

What is Power?

Contents

Introduction	1
Power as influence over others (and vice versa)	2
Pluralists and Elite Theorists: Dahl, Bachrach, and Lukes	2
Pluralists: Dahl, Polsby	2
Elite theorists: Bachrach and Baratz	3
Radicals: Lukes	3
Power as legitimacy to rule: Talcott Parsons, Arendt (also Weber) . .	4
Power as “the use of authoritative decisions to further collective goals” (Lukes’s phrase): Talcott Parsons	5
Power as a group acting together: Arendt	5
Power as freedom from other individuals: Pettit	5
Power as freedom to act	8
Power as non-interference by others: Berlin, Hayek	8
Power as ableness: Morriss (also: Steiner, Sen)	8
Criticisms of Morriss	10
Lukes, Oppenheim	10
Barry	11
Power as autonomy of will	11
Bibliography	11
Further avenues	12

Introduction

The literature on the concept of power divides into those who see power primarily as a relationship the individual is in — “what can someone else get you to do?” — and those who see it in terms of the individual’s capacities — “what can you do?”.

The first camp contains:

- Elite, pluralist, and radical theorists of government: Dahl, Bachrach, Lukes.
- Talcott Parsons, Hannah Arendt, and Max Weber: power as legitimacy.
- Republican theorists of freedom as non-domination, most prominently Philip Pettit.

The second camp contains:

- Some negative liberty theorists, such as Steiner. (But not Hayek or Berlin.)
- Peter Morriss's theory of power (as primarily 'power-to' rather than 'power-over').
- One might also include here Charles Taylor's concept of freedom as an "exercise concept".

Power as influence over others (and vice versa)

Pluralists and Elite Theorists: Dahl, Bachrach, and Lukes

These theorists are often seen in opposition, with Dahl locating power in one's ability to influence a collective decision in deliberation, Bachrach (with Baratz) locating it further in one's ability to prevent issues from reaching the stage of deliberation, and Lukes as adding the dimension of one's ability to obtain that one's co-deciders see one's interests as more important than their own.

However, the debate between these three authors takes place within the shared idea that power is the influence of others.

Pluralists: Dahl, Polsby

Pluralists see contemporary societies (starting with mid-twentieth century USA) as generally distributing political power quite evenly across the population. No one group (class, ethnicity, etc.) has power over the others.

Robert Dahl, 'The Concept of Power' (1957): the 'intuitive idea of power' is 'something like this: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do'.

Polsby (Polsby 1963:3-4, then 113):

one can conceive of 'power' — 'influence' and 'control' are serviceable synonyms — as the capacity of one actor to do something affecting another actor, which changes the probable pattern of specified future events...

In the pluralist approach ... an attempt is made to study specific outcomes in order to determine who actually prevails in community decision-making...

Elite theorists: Bachrach and Baratz

Elite theorists claim that the power structure of contemporary societies is predominantly characterised by a division between a power elite and the rest of the population.

In addition to Dahl's dimension of power, Bachrach and Baratz argue that "to the extent that a person or group — consciously or unconsciously — creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power" ("Two Faces of Power", p. 8)

Radicals: Lukes

Lukes defines power as "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests." (*Power: A Radical View*, p. 37) He prefers this to the pluralist and elite theorist views because "[their] insistence on actual conflict as essential power will not do, for at least two reasons." (p. 26):

- 1) "The first is that, on Bachrach and Baratz's own analysis, two of the types of power may not involve such conflict: namely, manipulation and authority — which they conceive as 'agreement based upon reason' (Bachrach and Baratz 1970:20), ..." (p. 27)
- 2) "The second reason why the insistence on actual and observable conflict will not do is simply that it is highly unsatisfactory to suppose that power is only exercised in situations of such conflict. To put the matter sharply, A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have desires you want them to have — that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?" For Lukes, "the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place." (p. 27)
- 3) "The third count on which the two-dimensional view of power is inadequate is [derives from this] insistence that nondecision-making power only exists where there are grievances which are denied entry into the political process in the form of issues. If the observer can uncover no grievances, then he must assume there is a 'genuine' consensus on the prevailing allocation of values. To put this another way, it is here assumed that if people feel no grievances, then they have no interests that are harmed by the use of power. But this is also highly unsatisfactory." (p. 28)

- 1) “In the first place, what, in any case, is a grievance — an articulated demand, based on political knowledge, an undirected complaint arising out of everyday experience, a vague feeling of unease or sense of deprivation? (See Lipsitz 1970.)”(p. 28)
- 2) “Second, and more important, is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat.” (p. 28)

Note that in criticising the previous two schools of thought, Lukes nevertheless reaffirms their basic presupposition: that power is about “A ... exercis[ing] power over B” (p. 27) (with A and B being agents). Again, in Lukes’ words: “The absolutely basic common core to, or primitive notion lying behind, all talk of power is the notion that A in some way affects B.” (p. 30) Again: “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests.” (p. 30. The phrase is further repeated on p. 37.)

