthy. In short, a person who successfully exercises power over others is more likely to believe that they are less deserving of respect. They thus become good prospects to be exploited.

For example, Kipnis organised experiments in which a “boss” oversees the work of “subordinates” in a simulated situation. The experiment is contrived so that all subordinates do the same work. But the subordinate who is thought to be self-motivated is rated much more highly—for exactly the same work—than the subordinate who is thought to have done the work only under instruction. As well as laboratory studies, Kipnis examines the effects of power on the powerholder through studies of couples, managers and protagonists in Shakespeare’s dramas. The results are always the same.

In *Technology and Power*, Kipnis follows through the implications of such evidence in a number of areas involving technology, including medical technology, workplace technology and the technology of repression. For example, technologies for surveillance or torture serve to control others: that is the obvious effect. But in addition, the psychology of the powerholder is changed when the technology promotes the reality or impression that others lack autonomy. Those subject to the technology are treated as less worthy, and any prospects for equality are ruled out.

Kipnis rightly points out that few studies have looked at the effects of power on the powerholder. He has done an admirable job of redressing this imbalance.

As a result of his investigations, Kipnis is quite pessimistic about solving the problems of power and the technology that reinforces it, precisely because the usual prescriptions ignore the effects of power on the powerholder. It seems, though, that Kipnis is unaware of anarchism and the longstanding anarchist critique of all forms of hierarchy.

However, this gap need not detract from the value of Kipnis’s studies for anarchists. Besides the points mentioned above, he deals with tactics of influence, use of rewards, inhibition of the exercise of power, motivations for power and other corruptions of power. This work bears close study by all who want to understand better the psychological dynamics of power.

Brian Martin