

The Bending World, a Bent World
Supernatural Power and Its Political Implications

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Donald Trump revealed himself as the world’s most powerful fire-manipulating sorcerer on January 6, 2021. Marching with his fervent supporters towards the United States Capitol, where the joint session of Congress was assembling to formalize Joe Biden’s victory over the incumbent president in the November 2020 election, Trump proclaimed: “The corrupt Democrats and the treacherous RINOs [Republicans-in-name-only]—they’ve left me no choice. I didn’t want to scare you with my TREMENDOUS fire sorcery. I just wanted to rule with my charisma, my brilliance. But now you’ve left me no choice. Now I have to take it back myself.”

“BURN THEM ALL! BURN THEM ALL!” cheered his followers.

Grinning, Trump waved his hand, flames flickering in his palms. Blue lightnings shot into the Capitol, where temperature rose rapidly. Live broadcast on national television, panicking legislators inside the building screamed for help, cursed, begged, their faces twisting under increasingly excruciating pain.

The above scenario didn’t really happen—and wouldn’t have happened in our world anyway. According to our best scientific theories (and their underlying naturalist worldview), sorceries are simply incompatible with, and precluded by, the fundamental laws of nature. Admittedly, not everyone embraces the naturalist worldview; in fact, a large number of people—especially outside of academia—continue to believe in sorceries, or other sorts of “supernatural” powers, magic, and miracles that are out of science’s

reach. Regardless, even if you are a believer in naturalism and disbeliever in sorceries, you can still *imagine* a world where sorceries are real and where the above scenario could have happened.

The genre of fantasy offers a plenitude of such worlds, including the universe where the stories of our beloved animated television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender (ATLA)* and *The Legend of Korra (LOK)* take place. In that universe—let’s call it the Bending World—some people (“benders”) are endowed with telekinetic superpowers to maneuver surrounding objects without physical interaction, by mentally steering (“bending”) one of the four classical “elements of nature” composing the objects: air, fire, water, and earth. So, it’s entirely possible that someone like Donald Trump would turn out to be the world’s most powerful firebender and single-handedly orchestrate a live-televised congressional massacre, right?

But wait, you might ask, does it *even make sense* to assume that things like Congress, federal elections, the Electoral College and so on would still exist in the Bending World? After all, in a world where the fundamental laws of nature are radically different from those of our world, shouldn’t the fundamental conditions and manifestations of politics be radically different too? That, of course, is not to deny that political bodies familiar to us are depicted in *ATLA* and *LOK*: tribes, monarchies, autonomous townships, city-states, loose federations, colonial empires, and democracies. Despite those familiar depictions, however, it’s worth contemplating how the existence of supernatural power might fundamentally alter the norms and rationales of politics—and how it might in turn help us better understand our own political reality.

Might Is Right, Magnified

In a typical fantasy universe, distribution of supernatural capacities across the population is extremely unequal. The Bending World is no exception. A minority of people are born benders, while the majority are born nonbenders. Among benders, a few of them are much more powerful than the rest. Fire Lord Ozai, the “big boss” in *ATLA*, may burn a town to the ground with a single stroke of firebending, whereas numerous “ordinary” firebenders can only bend fire to light candles or do simple tricks (*ATLA*, “[The Deserter](#)”). Furthermore, while most benders can only bend one element, there is a successive lineage of

rare benders (the “avatars”) who can bend all four elements and who, from a certain point on, can also master the art of bending “life energy”, a mysterious component of the universe more elemental than the four elements (*ATLA*, “Sozin’s Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang”).

Given the staggering disparities in bending ability, the handful few at the top of the superpower hierarchy—such as the avatars and their archenemies—are practically immune from almost all ordinary and “low-level bending” attacks. To be sure, they are still human beings, and can be defeated or killed by “lesser” benders and nonbenders at the right moment or with the right method: for example, just like other firebenders, Fire Lord Ozai would lose his power temporarily during solar eclipses (*ATLA*, “The Day of Black Sun, Part 2: The Eclipse”); and Ty Lee, a skilled martial artist nonbender, can defeat powerful benders in close combat via “*qi*-blocking,” a technique inspired by the notion of *dianxue* (“vital-point striking,” sometimes translated as “touch-of-death”) popularized in Chinese martial art novels and movies. Nonetheless, the larger point stands: in the Bending World, it is almost impossible for those who are supernaturally “weak” to physically harm, let alone kill, the few who are “strong.”

