4 Methods and Parenting: Bourgeois Power

There is hardly a single bourgeois moral standard which has not been anticipated by the unequalled magnificence of Hobbes’ logic. He gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of bourgeois man, an analysis which in three hundred years has neither been outdated nor excelled.

(Arendt, 1951: 139)

The cause [of the restless and perpetual pursuit of power after power] ... is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he has present without the acquisition of more.

(Hobbes: 86)

... the aristocracy had also asserted the special character of its body, but this was in the form of blood, that is, in the form of the antiquity of its ancestry and of the value of its alliances; the bourgeois on the contrary looked to its progeny and the health of its organism when it laid claim to a specific body ... But there was more to this concern with the sexual body than the bourgeois transposition of themes of the nobility for purposes of self-affirmation. A different project was also involved: that of an indefinite extension of strength, vigor, health, and life. The emphasis of the body should undoubtedly be linked to the process of growth and the establishment of bourgeois hegemony.

(Foucault, 1978: 124–5)

Introduction

In the last chapter, I drew on the Socratic tradition of social inquiry in order to demonstrate the claim that to exercise power well requires disciplining the boundaries of possible desire in a way which develops self-understanding. The endless and restless pursuit of power after power, when driven by an inability to govern one’s fantasies, leads to the life of the tyrant. As both Gadamer and Arendt show in their various works, the ancient Greeks were well aware of this temptation. The phronesis position of Aristotle grows out of the Socratic understanding that the best defence against the temptation of giving in to the boundaries of possible desire is to develop a taste for good action. ‘Greek ethics ... is in a profound and comprehensive sense an ethics of taste’ (Gadamer, 1975: 38).
However, as the quotations above show, Hobbes does more than articulate the tyrannic impulse. His position is different from Callicles’s argument in Gorgias. Rather, Hobbes points to a new relation to power which was to transform Western civilization. It was transformative because it was embodied by the group of people who, above all others, were to put their own stamp on the modern age, the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois focus on ‘its progeny and the health of its body’ is ‘linked to the process of growth and the establishment of bourgeois hegemony.’ As Arendt says, Hobbes ‘gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of bourgeois man.’ The arrival and eventual hegemonic dominance of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe and North America brings about developments in relation to power and parenting, public and private life, which, in turn, make the tradition of thinking and acting being developed in this book distant and alien (Gadamer, 1975: 38).

The bourgeois impulse in Hobbes is paradigmatically represented by his formulation of the reason why humans tend restlessly and endlessly to pursue power. The motive for such a life, he says, is not that ‘a man hopes for more intensive delight’ or that he ‘cannot be content with moderate power,’ but because ‘he cannot assure the power and means to live well at present without the acquisition of more.’ According to Hobbes, the actor he theorizes (under the universal sign of man) pursues power not because of lust or some other ‘irrational’ desire. In addition, it is possible for this actor to be content with moderate power. In contrast to Sennett’s formulation in the last chapter, the interest in the endless and restless pursuit of power after power comes neither from an inability to be satisfied with moderation nor the pursuit of ‘intensive delight.’ Rather, this type calculates that the only way to assure ‘the means to live well which he has present’ is to acquire some more power. It is on the basis of a calculating rationality rather than a passionate craving that the pursuit of power is chosen.1

As a life or ideal type (Weber, 1947), the defining characteristics of this social actor are a calculating rationality, an ability to be satisfied with moderation, and a capacity to resist the charms of intensive delight. These are the defining characteristics of the bourgeoisie (Strauss, 1963: 6–29; MacPherson, 1968: 9–64). As we shall see, far from looking like immoderate tyrants, this group has the appearance of responsibility and morality. And while full recognition of the decisiveness of this group’s entry on the Western stage had to wait until the work of Marx, the publication of Weber’s classic study, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Foucault’s (1977) work on disciplinary power, Hobbes, in the words of Arendt, anticipates the logic and moral standards of the bourgeoisie with ‘unequalled magnificence.’2

The bourgeoisie pursue power not because they are interested in power per se. They pursue power because they ‘cannot assure the power and means