The Power Dilemma

"Chile! What does he know about Chile! Was he there?"

A loud Texan drawl emerged from the seat next to me. Sadly it was not an isolated sentiment. In fact, on the night that I saw The Blind Giant is Dancing, the Opera House audience itself was a problem. Many seemed unable to recognise some of the complex problems which Sewell begins to explore. At times, sections of the audience responded with untimely laughter as if for want of a better response.

Perhaps this is not so surprising, given that The Blind Giant is an immensely dense and complex play. In the course of some three hours, the play considers the relationship between worker and capitalist, husband and wife, father and son, between government and people, and between party and activist. Different scenes tend to focus on one or another of these relationships, often in rapid succession. But the play does not consider them in isolation: the scenes feed into one another and the play is held together by both the narrative and a number of underlying themes.

The narrative centres around the character of Allen Fitzgerald, a marxist economist and leader of the socialist left within the Australian Labor Party. The play deals with Allen's struggle for, and accession to, power; and the effect which this has on those around him — comrades, lovers, wife, brothers, parents, friends — and the effects which they in turn have on Allen. It is the nature and exercise of political power which is Sewell's most important underlying theme and it is to this theme that I now want to turn.

I say "theme", but it would be more appropriate to refer to the question of power as a "dilemma". Given that we need power as a means, can we avoid making it an end in itself? The dilemma is reflected in Allen's changing attitude to power. Early in the play, we find him arguing against a proposal by his comrade Ramon to do a deal with Charlie Palmer who is a crime boss in the Labor Party. Allen states clearly that:

"We're fighting for a society where people can live with some kind of dignity ... at the heart of socialism is the idea of justice and if we betray that, we betray socialism, even if we achieve power. (p.20)"

He even goes so far as to invoke the anarchist dream "to destroy power". (p.20) All the same, Allen chooses to do the deal.

By the end of the play he is arguing the very opposite:

"The only thing that matters is power .... We're creatures of power! .... There'll never be socialism in this country: that's the joke. We've been fighting for nothing. (p.71)"

Allen concludes that he has finally discovered that:

"the appalling beauty of capitalism is that it creates the illusion of our freedom; that it makes us think we can change it or alter it — that we create it. But that's not true. It creates us. It makes our desires and our thoughts .... it employs us to maintain and expand itself .... (p.75)"

Those who seek to exercise the levers of power which capitalism provides merely become traitor (supports) for capitalism itself. "All we are are momentary carriers of its power and what's finally real is capitalism". (p.76)

Of course, it is true that power is a neutral means. The institutions in which power is distilled, and through which it is exercised, are not neutral mechanisms that are equally able to help us whatever our goal. In a capitalist society power is distributed in such a way that it tends to reproduce capitalism. The trouble with Allen's conclusion is that it goes one step further and hypothesises the existing distribution of power in capitalist societies. But the institutions through which power is exercised are not fixed and unchangeable for all time. It is possible to struggle for the redistribution of power and the establishment of new democratic and popular institutions through which power can be exercised. This is the very essence of socialism.

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Reviewed by Robin Archer
However, while affirming that we can and should redistribute power, we must also be clear that this does not allow us to avoid the need to engage with existing sources of power. Ramon clearly recognises this in his response to Allen's original objections to the deal with Charlie Palmer:

Ramon: Capitalism makes the rules!
Allen: They're not our rules!
Ramon: As long as the bourgeois is in power, they are. (p.20)

If we are to influence existing political struggles then we must participate in existing political institutions. This, in turn, involves us in seeking to exercise political power in these institutions.

The study of Allen Fitzgerald is in part a study of his attempt to exercise power through one such institution — the Labor Party. Throughout, Allen remains somewhat ignorant of the real means by which power is exercised in the Labor Party. For example, he asks his rightwing rival Michael Wells whether he has "gone to the police" about a murder ordered by Charlie Palmer, only to be told by Wells that, "It was a fucking cop that did it". (p.52) Nor does he understand Wells' ominous warning about "the power of the Americans" (p.78) until much later when he discovers that he, too, is trapped.

Nevertheless, Allen does begin to learn where power lies in the Labor Party and, since he is determined to exercise power through that institution alone, he must try to master its sources of power: not least the branch stacking; the ballot rigging; and the Americans. The irony is that in seeking to master these sources, they actually master him. Allen's predictions become self-fulfilling. He becomes no more than a carrier for the power of capitalism.

But the problems which confront Allen are not just problems for those in the Labor Party. They are problems for all who seek to intervene in existing political struggles. The Communist Party, for example, makes this sort of intervention central to its strategy, arguing that "Unions and workers ... must intervene in the (capitalist) structure of power" (p.46, Towards Socialism in Australia) in order to challenge that same power. Similarly, many feminists seek to intervene in male-dominated institutions in order to challenge the sexual structure of power. In both these cases, socialists and feminists face the problem of trying to change the distribution of power without first succumbing to the existing power structures.