This is a stark contrast to our world. Granted, individual physical strength varies in our world too. But as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), an English philosopher widely regarded as one of the founders of modern political thought, famously remarked in his book *Leviathan*, humans are relatively “equal in the faculties of body and mind,” in the sense that “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself.”¹ Hobbes further argued that a common knowledge of this fact is crucial to (hypothetically) motivating all of us, the strong and the weak alike, to leave the anarchical “state of nature” that is permeated with the constant fear of being backstabbed to violent death by our neighbors, and to enter a binding “social contract” that forms a “political society” and authorizes a government to adjudicate disputes and enforce law and order.

The specifics of Hobbes’s social contract theory have been contested by later philosophers, especially his insistence that extremely draconian restrictions on individual rights and civil liberties are the

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 76-77.

(rational) price to pay for averting the state of nature. Nonetheless, his core insight that *relatively limited* natural (or supernatural) inequality such as in physical strength (or in deadly superpower) constitutes a basic condition for politics in our world remains illuminating. If that condition changed drastically, our political calculations, behaviors, and expectations would likely have changed too, and so would political norms, visions, and possibilities.

In a world where some people possess deadly superpower while others don't, it'd be natural to expect tensions between those two groups. Those without superpower would understandably be wary of those having it, and under certain circumstances may be able (and may decide) to ostracize the latter from the society. This is indeed a recurring theme across superhero stories. For example, at the outset of the animated film *The Incredibles* (2004), the "supers" were forced to abandon their exploits and go into hiding because public opinion had turned against them over the collateral damages caused by their crime-fighting. In the Bending World, nonbenders similarly fear, envy and resent benders, sentiments that would culminate in the Anti-bending Revolution during Avatar Korra's time (we will come back to this later).

But such collective ostracism is possible only when the gap in strength between the two groups is realistically surmountable. After all, how can nonbenders ostracize a ruthless Fire Lord if they cannot defeat him as a group? Understandably, when inequality in (super)power passes a certain threshold, most people would simply internalize the conditions and norms of supernatural hierarchy, and adapt to it by being resigned and submissive to the rule of the supernaturally mightiest.

In the meantime, the ruling class's calculations and behaviors would also change. For one thing, Hobbes's abovementioned remark—"the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest"—cannot be more apt when it comes to real-world politicians: however powerful they are politically, their lives can easily be deprived through targeted assassinations (such as American President John F. Kennedy), by disgruntled bodyguards (such as Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi), or in military coups (such as Chilean President Salvador Allende). In response, various norms, institutions, and strategies have been developed to minimize such danger (as well as other headaches) throughout history—for instance: using patronage or "spoils" to buy the loyalty of security forces; strengthening civilian control of the military; defusing, or

exploiting, tensions among ethnic and religious groups; mythologizing the ruling household through legends of divine blessing; regularizing competitive election as a peaceful venue for challenging incumbent politicians; and, above all, forging ruling coalitions and negotiating policy consensuses among relevant stakeholders. Now, imagine a supreme ruler whose supernatural power far surpasses those of their subordinates and subjects, so much so that any attempt at their assassination or disposal is but futile. Would the supreme ruler still care to, say, bargain with those inferior in (super)power?

Granted, no bender appears to be (super)powerful enough to subdue all other benders at once, and political assassinations do occur in the Bending World.² Still, political practices there are heavily shaped by the relative strengths of rulers *as benders*. Compare, say, Earth Kingdom politics with Fire Nation politics. The Earth Kingdom has an expansive spy network (the Dai Li) within the walls of its capital city Ba Sing Se, partly because most monarchs of the Earth Kingdom are not powerful enough benders themselves, and have to coalesce with the Dai Li to secure monarchical control over the capital. The supernaturally weakest among the monarchs, such as Earth King Kuei, would even become mere figureheads manipulated by the Dai Li (*ATLA*, “City of Walls and Secrets”). By contrast, even though Fire Lord Ozai needs ministers and generals to carry out his war plans, he is not depicted as needing to make compromises with them (they are mere executors of his orders), let alone other interest groups such as business owners, local elites, and commoners. Rather, like Prince Zuko and General Iroh, those who dare to confront the Fire Lord would be purged and persecuted at his will.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), who narrowly escaped Nazi persecutions in the 1930s, contended that genuinely *political* power is squarely incompatible with *violence*. For Arendt, politics is the process of exercising—and contesting the exercise of—the collective power of decision-making by members of a community, whereas violence is imposing one’s arbitrary will on others through forceful means.³ Violence therefore circumvents—and eradicates—politics. As the logic of “might is right” is

² For example, as is implied in *ATLA*, “Zuko Alone” (and confirmed in spin-off graphic novel *The Search*), Ozai and his wife Ursa conspired to poison his ageing father, then-Fire Lord Azulon.

³ Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 155.

significantly magnified in the Bending World, its politics is even more threatened by violence than ours. Amidst Sozin's Comet's centenary passing across the upper atmosphere of the planet, Ozai's firebending power reaches its height. After coronating himself as the Phoenix King, he proclaims: "It's time for this world to end in fire, and for a new world to be born from the ashes!" (*ATLA*, "Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters") In essence, what he wants is a world ruled solely on the basis of violence and terror—a world *devoid of politics*, as Arendt would say.

Energybender Is Coming to Town

In a world where might-is-right is supernaturally exacerbated, how can sheer (super)power—and its threats of violence and terror—be resisted and tamed? More specifically, if Avatar Aang's pacifism impedes him from dueling the comet-enhanced Phoenix King (*ATLA*, "Sozin's Comet, Part 1: The Phoenix King"), what hope is there for humankind?

To solve this conundrum, *ATLA* introduces (one might say, *has to* introduce) a previously unknown type of bending towards the very end of the storyline: energybending. Taught to Aang by the ancient, gigantic, and wise Lion Turtle, energybending overturns the notion (assumed up until that point of story) that the Bending World consists of precisely four "elements of nature," each subject to a corresponding art of bending. Indeed, it turns out that "life energy" is so much more elemental than the four elements that one who masters energybending can simply "confiscate" another bender's ability to bend, however strong it may be, by taking away the latter's life energy (without killing them). Ozai is thereby defeated—and permanently "disarmed," becoming a nonbender. In terms of storytelling, energybending is no doubt a *deus ex machina* (a Latin phrase meaning "god out of the machine"): a plot device whereby a seemingly unsolvable problem in a story is suddenly and abruptly resolved by an unexpected and improbable occurrence.

Anyways, Aang the energybender puts a stop to Ozai's plan for world domination. But what if, you might wonder, future bad guys master the invincible art of energybending? Who's going to stop their evil

plans, then? Don't worry! Not only does this *deus ex machina* subvert the four-element cosmology, but it's also embedded with a "moral self-destruct" feature, so to speak. The power of bended energy, according to the Lion Turtle, can only be harnessed and wielded by those of "true heart" and "true mind":

The true mind can weather all the lies and illusions without being lost. The true heart can touch the poison of hatred without being harmed. Since beginning-less time, darkness thrives in the void, but always yields to purifying light. ... In the era before the Avatar, we bent not the elements but the energy within ourselves. To bend another's energy, your own spirit must be unbendable or you will be corrupted and destroyed. (*ATLA*, "Sozin's Comet, Part 2: The Old Masters"; "Sozin's Comet, Part 4: Avatar Aang")

Thanks to their purity, energybenders simply can't—hence won't—do evil, whereas those of "bendable" spirit won't be able to master the art of energybending in the first place. Problem solved.

This surely isn't how things work in our naturalist world. It'd be a non-starter to expect, say, real-world nuclear weapons to have such built-in moral self-destruct features that only the "truly good guys" can initiate them, while a "bad guy" who attempts to do so will evaporate into a puff of smoke the moment they reach for the button. But this is more than just nuclear weapons or other scary worldly forces versus moralized superpowers; instead, it should be seen more generally as a metaphor for how crucial characteristics of naturalistic political power, and of naturalistic politics, might get lost in supernatural settings.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," taunted British politician Lord Acton (1834-1902).⁴ There is always a danger of abuse to power; that is why it is important in politics to have proper mechanisms of "taming" it, such as democratic elections, checks-and-balances and other accountability measures. By contrast, because energybending—the invincible super-duper power—does

⁴ John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton, "Letter to Bishop Creighton," in *Historical Essays and Studies*, eds. John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907), 504.

not, and cannot, corrupt the incorruptible few who can master its art in the first place, it is only natural that those incorruptible few become the ultimate guardians of the world, fending off conspiracies and aggressions from various directions. They are not and, let's face it, *should not* be held accountable to anyone else; for who can hold them accountable more effectively than the very fact—the unexplained and probably unexplainable law of (super)nature, written perhaps by some higher being(s) than we mortals—that energybending has a built-in self-destruct safety device, such that an (aspiring) energybender will, by themselves, succumb to the severe adverse impacts of energybending as a punishment if their moral conscience ever goes awry?