This is what unifies the three views; “[c]learly, we all affect each other in countless ways all the time: the concept of power, and the related concepts of coercion, influence, authority, etc., pick out ranges of such affecting as being significant in specific ways.” (p. 30) The three schools of thought differ according to their distinctive understandings of what is a significant way of being affected (“‘what counts as a significant manner?’, ‘what makes A’s affecting B significant?’” (p. 30)).

In the case of an effective exercise of power, A gets B to do what he would not otherwise do; in the case of an operative exercise of power, A, together with another or other sufficient conditions, gets B to do what he would not otherwise do. Hence, in general, any attribution of the exercise of power (including, of course, those by Dahl and his colleagues) always implies a relevant counterfactual, to the effect that (but for A, or but for A together with any other sufficient conditions) B would otherwise have done, let us say, b. (pp. 43-44)

Power as legitimacy to rule: Talcott Parsons, Arendt (also Weber)

While the previous debate shared the idea of power as A’s ability to get B to do something against B’s will (Dahl, Bachrach) or interests (Lukes), this second

group of authors see power as including A's ability to get B to do something that genuinely is in their collective interest.

Power as “the use of authoritative decisions to further collective goals” (Lukes’s phrase): Talcott Parsons

Talcott Parsons: wants to “treat power as a *specific* mechanism operating to bring about changes in the action of other units, individual or collective, in the processes of social interaction” (1967: p. 299).

Power then is generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization *when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions — whatever the actual agency of that enforcement.* (Parsons 1967: p. 308, my emphasis)

Parsons: The “power of A over B is, in its legitimized form, the”right” of A, as a decision-making unit involved in collective process, to make decisions which take precedence over those of B, in the interest of the effectiveness of the collective operation as a whole” (p. 318)

i.e. power is “a facility for the performance of function in and on behalf of the society as a system” (Parsons 1957: 139)

i.e. Lukes: that specific mechanism is “the use of authoritative decisions to further collective goals”. (p. 31)

Power as a group acting together: Arendt

Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. (Arendt 1970: 44)

All political institutions are manifestations and materializations or power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.” (Arendt 1970: 41) “Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert (p. 52)

Power as freedom from other individuals: Pettit

Republican freedom provides a third grouping of theorists. The main proponent of this view is Philip Pettit, who sees freedom as the state of not being “dominated” — it is not too great a leap to see his theory of domination as a theory of power.

Domination, as I understand it here, is exemplified by the relationship of master to slave or master to servant. Such a relationship means, at the limit, that the dominating party can interfere on an arbitrary basis with the choices of the dominated: can interfere, in particular, on the basis of an interest or an opinion that need not be shared by the person affected. The dominating party can practise interference, then, at will and with impunity: they do not have to seek anyone's leave and they do not have to incur any scrutiny or penalty. (*Republicanism*, p. 22)

“The difference between [domination and interference] comes out in the fact that it is possible to have domination without interference and interference without domination.”:

- “domination without interference”: “non-interfering master”:

I may be dominated by another — for example, to go to the extreme case, I may be the slave of another — without actually being interfered with in any of my choices. It may just happen that my master is of a kindly and non-interfering disposition. Or it may just happen that I am cunning or fawning enough to be able to get away with doing whatever I like. I suffer domination to the extent that I have a master; I enjoy non-interference to the extent that that master fails to interfere. (pp. 22-3)

- “interference without domination”: “non-mastering interferer”:

“I may undergo interference without being dominated: without relating to anyone in the fashion of slave or subject. Suppose that another person or agency is allowed to interfere with me but only on condition that the interference promises to further my interests, and promises to do so according to opinions of a kind that I share. Suppose that the person is able to interfere in the event of the interference satisfying that condition, but that otherwise they are blocked from interfering or are subject to a deterrent penalty for attempting interference. It may be that a third party polices the person's performance or it may be that I am in a position to contest it myself. In such a case it is not possible to see the interference as an exercise of domination; the person interferes with me but not on an arbitrary basis. The person envisaged relates to me, not as a master, but more in the fashion of an agent who enjoys a power of attorney in my affairs. (p. 23)

In sum,

[d]omination can occur without interference, because it requires only that someone have the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in your affairs; no one need actually interfere. Interference can occur without domination, because interference need not involve the exercise of a

capacity for arbitrary interference, only the exercise of a much more constrained ability. (p. 23)

Again:

