

On Power

Robb Smith,
CEO, Integral Life
www.integrallife.com
[@robbsmith](https://twitter.com/robbsmith)

Let's talk about power. I mentioned in my keynote address that I'd dive deeper into power as one of the key aspects of the great, disruptive release that marks the dawn of the Teal transformation age.

"The feeling of having no power over people and events is generally unbearable to us. When we feel helpless, we feel miserable." Thus opens Robert Greene's classic *The 48 Laws of Power*.

And I believe it's another way to summarize why the past year has not felt great. For the first time, perhaps in most of our lifetimes, many of us feel powerless in a way that is genuinely threatening. Certainly, this is true of us in the west and it is even more true for those of us in the United States, for all of the reasons we looked at in some detail to this point in the event.

We're genuinely scared for the first time in our lives because not only has our power been displaced, but as we discussed we've had the stabilizing norms of our society shaken beneath our feet; we're beginning to feel like we don't understand the rules anymore, or perhaps there are no rules at all.

As Trevor Noah summarized so succinctly: "does anything matter anymore?"

Now as we looked at the great release, this disruptive and momentous leap from a Green to Teal operating system, we saw that breakdowns often signal the need for, and emergence of new forms of governance, primarily because they are driven by new technologies to begin with, and these new technologies change the nature of power in the global system itself.

Our goal on today's panel will be to talk about power, looking first at what power is and the evolution of social power as a holarchy. Then sit down with other experts from diverse disciplines and discuss various current events through the lens of power.

Let's start with a better understanding of power, something I don't think we talk about nearly enough in the integral community.

I'd suggest that power is the ability to influence, regulate or control some phenomenon in the universe. As it relates to human social relations, power follows an evolutionary sequence like many other things we think about through an integral lens. It is a holarchy where each stage of social power emerges as life conditions, social organization and cultural values evolve.

Power Pyramid

At the base of the power pyramid is the most fundamental power that exists in human social life: the power to protect and kill. In archaic tribes of course it entails the power to kill enemies, kill for food and kill to survive the natural world. But this power is still with us even today: we grant the state the right to execute citizens and to go to war. Obviously because it is the most extreme form of power in human relations, it is our most highly-regulated power; or at least it should be, in principle. The Black Lives Matter movement and the North Korea crisis both stem from this level of the power pyramid.

As the average size of human societies grew from bands into tribes, a new form of power emerged, which is the power to expel. Classically, the power to expel is held by the tribal "big man" and any of the religious classes who set the terms by which the tribe can eject a member... which, back then, was akin to a death sentence. In modern times, the power to expel is granted to the state by citizens, and includes the right of imprisonment and the right to deport non-citizens. Trump's commitment to "Build the Wall," his executive

orders banning Muslims, and his constant demonization of immigrants generally all stem from this level of the power pyramid.

The power to expel is transcended and included in the power to sanction, which is the first state-based rule of law that emerges in the chiefdoms and kingdoms of mythic-agrarian societies around 3,500 BCE. These early civilizations reach a critical mass of people such that the power of an administrative state becomes necessary to maintain order. The power to sanction accrues to those who can officially approve actions, or sit in judgment of transgressions against the laws and mete out punishment. The Code of Hammurabi is an exemplar of this power in its early form.

In contemporary society, this power extends throughout the regulatory agencies of government. It is seen by some as burdensome and overreaching, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Trump is almost single-handedly dismantling the regulatory state: from the EPA to the Department of Energy to the State Department to Net Neutrality, we see a frontal assault to strip out the state's power at this level of the power pyramid.

It's important to watch how as society evolves, the most important "scarce resource" of society evolves with it, which in turn evolves the nature of power in each society. As society evolved past the early agrarian states into later empires, we see that the scarce resources of survival, might and order have been largely solved for. Accordingly, power begins to shift toward more contemporary powers, with arguably the power to reason emerging: first with the Greek philosophers but later into the arts and empiricism of the Renaissance.

The power to reason is transcended and included by the power to contract during the rise of the industrial era in the late 18th century. This is a power that reaches its pinnacle in modern, industrial society, and is the ability to use money, resources and capital to engage in free, third-party contracting with other free people in an effort to maximize value and wealth through

economic exchange. The power to contract correlates exactly with the scarce resource of the Orange operating system, which is material wealth maximization throughout society.

