

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

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General discursive introduction: conceptions of power vary, apparent in popular and political culture.

30-40 years ago power was confined to the State

during the last 25 years, **discussions of power are in almost all aspects of life**

- e.g. op-ed article, "The Power Suntan" by Russell Baker
 - metaphor of sun tan as symbol of social power and prestige because a fresh tan means an August vacation. August vacations are more expensive, and those who can afford them are therefore more powerful
 - money = power as part of American culture
- **embedded cultural cues** in the article
 - pigmentocracy reversed: the darker are socially higher now
- makes fun and reveals prejudice/insensitivity to appearances as signs of power

resources for power are historically and culturally specific, meaning they are confined to specific locations, groups, and times

- fashion as power status
- uniform as an indication of status (status = position in hierarchy)
 - the uniform is amalgam of values, assets, and cultural capital, the signs and symbols that circulate
 - e.g. JP Morgan vs. Google – a suit and tie vs. jeans and a baseball hat – encodes values inherent to the particular subcultures associated with each firm

* status and hierarchy are not necessarily analogous

* position is not necessarily coterminous with power exercised

Frances Bacon: *Knowledge is power.*

Lord Acton: *Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

Therefore, knowledge corrupts and wisdom corrupts absolutely!

- The meaning of this syllogism depends on the **ambiguity of the word "power."** The conclusion may be valid (following the premise) and sound (accurately describing the empirical world) but it may seem a bit off, like it does here.

Power is one of the most contested terms in the social sciences. It has a confounding ethical sense and a deep theoretical ambivalence, and also a psychological/moral ambivalence like that in the modern world.

In the 20th century, there was a transition in American politics. The **imperial presidencies** of Johnson, JFK, and Nixon gave way to the more lax presidencies of Carter (who acted as if he had no power), Reagan (who delegated everything), and Clinton (who was checked by lobbyists and law suits). Two of these presidencies provide **evidence of how power corrupts**.

But in the 1970s, there were social movements pushing for popular participation, and democratic checks on public power, that decisions be subject to the will of the people, sometimes called the

cultural revolution or the rights revolution. The idea was to **change social norms, make them more diverse**, create alternatives to formal law and authority, encourage mediation and conciliation, and importantly, reform corporate management. Some of the proposals were enacted. The movement was in part a reaction to the imperial presidencies and their abuses of power, in part reactions to the Vietnam War, in part outgrowths of the civil rights movement and the women's movement that emerged at the time. Some examples of the institutional changes – police review boards were installed to check police violence, students were put on committees to participate in governing universities, etc.

In the 1990s, the corporations became more assertive, but they are beginning to be subject to scrutiny nowadays (e.g. the Sarbanes-Oxley law that mandates extensive corporate reporting). Although some of checks on organizational power have been institutionalized, become accepted, it appears that the **imperial presidency is on the rise again**. Paul Krugman and Maureen Down in their *New York Times* op-ed columns, write about how Bush is exercising power without legal authority or Congressional checks.

This begs the questions:

- Is it a historical cycle?
- Is there only a limited number of ways to exercise power?
- Is it only a back-and-forth between absolute power and checked power?

Power is also manifest in everyday interactions, not only the state.

Power is intentional and non-subjective and is a **duality** of human desire/will (what is called “agency”) **and** the cumulative consequences of institutions (what is called structure, i.e. the durable aggregate). (Agency and structure serve as the content and context of social science). Social life is not just additive; there is a level of aggregation that simply does *not* boil down to discrete human decisions.

Sometimes we are limited by our language – there are multiple meanings and interpretations. For example, institutions vs. organizations:

institutions – transcend any particular organization

- Economy, State, Law, Family, Religion
- constitute a **pattern of action that persists over time and groups**

organizations – particular aggregates, formally instituted and coordinated, such as MIT, IBM, corporations and companies, as well as clubs, teams, etc.

One aim of this class: do not assume that the status quo is the way it is because it has to be or because individuals can't change organizations! To pursue change, or even a strategic course of action, we need to engage in rigorous, systemic analysis of social action.

One way to deploy power is to **give something a name and enforce that definition**.

- e.g. Hobbes' *Leviathan*
- *Metaphors We Live By* which has become the Democratic Party's response to the Republicans' manipulation of language

Modern ideas of knowledge claim status as science, observations of empirical phenomena. In its

aspiration to be a science, a good part of 20th century social science concentrated on what was observable in human action, what we sometimes refer to as behavior, discarding attention to language and its impact in shaping behavior. A paradigm shift, beginning in the 1970s, reaching a peak in the 1980s (not unrelated to those political and cultural movements we spoke of earlier) suggested that **how we describe things may be as important as the material/ physical phenomenon (action vs. behavior)**. We share with each other assumptions about everyday things/ideas that frame the possible and the probable, that underwrite social action and the exercise of power. Persuasion and manipulation are forms of power alongside coercion and force.