To enjoy non-interference is to escape coercion in the actual world. For a relevant range of possible choices no one coerces you to choose one way or another; were you to face one of those choices, you could make your choice without hindrance, threat, or penalty. ... [for] nondomination ... [all one needs is that] the interference is not perpetrated by an agent on an arbitrary basis and does not represent a form of domination. ... the world must be a non-interference world of that kind, not by accident, but by virtue of your being secured against the powerful. (p. 24)

You might enjoy the non-interference in the actual world, because of a quite precarious contingency: say, because it happens that certain powerful individuals have a liking for you or it happens that you are able to keep out of the way of such individuals or ingratiate yourself with them. In this sense, you might enjoy non-interference in the actual world but not enjoy it with any degree of security against the powerful: not enjoy it robustly or resiliently. ... You enjoy non-interference from the powerful in the actual world, as we might say, but you do not enjoy it in the range of readily accessible worlds — a range of nearby possible worlds—where this or that contingent condition is varied; you do not enjoy it resiliently. (24)

Those who are attached to the ideal of non-interference value the fact of having choice — the fact of non-interference — whether the choice is dominated or not; those who embrace the ideal of non-domination value the fact of having undominated choice, but not necessarily the fact of having choice as such. ... The first group focus on the quantity of choice available, no matter what kind of choice is involved; the second are interested only in choice of the right, undominated quality. (p. 25)

As with the debate between Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes, however, both sides of Pettit's distinction make reference to an agent as the possessor of power — it is not easy to fit into Pettit's characterisations the idea either of interference without an interferer, or of domination without a dominator. Perhaps one could see in the idea that "Those who are attached to the ideal of non-interference value the fact of having choice" (p. 25) some support for the idea that what is important about non-interference is being able to make choices, rather than the fact that no one is stopping you; for this we can turn to Hillel Steiner (below). Similarly, perhaps the idea of non-domination finds its plausibility more in the idea of being in control of one's own destiny than in the idea that no one else is in control. (But it is important to stress that Pettit, in this discussion of freedom, does not seem to take this view.)

Power as freedom to act

The other family of power concepts might be thought of as focusing on “power to” rather than “power over”; here there *is* space to think of power as not involving a relationship between two agents, but as being the property of one agent.

Power as non-interference by others: Berlin, Hayek

Under Berlin’s conception of negative liberty, to ask how free the subject is to ask the question “What is the area within which the subject... is or should be left to do or be what he wants to do or be, without interference by other persons?”. It is unclear whether it falls into this second camp.

Berlin does contrast negative liberty with his definition of positive freedom (to ask how free the subject is to ask the question “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, one thing rather than another?”), which is centrally occupied with the idea of someone else controlling the subject. However, note that the definition of negative liberty (cited in the previous paragraph) also only counts “interference by other persons” as a constraint on freedom. So *both* sides of Berlin’s dichotomy are within the first camp laid out above.

(The same is true of Hayek.)

Power as ableness: Morriss (also: Steiner, Sen)

Morriss (2002), described by Lukes as “the most acute and systematic analytical discussion of the concept of power” (Lukes, p. 163), is the key book for the idea of power without an agent. His view, however, is in the minority, and his tone is polemical: “Quite early on in my perusal of the literature I came to the conclusion that our academic emperors wear very little in the way of clothes.” (p. 1)

Morriss quotes Lukes: “the absolutely basic common core to, or primitive notion lying behind, all talk of power is the notion that A in some way affects B’ (Lukes, 1974: p. 26)” But, Morriss argues, “‘power’ is not concerned at all with affecting, though ‘influence’ is. ‘Power’ is concerned with *effecting*, which is a very different idea.” (As he explains, “To *affect* something is to alter it or impinge on it in some way (*any* way); to *effect* something is to bring about or accomplish it.”) (p. 30) He argues that “simply *affecting* someone is not what we understand by power” on the basis of the implausibility of saying someone has power in the following situations, drawn from further literature:

- “if it were, then the victim who incautiously displays a well-filled wallet would exercise power over the thief who robs him (Wormuth, 1967:

- p. 817”);
- “a person who overturned their car and burdened the insurance company with the bill would, likewise, have thereby exercised power (Young, 1978: p. 643)”;
- “and so would the bankrupt financier whose fall ruined thousands of people who had invested their savings with him (Benn, 1967: p. 426).” (p. 29)

In sum, “simply affecting something or somebody is not an exercise of power unless the actor thereby effects something, and that, correspondingly, the capacity to affect is not power unless the capacity to effect is also present.” (p. 30) In other words, it doesn’t matter who we can tell what to do; what matters is that we can get something done (although this can happen because we can tell someone what to do).

Further to this, Morris wants to argue that “someone may be powerful when they have the capacity to *effect* something even when they cannot *affect* anything.” (p. 30) That is, that power does not need to be power over someone else — we can produce events without needing to get others to do it for us, and therefore ‘power over’ is only a subset of ‘power to’.