As we get to the end of industrialism and we start to shift into a Green operating system, increasingly a new leading edge of power emerges, which is where find ourselves today: we've really had an information era upon us for the last many decades, and Green power is reaching its apex: the power to convene, the power to hold attention while also providing a set of norms within people who are feeling norm-less, who are feeling lost and adrift in a society whose moral center has not held.

With the rise of the information age, a knowledge-based, pluralistic landscape of perspectives– a genuine, aperspectivalism emerges for the first time. What it brought with it, among other things, is what sociologist Emile Durkheim called anomie. Anomie is a pervasive sense of alienation from a society whose norms are breaking down, where there's no longer a fixed center.

As we discussed a few days ago, societal norms fragment as a central aspect of the Green operating system. This has various dignities of course, serving to break up traditional domineering power structures, including sexism, racism and, more generally, just the sense that there's a single societal norm we have to conform to. Frankly, it's highly liberating.

But anomie is one of its downsides: this sense of existential alienation from society or one's own social groups when they become norm-less; they almost literally lose their ability to guide our behavior (which, paradoxically, is one reason why Green feels liberating).

But what emerges right alongside this set of life conditions is in fact, a new kind of power: the power to convene. You see, the power to convene is actually powerful at this stage of sociocultural evolution because, and

precisely because, the person, thing or entity that holds this power, is able to hold attention or reanimate some set of norms within individuals that allows them to heal some of that existential divide for them. It provides them a new calling and helps them channel their time, attention, and belief structures back into an in-group. Both Facebook and Donald Trump are quintessential examples of this power in action.

It's not that money power, the power to contract, is no longer there. The power to contract is still thriving. We still include it in the evolutionary stack of social power, but it has been transcended by another power that is more significant, which better responds to the scarce resource of the current form of social organization, which is, roughly stated, a network society whose scarce resource is meaning and attention.

So the significant dominant power of our time is the power to convene: the power to hold attention and reanimate meaning within individuals who feel culturally adrift, which I'd suggest is all of us in some way. This power is more significant than the earlier, more fundamental powers upon which it rests: the power to contract, the power to reason, the power to sanction, the power to expel, and the power to kill.

Incidentally, it's notable that as we move up the power hierarchy, free will increases while the severity of consequences of revolting against the power go down.

Now, it should be easy to see that in every occasion power differentials are changing constantly as contexts change: on stage here I may have more power to influence you than you do me, simply because of the power structure inherent to the event design: I'm holding the mic. But if a police officer walks through the door, she may have more power to regulate or even control all of us because of the more fundamental power that is bestowed by us as a society to our law enforcement function.

And though I've discussed power so far in a human context, let's understand that power is operating in all four quadrants throughout the evolutionary chain of being. There are power differentials within and amongst atoms, inside biochemical processes and the heart of chemistry, in our seismic and geological phenomena, indeed inside all of the very laws of physics, chemistry, biology, economics, political science and so on.

Power infuses the universe because it describes a universe where things interact.

Green too often does not make this holarchical distinction because of its view on power. For example, it mistakenly sees two important values—freedom of speech and social equality—as two opposing poles rather than two emergent aspects at differing levels of the same holarchical growth process. And what governs all holarchies—from particle physics and biochemical reactions to the emergence of language in the brain and our federal court system—is power. Power arises to both drive and regulate growth.

So of course power differentials exist as a natural feature of the universe: differentials at the same level of being, like two people, one of whom is powerful in a certain context because of their knowledge, let's say a physician; and another who is powerful in a different context because of their resources, let's say an investor. Different contexts, different kinds of power, but both people exist themselves at the same level in evolution.

Contrast this with power differentials that exist within *different levels* of the evolutionary stack itself: for example, cancer at the level of my cells has a more fundamental kind of power than the power of my free will. I can't will the cancer to be gone, and yet the cancer will absolutely impact on all of the holonic levels within me that have included cells, which is to say, all of them.

The takeaway is that we can come to a more nuanced understanding of how power—this ability for one phenomena in the universe to influence, regulate or control another phenomena—how it interacts and changes, across different contexts and different levels. And for us humans, how we're constantly engaged in a dynamic dance of changing power relations, moment-by-moment, throughout the day, and throughout our lives as social conditions change, the power of which can sit anywhere on the evolutionary spectrum I've outlined.

Current conditions

I'll conclude with just a few brief comments about power as it pertains to our *current* social conditions as we make our momentous leap into a Teal operating system.

