A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF POWER: AN INTERACTIONIST REVELATION OF ITS MORAL NATURE *

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Abstract

It is argued that power is best understood as a moral category rather than as a causal category for purposes of social analysis. Since the exercise of power implies the violation of preferences, it is a moral problem which requires the identification of a responsible party for remedy. If a social analysis does not make responsible actors and relevant moralities manifest, the analysis emasculates the fundamental moral resources available to the party over whom power is exercised. Concepts of power involving closed, substituted, simultaneous, and negotiated moral universes are examined from this perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of power begins in our common sense, everyday usage. People and institutions are described as powerful when they get their way. Those who lose out try to figure out how those who dominate can be resisted. Those who dominate try to figure out how to keep from being resisted. Some uses of power are seen as legitimate. Some are seen as coercive.

Historically, social thinkers have explored the common sense concepts of power to discover the realities behind the usage. For example, concepts of power before the nineteenth century focused on the individual in the process of gaining what he or she desired (Weinstein 1971). In this period, Hobbes (1971) defined power as the present means to some future apparent good. Here, a person has power to the extent that he or she has resources such as wealth, reputation, cunning, strength, and weapons. The tradition of focusing on the individual is also reflected in Weber's (1978) definition of power: power is the chance of a person to realize his or her own will in a social action even against the resistance of others.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concepts of power used by social thinkers began to reflect a new taken-for-granted reality. Power was seen as inhering fundamentally in institutions rather than in people. Examples of this are seen in concepts of power inherent in Marx's (Tucker 1978) concept of a mode of production and in Durkheim's (1984) idea of solidarity based on the division of labor. Additionally, the concept of a person as an important factor in understand-

ing social life began to vanish. This can be seen in Durkheim's (1982) notion of social facts as explanation for social behavior.

In the twentieth century, following the lead of the pragmatist and the phenomenologist, taken-for-granted notions began to be approached as problematic. Following what has come to be known as the Thomas theorem –if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences– power has been studied in terms of how its perception is constructed in interaction (Becker 1975; Brown 1983; Collins 1982; Douglas 1975; Garfinkel 1956; Kitahara 1986; Rosen 1985; Scheff 1975; Wasielewski 1985; Watson 1978).

While one could examine power by placing the concept in its historical context and thereby construct an understanding of how it developed, most of the works consulted for this paper treat concepts of power as competing paradigms. Much time is spent criticizing notions of power for what they miss or overlook. At the heart of this quest is the hope for an unassailable understanding of power in terms of causality. The purpose of this paper is, first, to demonstrate that trying to understand power from the standpoint of causality is fundamentally doomed. This will be done by demonstrating that power is ubiquitous and that any sense of causality is dependent on the framing of change and on the search for causes for change within that frame. Second, it will be demonstrated that power if fundamentally a moral category. Furthermore it will be demonstrated that some concepts of power emasculate the fundamental moral nature of the term and consequently render it useless in the everyday world of individual action.

THE DOOMED SEARCH FOR POWER IN TERMS OF CAUSALITY

Let us begin by examining how various concepts of power have been framed. Consider Weber's concept of power defined above. One knows that power has been exercised when one person has one preference which is materialized over the preference of another. While Weber does not require resistance to be present, Berndtson (1970) has noted that power is apprehended only in a situation in which resistance is present. Now, how is one to determine what caused one person to prevail over another?

Weber identified charisma, the unique qualities that people attribute to a leader, as one source of power. Here, if one frames the issue of cause in essentialist terms, one explores the character of the leader for causes. If one frames the issue of cause in terms of norms and values of institutions (Collins 1982), one explores norms and values in an institution that define what characteristics a charismatic leader must have. If one frames the issue in terms of how one uses framing rules in social interaction (Wasielewski 1985), one explores the interaction process of framing rules used to gain legitimacy in interaction.

In addition, Weber identified tradition and rationality as grounds for commanding compliance. Again, framing the issue of cause in terms of norms and values leads to a search for rules that are the cause. And

again, if one shifts to an interactionist frame, one finds interactionist causes. For example, Douglas (1975) documented how gaps exist between supposed shared values and the specific nature of situations such that individuals must continually negotiate the meaning of norms and values in the process of interaction.

Hunter (1953) identified status as yet another cause for the situation of one person prevailing over another in the face of resistance. By assuming that power was inherent in social status, Hunter could then explore how people with these factors caused others to act in the face of resistance. Furthermore, he could explore how power was distributed by looking at the distribution of social status. But, if one changes the frame of examination, as did Garfinkel (1956), one can observe the acts by which one can successfully degrade another's social status. Thus social structure seems to be continually created by interaction.

