

LAW 38: The Power of Conformity and Independent Thinking

Law 38 from Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power* underscores the importance of balancing independent thinking with outward conformity to avoid unnecessary hostility or isolation. The law warns that openly displaying one's uniqueness or unconventional beliefs can provoke resentment, suspicion, or even direct opposition from those who feel threatened by non-conformity. Greene argues that while individuality is valuable, it is often wiser to mask personal views, sharing them only with those who are receptive and trustworthy, rather than confronting the prevailing norms directly.

The chapter presents the historical example of Pausanias, a Spartan general whose downfall serves as a cautionary tale of blatant non-conformity. After his military successes, Pausanias developed an admiration for Persian customs and openly adopted their luxurious lifestyle, disregarding the austere values of Spartan society. His extravagance and visible defiance of Spartan norms led to widespread mistrust, and his peers eventually accused him of treason, leading to his disgrace and death. This example illustrates how standing out too boldly in a rigid society can lead to alienation and even destruction.

In contrast, Tommaso Campanella, a philosopher during the Spanish Inquisition, provides an example of strategic conformity as a means of survival. Rather than openly defying the Church, he subtly embedded his radical ideas within writings that outwardly appeared to align with accepted doctrines. By maintaining a public facade of obedience while secretly preserving his independent thought, Campanella managed to evade execution and continue influencing intellectual discourse long after his time. His approach highlights how navigating societal restrictions with subtlety can be far more effective than open rebellion.

Greene argues that discretion and adaptability are essential when dealing with societal expectations. Those who blend in while privately fostering their unique perspectives are more likely to preserve their influence and gradually shift perceptions over time. Individuals who fail to recognize this reality risk unnecessary struggles, as society often resists sudden change and punishes those who attempt to disrupt its order too openly. The key takeaway is that power is not only about intelligence or originality but also about understanding when and how to express those qualities effectively.

Another key point of the law is its insight into human psychology, particularly the envy and suspicion that arise when someone stands out too much. People tend to be wary of those who appear too different, as societal cohesion is often built upon shared norms and expectations. By outwardly conforming to these expectations, an individual can avoid unwanted scrutiny while still maneuvering toward their ultimate goals. Greene suggests that it is not deceitful to blend in—it is strategic, ensuring that one can work within a system without becoming a target.

The chapter also draws parallels to modern society, where successful figures often temper their most radical views to gain acceptance before introducing more transformative ideas. Innovators, business leaders, and politicians frequently present themselves in a manner that aligns with mainstream expectations, only gradually implementing their true vision once they have secured a position of influence. For example, historical figures such as Galileo Galilei initially presented their findings in ways that were palatable to the authorities of the time, allowing their revolutionary ideas to spread without immediate backlash.

This law does not advocate suppressing personal beliefs or compromising one's identity; rather, it advises a tactical approach to self-expression. Greene suggests that those who want to make an impact should first observe the social climate, identify allies, and strategically introduce their ideas in a manner that minimizes resistance. Change is best introduced subtly, rather than through direct confrontation, which often results in defensive reactions rather than progress.

Ultimately, Law 38 teaches that independent thinking must be paired with social awareness. Those who understand the value of appearing to conform while maintaining their true beliefs in private are more likely to succeed than those who openly challenge convention. In a world that often punishes non-conformity, blending in while carefully selecting moments to express one's true self is a powerful strategy for maintaining both influence and personal integrity.