This line of thinking is reminiscent of an ancient doctrine called “the divine right of kings,” variations of which could be found across cultures. It asserts that monarchs derived their authority from some higher supernatural being(s)—God, Heaven, or whatever—and therefore could not be held accountable for their (ab)uses of political power by any earthly authority such as a parliament, the judiciary or the electorate. If a monarch *really* did something wrong, then the superintending higher being would certainly do something to condemn or punish the ruler: an unforgiving oracle through priests; an instance of *zaiyi* (“natural disasters or abnormalities” that signal heavenly grievances, according to traditional Chinese political thought); a sudden disappearance of the monarch’s energybending ability; and so on. According to the naturalist worldview, however, none of those supernatural interventions is available. The sources of political legitimacy cannot be traced to divine ordinances; and the accountability of political power cannot rely on miraculous events or mechanisms that are beyond earthly control by the people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), one of the assassinated leaders of the American civil rights movement, warned us that “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”⁵ Luckily, as an energybender, Aang *can't* be an oppressor. Rather than becoming a “divine king” himself after Ozai’s defeat, Aang remains a “passive guardian” of the world, so to speak, who keeps a watchful eye on potential supervillains or other existential threats to human society, but does not seek or

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (April 16, 1963), available at https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

assert political authority over others. Thereby, he opens up rooms of political participation and contestation for ordinary folks. Indeed, the Aang gang would soon appreciate Arendt's aforementioned insight that politics begins where violence ends: if Aang refuses to be another Ozai who, by threatening violence, imposes his decisions upon others, then everyone would, in the face of policy disagreements,⁶ have to (and have the chance to) sit down, talk, persuade, and reach consensuses or compromises.

A Spectre Is Haunting the Bending World

So, the passive guardianship of an uncorruptible energybender (unavailable in a naturalist world) keeps potential superpowerful autocrats at bay without engulfing politics through the energybender's own rule. Yet looming over this apparent utopia are two key settings of the Bending World that periodically agitate its politics worldwide: the reincarnation of the Avatar, and the stark (super)natural inequality between benders and nonbenders. Maybe with the presence of Aang the energybender and his friends, no bender would dare make trouble and bully nonbenders. But surely Aang won't live forever, right? What if he is gone, the new Avatar is too young to be of help, the art of energybending is once again lost and no one is watching nonbenders' back against powerful and aggressive benders?

The reincarnation of the Avatar can be seen as an instance of the more general problem of leadership succession (and power transfer), which concerns both our world and the Bending World. When old leaders retire or die, they leave behind power vacuums that the politically ambitious are eager to fill; reliable processes and institutions must be in place to ensure peaceful successions and transfers of power. For example, monarchies typically determine the order of succession based on primogeniture (the right of the firstborn legitimate child to inherit the parent's title or estate), whereas democracies transfer political office via popular election. Local and national polities in the Bending World have their own rules of

⁶ For example, immediately after the war, disputes erupt about the future of the Fire Nation colonies across the Earth Kingdom (see spin-off graphic novel *The Promise*). Many colonizers have settled there for two or three generations, intermarried with local Earth Kingdom residents, and never been to the Fire Nation in their lives—should they be relocated to the Fire Nation, as part of the postwar decolonization process?

succession, too; but the existence of a supernatural guardian of world peace—the Avatar—means that there is an additional layer of recurring power vacuums, unfolded every time the Avatar dies and reincarnates in a baby. The Hundred Year War, for example, endured insofar as Avatar Roku’s successor Aang remained a child yet to master all four bending arts. Likewise, the post-Aang world is doomed to have another huge political crisis.

Moreover, because the art of energybending has to be learned, rather than passing on automatically to the new Avatar, the succession of the Avatar this time not only creates a *power* vacuum, but also a *moral* vacuum: unlike Aang the energybender, his successor Avatar Korra—before she masters energybending—cannot be presumed “true-minded” and “true-hearted” by the people. And if even the Avatar—the greatest bender—cannot be trusted, how can nonbenders trust benders as a group, who by (super)nature are much more powerful than nonbenders? Though a general strike by the nonbender majority against the bender minority is more or less inevitable in the Bending World given its stark supernatural inequality, the timing of such a strike very much depends on the occurrence of such a moral vacuum, made possible by the reemergence of the awesomely pure-spirited art of energybending, destined to be lost again (temporarily at least) following the Avatar’s reincarnation.