Resources have also been identified as a tool of power. If one frames a study in terms of the use of resources by organizations to secure compliance from others (Clark 1968; Dahl 1960; Hawley, Wirt 1968; Murphy1988), one explores the relations between the distribution of resources among actors in institutions and among institutions and observes how those resources are used to gain compliance. Yet if one shifts the frame to interaction (Kitahara 1986), one can see how resources are perceived resources and therefore depend on how their perception is constructed.

While the above is not an exhaustive review of literature on the concept of power, it does reveal that any search for causality in terms of power changes with every change in the way the concept is framed and with every level of social phenomenon to which the concept is applied. The way that most social scientists treat this state of affairs is by submitting to the unique solution aspect of the concept of truth in logic and then by sorting out concepts and levels with data and reasoning to find the right answer. Yet the phenomenological nature of power may not permit one to find the right answer one so fervently seeks.

First, consider Ernest Becker's (1975) analysis of demeanor and deference. He pointed out that the verbal context of action gives the possibility of the direct exercise of power over others. Here, every time one person addresses another, the situation changes and requires a response from the one being addressed. Additionally, if one analyzes interactions, one can document actions and responses, but the question of power in terms of cause is not possible to ask beyond a person deciding to start some line of action.

Second, consider Arthur Berndtson's (1970) phenomenological analysis of the concept of power. One does not know power except as one observes change and infers power as a source of change. Change is known by its novel character. An enduring being surmounts change from moment to moment. Thus, the appearance of permanence is created by overcoming the novel from moment to moment. Additionally power is not open to direct inspection. It can only be apprehended through a situation of resistance.

Finally, power has no antecedent and therefore is a self-caused cause.

From Becker's and Berndtson's analyses, one can seriously entertain the possibility that power is ubiquitous. Second, one can ask questions about causes up to a point. Then, the question no longer has an answer. It is what Toulmin called a limiting question:

> ...the way of answering suggested by the form of words employed will never completely satisfy the questioner, so that he continues to ask the question even after the resources of the apparent mode of reasoning have been exhausted. (1970:205)

The words employed to ask the limiting question and the modes of reasoning that are exhausted are those of the frame or concept of power used. Thus we look at a ubiquitous phenomenon with a frame that makes some things important and ignores others (Burke 1954). To inquire into the truth of any frame is to ignore most of that which is everywhere with a frame which cannot ask beyond itself. Thus, any attempt to compare frames, or notions of power, to find the unique answer about cause with respect to power is doomed to failure.

POWER AS A MORAL CATEGORY

Even though power is ubiquitous and power as a cause is an unanswerable question, the use of the term power by the common person and by the social scientist is *not* ubiquitous, and the question of power as a cause is treated as if it were answerable. In what kind of situation is the term power applied? And what is a person doing when applying the term?

If one returns to Hobbes' definition of power, one finds that, in applying the term power to a situation in which one uses some source to overcome resistance, a person must attend to the propriety of the uses of particular means to overcome resistance in terms of the apparent good to be achieved. If one returns to Weber's definition of power, one finds a situation in which one party is appealing to another party to compel them to obey. Here, there must be some basis for accepting the command, such as tradition, rationality, or the charismatic nature of the commander. Hawley and Wirt (1968) also included the offer of payoffs and the threat of inflicting costs as appeals to induce compliance.

When one applies the term power to institutions, people vanish. Actually they do not vanish, but responsibility for acts is not easily attached to people. The consequences of not being able to attach responsibility to people such that their behavior can be challenged can be seen in Richard Edwards' (1984) historical analysis of the forms of control in the labor process. Edwards defined a system of control as a process by which a work task is directed, evaluated, and rewarded or disciplined. A simple control system consists of a boss exercising power openly and personally. Here, responsibility between the boss and the worker is direct and definable. If a worker does not like how the boss conducts

one of the three tasks of control, assigning responsibility for how those control tasks are done is possible. As the scale of industry increased, the task of directing work was taken over by an assembly line. Technical control removes the directing of work from the interpersonal context. If a worker does not like how the machine directs work, to whom and how is responsibility for this attached? Finally, the tasks of evaluation, reward, and discipline were carried out through elaborate, negotiated rules between the management of labor and the management of industry. At last, the ability to define a responsible party of deciding how work gets direct, evaluated, and rewarded becomes almost nil.

