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Power: A Radical View
by Steven Lukes

In 1974 Steven Lukes published *Power: A radical View*. Its re-issue in 2005 with the addition of two new essays is much to be welcomed. In this new edition the author reproduces the original text and adds two new chapters in which he clarifies and expands his view of power by acknowledging some of the mistakes and inadequacies of the original version.

The book, originally a contribution to the debate 'American politics: dominated by a ruling elite or an example of pluralist democracy?', attempted to answer the following question: how do the powerful secure the compliance of those they dominate and, more specifically, how do they secure their willing compliance? Lukes also addressed a yet more thorny and fascinating issue: how to think about power theoretically, and how to study it empirically. This continues to be a fundamental question for scholars of sociology, political science, and international relations who investigate power relations in any sociological or political arena. For this reason this short book was enormously influential and spawned a large debate among conceptual theorists. It also led to a number of empirical studies attempting to measure the impact of the third dimension of power on people's lives.

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Lukes' principal argument is that we need to think about power broadly and to pay attention to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation. Power is seen as the imposition of internal constraints, and those subject to it acquire beliefs that result in their consent or their adaptation to domination, by either coercive or non-coercive forms. This radical view of power is argued to be empirically useful in the sense that it allows the framing of hypotheses that are in principle verifiable or falsifiable.

Lukes maintains that power is one of those concepts which is unavoidably value-dependent, that is, "both its definition and any given use of it, once defined, are inextricably tied to a given set of (probably unacknowledged) value-assumptions which predetermine the range of its empirical application" (Lukes, 2005: 30). For the scholar, using this concept involves disputes about its proper employment: "Indeed, to engage in such disputes is itself to engage in politics" (*Ibidem*).

The basic common core to any mention of power in the analysis of social relationships is the notion that A in some way affects B in a significant manner. The three views are alternative interpretations and applications of the same underlying concept of power, according to which A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests. In the new edition, Lukes expands the concept of power, which is a capacity rather than the exercise of that capacity. Power can be held even where it is not used or needed. The notion of interest is also a very evaluative notion and each view of power rests on a different conception of interest.

Lukes sketches three conceptual maps which reveal the distinguishing

features of three views of power: the pluralist view (which he calls the one-dimensional view); the view of critics of pluralism (which he calls the two-dimensional view); and a third view of power (which he calls the three-dimensional view).

The distinctive features of these three views of power are summarized below (Lukes, 2005: 29).

One-Dimensional view of Power

Focus on:

  a) behavior;

  b) decision making;

  c) (key) issues;

  d) observable (overt) conflict;

  e) (subjective) interests, seen as policy preferences revealed by political participation.

Two-Dimensional View of Power

(Qualified) critique of behavioral focus. Focus on:

  a) Decision-making and control over the political agenda (not necessarily through decisions);

  b) Issues and potential issues;

  c) Observable (overt and covert) conflict;

  d) (Subjective) interests, seen as policy preferences or grievances.

Three-Dimensional View of Power

Critique of behavioral focus. Focus on:

a) decision-making and control over the political agenda (not necessarily through decisions);

b) issues and potential issues;

c) observable (overt or covert) and latent conflict;

d) subjective and real interests.

Lukes argues that the first two views of power are inadequate, claiming that the three-dimensional view is a better means for the investigation of power relations.

According to the one-dimensional view, power is conceived of as intentional and active: it should thus be measured through the study of its exercise. The seminal work here is Dahl's *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. There are situations of conflict between interests, revealed in the political arena by political actor groups, and power consists in defeating the opponents' preferences. The focus is on decision-making behavior on issues where there is an observable conflict of subjective interests as revealed by policy preferences.

According to the critics of this view, power is not only reflected in concrete decisions. Individuals or groups can limit decision-making to relatively non-controversial issues by influencing community values and political procedures and rituals. Power may also be located in the capacity to create or reinforce barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts (Bachrach

and Baratz, 1970: 8). An empirical analysis according to this view would thus involve examining both decision-making and non-decision-making. A non-decision is a decision designed to avoid the emergence of values and interests contrary to those of the decision-maker. Thus non-decision-making is a means by which demands for change in the allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated, kept covert, or prevented from gaining access to the relevant decision-making arena. This critical view of pluralism thus introduces the notion of potential issues, which non-decision-making prevent from being actual.