The dilemma can be summarised as follows:

- In order to change the distribution and exercise of power, we need to intervene in the institutions in which power currently resides.
- To effectively intervene we need to exercise power within these institutions.
- But how can we use this power against itself? How can we use the power which is embodied in these institutions to change the distribution and exercise of that very same power?

More simply, given that "capitalism makes the rules" (p.20), can we use the rules to change the game itself?

It seems to me that Sewell's success lies in his ability to resist the temptation to offer us easy solutions and, instead, to make us feel this dilemma. He concentrates our attention on the unavoidable contradictions involved in socialist struggle. In a completely different context, Denis Altman has also pointed to these contradictions in his recent ABC radio series Radicalism in the Age of Consensus. Altman interviews a number of prominent radicals who seek to work against "the system" from "within", and each time the same dilemma arises.

Thus, for example, how can socialists within the Labor Party seek to use the power which results from popular support for social democracy to undermine social democracy and build support for socialism?

Or, how can revolutionaries in parliament use the power and political legitimacy endowed by parliamentary representation to undermine the notion that politics equals parliament and build support for radically extended democracy?

Or again, how can socialist "mandarins" in the public service use their power to implement, say, industrial democracy programs when the whole point of such programs is to reduce the power upon which this mode of implementation relies?

Sewell cannot offer us an easy solution to these dilemmas because there simply is none. In part, however, an answer lies in the fact that capitalist power both within and between these institutions is often contradictory and these contradictions allow different sources of power to be played off against one another. Thus, socialists "outside" of capitalist power structures can make mutually beneficial alliances with one source of power against another.

The metal unions, for example, have currently made a loose alliance with manufacturing capital against the interests of capitalists in the finance and resource sectors. Similarly, an alliance can be made with one section of an institution against another section. For example, unions can make an alliance with those within the state bureaucracy who seek political control of economic planning (in, say, the Department of Trade or the National Parks and Wildlife Service) against those (in, say, the Treasury) who seek the free reign of market forces. Or, to look beyond Australia, in the Philippines and Nicaragua, socialists make vital alliances with radical priests and lay workers against the conservative church hierarchy.

All this talk of alliances with established institutions of political power raises another point. For to talk of alliance in this way is to recognise the existence of alternative sources of power which make these alliances. The possibility of creating alternative sources of popular power is a fundamental part of any
answer to the dilemma Sewell poses. It is possible to establish popular democratic institutions outside of "the system". We can, and do, develop new ways of exercising power in the workplace, in our local communities, in the household, and in personal relationships. If those who intervene in the established institutions of power tie themselves firmly to these alternative institutions, it is far easier to avoid the corrupting effects of existing power structures.

Only when Allen rejects any connection with these alternative sources of power, and tries first to limit them — "I can keep the left under control" (p.79) he tells Wells — and finally to destroy them, does he become completely compromised.

We have already noted that The Blind Giant is primarily a vehicle to pose, rather than solve, dilemmas. Indeed, as Ramon points out, Allen's desire for absolutes simply cannot be fulfilled: "This isn't heaven, mate and it's not hell: this is the world." (p.20) The priesthood, suicide and, finally, socialism each fail Allen in his search for "somewhere to stand that's not moving". (p.60)

Unlike the metaphysical notions of heaven and hell, the real world cannot provide us with absolutes, certainties, and simple formulae to tell us what to do. The best we can hope for is to resolve the contradictions which confront us in the concrete situations in which they arise. Nevertheless, although The Blind Giant emphasises the dilemmas facing socialists in all their complexity, it is not a play of despair. By the play's end, the characters of Bruce (Allen's brother) and Louise (Allen's wife) represent, in their different ways, a kind of hope for the future — an expression of confidence in the viability of socialist and feminist struggle.

We last see Allen, having completely rejected popular power, screaming "Burn ... burn ... burn ... burn ..." (p.82) at the protesters outside his party office. Bruce, on the other hand, is a part of that alternative popular power, and recognises its crucial importance by abandoning the Labor Party. "What's the point in being in the fucking thing anyway!" he argues. "We have to organise outside the Party: the whole thing's fucked." (p.79) Bruce's growing commitment to militant struggle represents an important thread of hope running through the closing scenes of the play. Louise, too, despite her confusion and anguish, maintains her commitment to "build a better society" as well as her belief that she and "all the other cripples in this world" (p.77) have the collective strength to do it. Louise wants to understand her identity, her emotions and their social reality. Allen comes to think that there is nothing to understand beyond the fact that hate, fear and personal desire is all that there is. Here at last Allen feels certain:

"I've found myself. I've found my hate, my fear, my truth. Nothing can stop me now. (p.72)

In fact, Allen is lost; but Louise, Bruce and their struggle continue.

The final word, however, should go to the Chilean exile, Ramon:

Ramon: What is it in your country that feeds on hate?
Allen: How can't you hate!
Ramon: Because it kills your heart. You think you've experienced it hard. My father and my brother were tortured and killed by the fascists in seventy-three. I saw things no man should see; I did things no man should do. But if all that was left of me was hate it would be best for everyone for me to be in the grave! You have no right to say these things, because you don't know!

"What do you know!" I said to the Texan beside me.

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