Just as the actions of management described by Edwards substituted mechanisms and rules as the responsible parties of the exercise of power into the definition of the situation, so have sociologist constructed understandings of power which do the same thing. For example when Clark (1968) and Collins (1982) argue that people can exercise power only within the norms and values of the institution of which they are a part, those over whom power has been exercised are left arguing over the rules. When Murphy (1988) argues that power consists of the ability to constrain and the ability to profit from without defining who is constraining and who is profiting, we are left in the same position as Edwards' assembly line workers facing a machine. Although Becker (1975) deals with a situation in which an individual exercises power in an interpersonal situation, his focus is on the use of rituals which create a context of action and an expectation of a particular response. While an actor who could be responsible for exercising power is a part of the scene, the ritual defines the situation and leaves the person over whom power is being exercised through the ritual dealing with the rules and mechanisms of the ritual. Thus, an interaction which does not include the notion of actor in the definition of a situation hides the actor involved in the exercise of power.

Now consider the consequences of moving from the use of power in institutional terms to the use of power in personal and political terms. In studying clients and public service bureaucracies, Fainstein and Fainstein (1974) found that clients tended to accept the rules which bureaucracies present to them and the right of social workers to interpret the rules. Here, when people did not qualify for help, they were angry but had no way to define who was responsible except the institution. Yet when some clients redefied case workers as public servants who were supposed to be responsive to the public, they defined the case workers as responsible and the will of the people –themselves– and not the institution as having the right to decide who should get help. Demands of the clients then began to be met.

C. Wright Mills (1959) saw that how a sociologist analyzes power has an effect on how people see the propriety of the power arrangement analyzed. The sociologist's work justifies, criticizes, or distracts attention away from the current structural realities of power. Using this insight, Mills (1956) compared the mass society controlled

by the power elite with the social structure necessary for democracy in order to debunk the current social structure. Yet, he conducted his analysis in the taken-for-granted notion of power as an institutional structure. Ironically, Mills saw that it was important to study the structure of society to identify the actors who were responsible for the way things are. Yet, the very notion of power as being rooted in structures by in large absolves any found actors from responsibility.

If one asks in what kind of situation is the term power applied, a look at the notions of power reviewed reveals that it is applied to situations in which some party or arrangement violates the preferences of some other part while the violated party is resisting. Such violations require appropriate justifications if they are to be accepted. If the violated party does not accept the justifications offered, the violated party has a weapon of redressing an appeal to others in terms of justice and responsibility. Both elements are important. Without appropriately framing the violation as unjust, appeals for help will not be accepted. Without defining a responsible party, further action is not possible.

Yet definitions of situations which include actors to whom responsibility could be assigned for the exercise of power do not bring those actors to the front of the situation in the same way. Consider the situation of the actor exercising power in the context of what Scheff (1975) calls absolute responsibility or of what Brown (1983) calls myth. Here, an actor exercises power by using justifications held to be the only possible in the situation. The party over whom power is exercised has the possibility of appealing to the justifications defining the situation to object to the exercise of power and to hold the actor exercising power responsible. Let us call this definition of the situation one of a closed moral universe.

Secondly, Fainstein and Fainstein's welfare recipients were confronted with a situation in which an actor –the social worker– could be held responsible. But the social workers, as in the situation of a closed moral universe, appealed to what they held to be the only justification possible for their exercise of power. The welfare recipients did not try to hold the social workers accountable in terms of the welfare rules. Instead, they substituted a new definition of a closed moral universe into the situation –representative democracy– which redefined the rules of appeal in their favor. Let us call this situation one of a substituted moral universe.

Third, Goffman (1967) has demonstrated that the maintenance of face is a condition of interaction. Thus in the midst of exercising power with appeals to various moral universes, actors are also engaged in gaining face, saving face, and depreciating others. At any one time, there are simultaneous moral universes being engaged in the exercise of power. Yet, as Schutz (1967) notes, a person can attend to only one of these moral universes at a time. The results of this can be seen in Shaw's (1982) analysis of the exercise of the authority in Christian scripture. Shaw points out that human speakers in scripture can personally benefit by

appealing to divine will. If the persons involved in such an exercise of power attend to the appeal to divine will, the actor making the appeal will vanish in terms of agency and responsibility, but if one attends to how the person using divine speech will benefit from it, an agent appears and a new range of justifications to counter the exercise of power becomes available.

Finally, a fourth approach to a definition of a situation of power involving an identified actor is suggested by Scheff and Brown. In contrast with myth, which makes contingent choice appear as necessity, Brown (1983) contends that seeing theories as metaphors for a given situation keeps the human agency of the origin of metaphors alive. In a similar fashion, Scheff (1975) counters the notion of absolute responsibility with the notion that responsibility is defined in interaction. Here, multiple realities are constructed side by side in the process of negotiation. The consequence of such definitions of the situation for the actors is noted by Scheff: When clients and professionals are aware that the situation is one of negotiated reality, clients gain more control over the resulting definition of the situation. In this definition of the situation –the negotiated moral universe– actors are most fully understood as such and can be held responsible. The moral universes to which actors appeal are more clearly seen as tools selected or constructed by actors in negotiation.