According to Lukes, the two-dimensional view of power is limited in that it focuses only on observable conflicts, whether overt or covert. Lukes claims that A can also exercise power over B by influencing, shaping, or determining his wants and preferences. Another second criticism is that this view is too committed to behaviorism, that is to the study of concrete decisions, whereas inaction can also be the outcome of socially structured and culturally patterned collective behavior. The third point on which this view is seen as inadequate is in its claim that non-decision-making power only exists where there are grievances which are denied entry into the political process in the form of issues. In line with the previous arguments, however, Lukes argues that power can be also exercised by *preventing* grievances - by shaping perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way as to secure the acceptance of the status quo since no alternative appears to exist, or because it is seen as natural and unchangeable, or indeed beneficial.

Lukes therefore sustains that it is important to investigate what he calls

the third dimension of power – the power to prevent the formation of grievances by shaping perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a away as to ensure the acceptance of a certain role in the existing order. This, is a very contentious and, at the same time, fundamental view.

The three-dimensional view allows us to consider the many ways in which potential issues are 'kept out' of politics, whether through individuals' decisions or through the operation of social forces and institutional practices. Lukes introduces and stresses the importance of the concept of latent conflict. A latent conflict consists in a contradiction between the interests of A (those exercising power), and the real interests of B, which are excluded. The conflict is latent because those subject to power do not express or even remain unaware of their interests. This means that the interests of B are very difficult to trace, because those concerned either cannot express them or are unable to recognize them. In my opinion, latent conflict thus poses many problems to the scholar of sociology or political science, because the line between social determinism and the lack of awareness about a group's interests is very thin. Nevertheless, at this point of the reasoning Lukes argues that these interests are empirically ascertainable, appearing to be willing to address the scholar of political science. These interests cannot be assumed as sociologically given but need to be discovered and analyzed case by case.

Yet Lukes is aware of the difficulties peculiar to using the three-dimensional view of power in empirical research. The classical objection is the following: how can one study what does not happen?

The first problem is how to justify the relevant counterfactuals. We need

to justify our claim that B would have thought and acted differently, and we also need to specify the ways or mechanisms in which A acted or abstained from acting in order to prevent B from doing so. To give an example, in order to gather evidence to support the claim that an apparent case of consensus is not genuine but imposed, one must investigate inaction, consider structural and institutional power, and consider ways in which demands are prevented from being raised.

The second problem is how to identify the process or mechanism of the alleged exercising of power. The three-dimensional view of power here presents three features which pose problems for the researcher. First, the exercise of power may involve inaction rather than observable action. The point here is how to find a casual link between inaction and its consequences, such as the non-appearance of a political issue. Second, the exercising of power may be unconscious. This may be the case where A exercises its power over B yet remains unaware of its consequences. In this case there is an exercise of power only where A could have discovered the consequences of its behavior. Third, power may be exercised by collectivities, such as groups or institutions. This, for me, entails a crucial question: how and where does one draw the line between structural determination and the exercise of power? Lukes refuses the conceptual assimilation of power to structural determination. Within a system characterized by total structural determinism, there would be no place for power. Power is about alternatives, and Lukes claims that to identify a given process as an exercise of power is to assume that within the process lies the possibility to act differently. This holds for individuals as well as groups or

institutions. His conclusion is that locating power is to fix responsibility for consequences that flow from the action, or inaction, of certain specifiable agents.

I would strongly suggest the reading of *Power: A Radical View* to all students and scholars interested in the issues of power and influence. It provides an in depth insight into the concept of power. Moreover, this book is a challenge to connect empirical research to theory. Yet the real value of this book lies elsewhere - disagreements on the definition of power matter and should be welcomed, because how much power we see in the social world, and where we locate it, depends on how we conceive of it.

Bibliography:

Bachrach P., Baratz M. S., *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1970.

Dahl R. A., *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1961.

Lukes S., *Power: A Radical View*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Power Revisited reconsiders Steven Lukes' own views in light of these debates and of criticisms The second edition of this seminal work includes the original text, first published in 1974, alongside two major new chapters. Power: A Radical View assesses the main debates about how to conceptualize and study power, including the influential contributions of Michel Foucault. Power Revisited reconsiders Steven Lukes' own views in light of these debates and of criticisms of his original argument. With a new introduction and bibliographical essay, this book has consolidated its reputation