His argument for this relies on an understanding of what we care about when we ask whether someone has power. He imagines someone who possesses a rain-making machine (taking the example from Alvin Goldman) — they press a button and rain falls from the sky within six hours.

You have the power to make rain (on clear sunny days). But do you have the power to make rain on all clear sunny days *including* those when it would have rained anyway [later in the day]; or only on those clear sunny days when it would *not* have rained? (pp. 30-1)

For Morriss, the answer to this question depends on why we care about your power to make rain. He thinks we usually care about the ability to ensure rain, rather than the ability to make it rain. If we are gardeners, for example; we do not care whether it rains because of the natural weather pattern or because of the machine — what matters is whether our plants get water. Even on days when it was going to rain anyway, we can ensure rain, so we have the power to make it rain even if it was going to rain anyway.

Similarly, with power in general, Morriss’s argument against the ‘power-over’ theories is that they miss out on common uses of the word power:

Dahl, Lukes and many others have defined power in terms of someone’s ability to affect others in various nasty ways. But our ability to kick others around (or to harm their interests or get them to do things they don’t want to do) can scarcely encompass *everything* we understand as power in social contexts. Frequently we value power simply because it enables us to do things we want to do: to have more control over our own lives. (p. 33)

Again: “It is far more common to say that someone has the power *to do some-*

thing than it is to say that they have power *over someone*. We readily contrast the Prime Minister's power to dissolve Parliament with the American President's lack of such power..." (p. 32)

"We talk of power in at least three contexts — practical, moral and evaluative ... I believe that these three are the only contexts." In each of these three contexts (knowing what people can do, knowing who to blame, evaluating social systems (e.g. as unfair)), Morriss sees the concept of power-to as "both more natural and more informative" than "power-over" (see also p. 46):

- In the practical context, we either "want to get [other people] to do things *for you*" or "to make sure that you don't run the risk of them doing unwelcome things *to you*" (p. 37); in both cases it is more natural to think of what outcomes they can effect than whom they can affect.
- In the moral context, we can excuse people from blame for an event by showing that they could not effect that outcome (p. 38), and we can accuse them of omission if we can show that they *could* effect an outcome but chose not to. (p. 39)
- In the evaluative context, we care both about society's giving people the ability to pursue their wants, and its putting some people in a position of power over other people. Here Morriss acknowledges the usefulness of 'power-over' but sees it as a subset of 'power-to', which we in fact only care about because we care about the ability of the oppressed to fulfill their desires and wants. (pp. 40-42)

To reiterate, "if [Abel] is unable to get out of a locked room it won't matter to him whether someone locked him in deliberately, did so inadvertently, or if the wind blew the door shut." (p. 118)

Criticisms of Morriss

Lukes, Oppenheim

Lukes' critique of those conceptions that "focus on the locution 'power to', ignoring 'power over'. Thus power indicates a 'capacity', a 'facility', an 'ability', not a relationship. Accordingly, the conflictual aspect of power — the fact that it is exercised *over* people — disappears altogether from view. And along with it there disappears the central interest of studying power relations in the first place — an interest in the (attempted or successful) securing of people's compliance by overcoming or averting their opposition." (*Power: A Radical View*, p. 34)

Oppenheim's criticism as reported in Morriss: "The one argument that has been tried is the claim that talking about power *to* do things 'cannot bring out what seems to me the important distinguishing features of *social* power; namely, that it refers to an interaction relation, a relationship between some action *y* of *P* and some possible *action x* of *R*' (Oppenheim, 1981: p. 31)." (p. 34)

Morriss's reply: "If we are interested in the 'conflictual aspect' of power, we can very easily look at someone's power *to* kick others around, or their power *to* win conflicts. Everything that needs to be said about power can be said using the idea of the capacity to effect outcomes — unless we are mesmerized by a desire to get the notion of *affecting* into 'power' at all costs." (Power, p. 34)

Barry

"for Barry, there is a necessary connection between power and resistance: if there is no resistance to overcome, there can be no power. As Barry rightly points out (Barry, 1988a: pp 310—14), this assumption creates all sorts of problems for my notion of power as ableness. He does concede that my notion of ableness is an important one (Barry. 1988a: p. 317); but he claims that whatever ableness is, it is not a power." (Morriss, p. xxxiii)

Morriss's response: If no one chooses to attempt to resist a powerful person, it feels odd to say that the latter thereby becomes powerless. Yet this is what Barry seems to suggest by associating power with resistance. It is especially counterintuitive given that Barry accepts that "as my actual resistance gradually decreases, your power-as-ableness gets larger".

Power as autonomy of will

- Taylor — self-mastery
- corresponds to Berlin's positive freedom
- Foucault

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Further avenues

- Taylor
- Foucault
- Habermas
- Morriss' review of Lukes
- John Scott, *Power: Critical Concepts*, 1994