Hence comes the Anti-bending Revolution, instigated by the Equalists and their scheming, charismatic leader Amon (*LOK*, “Welcome to Republic City”). A top-notch bloodbender disguised as a nonbender, Amon believes—as do other nonbender Equalists—that it’s unjust for benders to possess supernatural advantages over nonbenders and that, overall, bending causes far more harm and suffering than good. In order to “cleanse” bending from the world, the Equalists would kidnap benders, especially children, and use Amon’s bloodbending technique to sever (“de-bend”) the kidnapped benders’ bending abilities (unbeknownst to them, such severance could be reversed through energybending, as is explained in *LOK*, “Endgame”).

There surely is a lot to abhor about the Equalists’ *tactics*: the kidnappings, the unconsented severances, and the ways in which they stir up hatred and violence against bender minorities among nonbender majorities. But is their *cause*—elimination of bending—misguided too?

As the proverb goes, the devil is in the detail. Given what we've known (and not known) about the Bending World, there is good reason to suspect that, even if all current benders were "de-bended" (and there were no energybender around to heal them), future benders would just keep being born in the world. In that case, Amon would never have the luxury to say, "pew, I'm finally done with my job! I shall now de-bend myself—the last bender in the world—and retire and sit in safety under my own vine and fig tree." Instead, he would have to assume the role of supreme guardian for life, performing bloodbending on every newborn bender. What's worse, he really couldn't de-bend *everyone*—because he would need to train some young bloodbender(s), so that upon his death he could pick a successor to carry on the torch of de-bending (most of the) future newborn benders. Now that bloodbending doesn't have a "moral self-destruct" mechanism akin to energybending, who is to say no future Supreme De-bender would ever become a despotic Phoenix King?

The Communist Manifesto, an 1848 pamphlet penned by German philosophers Karl Marx (1848-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), opens with a memorable line: "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of communism."⁷ By contrast, we may say a spookier spectre is haunting the Bending World—the spectre of Equalism. While economic inequality and other social problems also exist in that world (indeed, staggering wealth gaps and class oppressions are portrayed throughout the series), the supernatural inequality between benders and nonbenders poses a political challenge both unique and uniquely existential.

Unlike wealth, bending ability—as a super(natural) endowment—is itself *non-redistributable*: whereas we can reduce economic inequality by taxing the rich and transferring part of their wealth to the poor, we can't simply divide up a bender's bending ability and give half of it to a nonbender, making them equal benders to each other. Wealth may be retained in the absence of wealth gaps, but bending has to be *eliminated altogether* if supernatural equality is the goal. Meanwhile, unlike similarly non-redistributable *natural* endowments (such as intelligence, beauty, height, physical strength and so on), bending ability is too powerful and potentially destructive a trait to leave be. Someone who believes good-looking people

⁷ Robert Tucker, ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), 473.

enjoy unfair advantages might propose, say, a “beauty tax” to neutralize said advantages, but certainly nobody would think it makes sense to *disfigure* everyone and eliminate beauty itself. After all, beauty doesn’t kill. Bending does.

That’s why the spectre of Equalism will continue to haunt the Bending World long after Amon and his Equalist followers have been defeated, and long after the United Republic of Nations has, in the wake of the Anti-bending Revolution, transitioned from an oligarchic federation ruled by the non-elected United Republic Council to a democracy with regular and competitive presidential elections (*LOK*, “Rebel Spirit”). As long as there are benders and nonbenders, the former’s bullying of the latter will abound, giving rise to the latter’s fear and hatred of the former. Meanwhile, benders’ supernatural advantages will certainly intersect with and reinforce class stratification and oppression, as well as erode political equality in the formally democratic United Republic of Nations. In time, democracy will crumble in the face of persistent supernatural inequality—whether giving way to another zealous experiment in support of watchful bloodbending “de-benders,” or being overthrown by a sore loser of presidential election who happens to be the most powerful bender in the world.

All in all, the Bending World is—much more so than ours—a bent world. A world premised on startling inequality in supernatural power, which inescapably conditions and haunts its politics, it is roundly bent towards startling political inequality, oppression, and violence. True, our naturalist world faces those challenges too. But instead of relying on some invincible and incorruptible energybender, we can, and must, make the world better through human endeavor: our own endeavor.