As I talked about a few days ago, the world right now feels out of our control, a bit foreign and threatening. The world is not just going through a transition technologically, culturally, politically and economically. At the core it is going through perhaps the greatest transition in many decades and one of the few major transitions in all of human history around the nature of power.

Since the 1970s the political left has come to dominate the realm of cultural power and the political right has come to dominate the realm of capital power. The middle and working class of both ends of the political spectrum have become increasingly frustrated by their dominant opposite: the right abhors the left-leaning cultural power they see foisting multicultural cosmopolitanism on the west (in the U.S. and Europe in particular), and the left abhors the right-leaning capital power they see degrading the middle class through globalization and financialization.

Both sides jockey for political power, trading it back and forth and using it to full effect to quash the other dominant when they hold the political reins (for example, the right tries to stymie cultural power they see destroying

traditional values by hammering abortion rights; the left tries to build the social safety net, such as the Affordable Care Act, that they see being eroded by unfettered free market capital power).

Then, within the historical blink of an eye, along come the Green and Teal power players—platforms that can convene attention, talent and energy: like Facebook, Twitter, Google, Fox News, Bitcoin/blockchain, and others—large media companies, outsized personalities, and massive tech platforms with the power to change, enhance or undermine other forms of power: money, cultural, and political power, while also creating new paradoxes within them.

Power is at work when we think about artificial intelligence, quantum computing and the singularity, and the rise of the big five tech platforms in Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft and Apple. As David has pointed out, these massive platforms have consolidated so much of our economic, social and technological lives under their purview, they wield almost indomitable power to continue to influence and guide the masses. Ironically, they also feel under constant threat of losing their own power to the next upstart at any moment.

Incidentally, the reason that millennials have so much more relative power than prior younger generations is because of the transition to platform power.

Will the existing structures and existing players really end up in the power position after the transition is done? Not likely.

It is a paradox, this contradiction between seemingly God-like powers of the mega power holders today on the one hand, and the way in which they know they might be displaced very quickly on the other.

Displaced how? By the whims of crowds; by the emergence of new technology; by a rewriting of the rules that govern our society; by new

innovations like the blockchain; by new political movements, and many others. This is the paradox of Green-level power: it's something so monopolistic in one sense and so transitory in the next, and this paradox characterizes our contemporary lives.

This is a war going on. Let us make no mistake, it is not a classic war, nor is it a war between good and evil, but it is still a war played out across the spectrum of power as those who have it try to hold on and grow it, and those who don't have it try to disrupt those who have it.

It's a result of the nature of human psychology in which at its core it wants the power to be free, power over itself, power over its own life and ideally power over others. The power to never feel threatened, the power to make whatever decision one would want, the power to satisfy one's needs however and whenever one would want.

This is a war brought on by these deep seated drivers and needs in human psychology, which have been around for tens of thousands of years, and at each successive stage of techno-economic evolution and social organization, the power structures rearranged themselves to accommodate the prevailing requirements of society of the time. From warriors of the band to the priests of the empire to the celebrities of the internet, power has evolved.

Power is changing once again, and it's incredibly destabilizing. You might have noticed already that each time a new power emerges it actually reconfigures the prior powers along with it: Green-level technologies didn't eliminate the power to kill, it reconfigured it with drones. Green-level economic power didn't eliminate the power to contract, it reconfigured it into the gig economy. Green-level relativism didn't eliminate the power to reason, it reconfigured it into post-truth echo chambers. And so on.

With every topic we've discussed this weekend, think about whose power is being threatened.

In politics, the power to wield the loyalty of a huge group of people is changed as people shift alliances more readily than ever before. This has distorted politics into a winner-take-all game of maximization where those in power get everything they can when in the majority, constraining norms or conventions be damned: goodbye senate blue slips for judicial nominations, goodbye legislative hearings, goodbye non-partisan budget reviews, goodbye shame of hypocrisy. It's simply a game of raw, brute power.

In media, fragmentation has created a landscape where consolidated power is harder than ever, and media shares power amongst a panoply of voices in a post-truth environment. As the news and social media landscape fragments, driven by the rise of social media platforms, money power can no longer easily just influence public opinion through brute force paid advertising. And yet Russia deployed that same platform power to distort foreign political processes by tapping into the anger and grievance of the middle and working classes waiting to vote.

In culture, power is what both confuses and infuses identity politics and the transaction of our cultural sphere understandings, about ethnicity and sexuality, about the patriarchy and gender equality, about equality in pay and so many other areas.