As one glances back, it was seen that the use of institutional and structural notions of power clearly emasculate the use of power as a moral category by making it difficult to define a situation as unjust and by making it difficult to identify a party responsible for the injustice. Now, let us examine these four notions of power that include an actor to whom responsibility for acts can be assigned to see how they either push the actor exercising power to the background behind the moral universe or pull the actor into the foreground where responsibility is visible.

In the situation of the closed moral universe, an actor can be defined as exercising power, but a situation can be defined as unjust only in terms used by the actor to exercise power. Thus, one is essentially in the situation of Edwards' bureaucratic control.

In the situation of a substituted moral universe, an actor can be defined as exercising power. The exercise of that power comes to be seen as problematic when a new closed moral universe is substituted for the one currently being used by the actor attempting to exercise power. Once the substitute moral universe is used to redefine the situation, the responsibility of the actor exercising power becomes clearer. The actor exercising power is choosing a morality rather than obeying one in the definition of the situation.

The situation of the simultaneous moral universe is similar to the substituted moral universe. By shifting attention from one aspect of a situation to another, a new view is gained of the actions of the actor who is attempting to exercise power, but instead of substituting one closed moral universe for another, one substitutes a personal moral universe for a public moral universe. One devalues lofty claims by

redefining the motives of the actor attempting to exercise power in terms of personal, individual interests. Here, the responsibility of the actor attempting to exercise power becomes even more visible because of personal motives make the violation of the preferences of others even more blatantly the act of the one exercising power.

Finally, the situation of the negotiated moral universe clearly places the actors in the exercise of power in the foreground. Here, the actors are not simply responding to moral universes; they are actively selecting or constructing moral universes in interaction. In so doing, the actor attempting to exercise power is manifestly responsible for such acts. Also, the one who is the object of power becomes visible as an active party. In a negotiated situation, the outcome rests on both parties. If one accepts the moral universe offered as justification for a violation of his or her preferences without countering, one bears some responsibility for the outcome. However, if one fails in one's attempts to resist the exercise of power in negotiating the situation, one clearly has an actor responsible for the violation of one's preferences and the morality used by the actor is more easily seen as relative and therefore questionable.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has not been to claim that concerns about power often discussed under the rubric of structure are not valid. As I sit writing this essay, I know that people are probably making decisions that will violate my preferences. I know that available options and resources affect my ability to deal with such violations.

But, I am saying that, in the everyday world of action, the exercise of power involves a violation of preferences. As such, it is a moral problem which requires the identification of a responsible party for remedy. Thus, the examination of social structure, resources, and options must be done for the purpose of making manifest responsible actors and relevant moralities. Otherwise, social analysis emasculates the fundamental moral resources available to the party over whom power has been exercised.

Finally, not all definitions of a situation which include actors and moralities equally bring the responsibility of the actor who exercises power to the foreground. In the situation of the closed moral universe, the commonly held morality used in the exercise of power hides the actor exercising power. In the situation of substituted moralities, actors use two different moralities as masks for acting. In the situation of simultaneous moralities, one actor will wrap himself or herself in a shared morality to condemn another actor defined as acting from a personal morality. Only in the negotiated moral universe do actors clearly stand responsible for their acts as they create and select moralities in the struggle for dominance.

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The Complexity of Modern Asymmetric Warfare
By Max G. Manwaring
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Today more than one hundred small, asymmetric, and revolutionary wars are being waged around the world. This book provides invaluable tools for fighting such wars by taking enemy perspectives into consideration. The third volume of a trilogy by Max G. Manwaring, it continues the arguments the author presented in Insurgency, Terrorism, and Crime and Gangs, Pseudo-Militaries, and Other Modern Mercenaries. Using case studies, Manwaring outlines vital survival lessons for leaders and organizations concerned with national security in our contemporary world.

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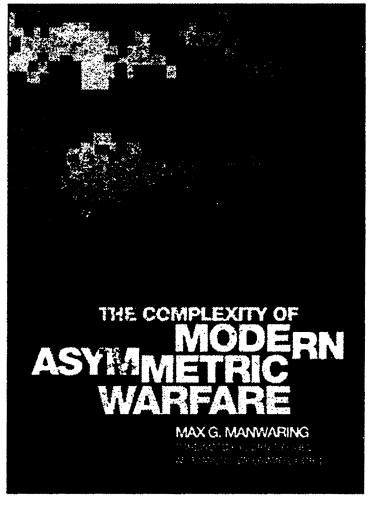

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