

The Gaze, Hierarchy & Power - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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1 — On Hierarchy

Sartre's theory of "the look" (also translated as "the gaze") describes the way in which we perceive ourselves both as subjects of our perceptive experience and objects in the perceptive experience of another subject. Although we feel constrained when we feel ourselves as objects and not subjects — as we can imagine how we *may* be perceived but never how we are actually — it is as a being-for-others that we can enrich ourselves as self-conscious, and thus broaden our perspective as subjects.

Briefly, I want to present an understanding of hierarchy (one which has certainly been proposed long before me) which is based on this theory.

In hierarchical relations, one is reduced only to the role of object in another's perceptive experience; one is banished from the realm of subject, reduced to an observer of oneself and not its conscious actor. As an observer of oneself, one is forced to adopt the form of observance of whoever constitutes one's external observers. Paralyzed, one internalizes the perceptions of these observers, and the hierarchy is reproduced from within.

A society beyond hierarchy, then, can be conceptualized as one where one can experience oneself as subject and object equally, where oneself as subject is able to be reified by oneself no matter one's place of origin in

society.

2 — On Power

By understanding hierarchy as reinforced by the object of its own domination, we can also better understand power as a whole. The maintenance of power cannot be discussed merely as a relation between oppressor/oppressed, whereby the latter feels oppression as a constriction external to it and *imposed*. It is doubtful whether this view of power has ever made sense in any era of history, but particularly now does it seem strange. Instead, power should be understood in terms of the shaping of actions and consciousnesses *through* the logic of power, rather than an oppression experienced from *above*. Millions of individuals making tiny actions and tiny shifts in behavior and thinking constitute power; the authority is maintained by a collective consciousness which has already made it necessary.

In this sense, no one is innocent, and the “middle men” can be blamed even more than the kings. In fact, the king may not even abide by his own law, if there is no-one watching him, whilst the most powerless individual polices her fellows and herself more fervently than the actual police. Once the collective power-consciousness has dispersed itself across the land, it is the very feeling of powerlessness which sparks the desire to micro-police, and it is only here where the king can sit. Foucault, in addition to Deleuze and Guattari, I believe have made the most noteworthy jumps in this direction when speaking of power.