In business, power is what is at work as modern financial capitalism resists evolving to the conscious capitalism and for-benefit corporations of the 21st century. Concepts like workplace democracy, changing values and heightened transparency undermine the power of business to maximize profit in the shadows, divorced from the natural and social world of which they are a part.

In economics, money isn't as powerful as it once was. It isn't an accident at this time that the "lean startup" movement has emerged at precisely the time that Green platform power is also emerging. Only experiments in large

numbers can lead to success in a participative economic landscape. A priori business design no longer count for nearly as much as it did even 15 years ago; successes can only be judged and seen after the fact, after they've proven they can convene.

Even military power, strangely enough, has fragmented: the nature of our threats have changed from nation-state threats to mostly non-nation state actors and terrorists rising up against modern world state apparatus. These are threats that can't be beat with raw military power. They can be eliminated slowly and at the margins, but they thrive on ideology and ideas, things not easily destroyed with bullets.

The power to convene, and the platforms and people holding this new form of power, is precisely the kind of power that you would expect and that integral theory would predict arises at apex green: a mainstream participative pluralism.

Because whereas the platforms themselves are all powerful, where they derive their power from is from the participation of crowds. It is no surprise that the headlines we see is the political body taking on the Facebooks of the world. It is no surprise that the moneyed interests of the world are using those same platforms to try to reassert their own interests. It's no surprise that the platforms have elbowed out the cultural opinion makers of the traditional media companies. This is the power struggle underway, and it will continue for a decade or more as this reorganized landscape seeks to cohere and find new footing to support the emergence of this momentous leap.

And as individuals, we face a host of new questions and dilemmas: who can we trust? Can we trust our neighbors? Can we trust our culture? Can we trust our employers? Can we trust the rule of law? Can we trust the courts, and the police and our military?

As individuals we have more responsibility than ever before to take it upon ourselves to establish our own sources of power: to discern the truth, to save for our retirement, to create our own jobs, to customize our own political views, to define our own marriage, to choose our own sexuality...

This is life deep inside Green. So many choices, so little center. In every instance, in all four quadrants, green post-modern, multi-systematic systems, and consciousness, and values, and technologies are absolutely transforming, eliminating, changing, disrupting, distorting, fragmenting, and terrifying power.

That is one of the primary dynamics of what is happening in the world today. It is one of the most fundamental dynamics of what is happening today, because it is that destabilization of power, in all the ways that we have known it up to this point—in our minds, in our emotional system, in our upbringing, in our thousands of years of evolution—that feels so destabilizing. To this point, even if we didn't like it, even if we didn't have much power ourselves, we at least felt like we understood the rules of the game.

All of that is changing, all of that is destabilizing, and there's a war underfoot, a struggle underway, a competition and scramble for asserting new forms of power, for claiming new territories of power. That is what we need to look at, that is what we need to better understand. Because the opportunity is for us to lean into our relationship with power—the power over us, the power we have over others, and the power we share with each other—and awaken our cosmic integrity in order to lead from a place well beyond fear, a place that can embrace the uncertainty and help to heal the fragmentation we see around us.

Questions for Panel

1. This year's been disruptive. Here comes this guy that gets the most powerful position in the world and he's shaking up norms and also threatening our known structures. **Does the conversation around power resonate with you: have you felt powerless, overpowered or perhaps even re-empowered this year?**
2. Let me go broad with this one. From the #MeToo movement that is looking at everything from inadvertent insults to sexual abuses, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement that is combating systemic law enforcement abuse...fast forward ten years: **what do we learn, how do we evolve here, and what does a world of healthy power relations look like?**
3. **What's a psychological or spiritual viewpoint on power: what has to happen within us that we can be healthy, well-adjusted adults in the 21st century? What practices, philosophies or mindsets should we adopt?**
4. As long as I've been alive I feel like I and many others have, to some degree, taken our democracy for granted. We know this is a mistake, and now people are really awake and engaged to the care and feeding that democracy needs. **In what ways have you been woken up this year, and do you think this is part of a broader theme of people re-owning their power by re-owning the responsibility that comes with it?**
5. I've suggested a spectrum of the evolution of power as one tentative way to think about how power evolves over time. **What might you add to that story, gaps you might fill in, or things you think I missed?**
6. **If you agree with the standard integral belief that Green simultaneously both liberates us and de-centers us from the cultural norms that bind us together as a species, what do you foresee as new forms of power—cultural, psychological, economic, artistic etc.—that will emerge with a Teal worldview?**