Encyclopedia of Political Theory

Power

The notion of *power* is one of the fundamental conceptual elements of political theory, yet it remains rather elusive. A great variety of different conceptualizations of power have been suggested by political theorists, yet there is no general agreement on a definition, let alone on a conceptual framework for how to use the term. Although this fact sounds detrimental to political theory's ambition to scientific rigor, there might be something to be learned from it, namely that contested political keywords like power play different roles and have different functions in specific political theories. In the broadest sense and roughly in tune with the use of the term in many everyday contexts, power can be generally described as the capacity to bring about certain effects. This wide meaning of the term can be found in Aristotle's usage of the Greek term *dynamis.* In the narrower context of social action, the concept of power refers to the ability of an actor (i.e., an individual or a group) to make other actors do (or suffer) something. Speaking of actors as "powerful" or describing an action as an "exercise of power" refers to this attribution of causality: An actor is said to be able to produce a certain outcome and thereby to influence or determine the behavior of others.

Among modern social scientists, Max Weber gave this core idea, which might historically be traced back to Thomas Hobbes's use of the term, its classical formulation when he wrote that the concept of power refers to the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his or her will, even against resistance. This formulation does not cover all aspects of power, but it covers many instances and cases in which the theoretical concept of power is employed. Using it as a guideline and elaborating its systematic implications can serve as a way to give an outline of what one might call the standard notion of power in modern political theory. It relies on an essential connection between power and domination and has undergone continual renewal and revisions over the last century. But it can also serve as a point of departure for introducing several alternative ways of using the concept of power that focus on power's constitutive or productive function. Finally, there remains the question about the very function of the concept of power in political theories.

Power and Domination

The Weberian idea that power refers to an actor's capacity to influence or determine another actor's behavior or to carry out his or her will, even against the other's resistance, has been the core of the traditional concept of power, and it has been reformulated in many ways. A famous restatement was suggested by Robert Dahl: An actor has power over another to the extent that he (or she) can get her (or him) to do something that she (or he) would not otherwise do. Several characteristics of this usage of the concept of power can be noted. First, it binds power to conscious actors and their intentionality. Second, it explains the efficacy of power on the basis of assumptions about a clear causal relation between two forms of action. Third, the counterfactual assumption treats power as something that gives an external motivation for action to the second actor that might even bring her (or him) to act against her (or his) own original free will. Objections have been raised against all of these assumptions. Why should power be effective only in cases of explicit intentions and expressed wills? Why should power depend on the always fallible knowledge about the effects of an action? Why should power always entail the agonistic moment of the suppression of one will? And finally, for many political theorists it was clear that all of these highly theoretical assumptions pose serious obstacles to an empirical study of power.

A number of revisions to the original schema were proposed, among which the most important were attempts to suggest a multidimensional vision of power. The first major revision was to include not only overt action but also nondecisions (or the avoidance of certain actions) as major instances of the exercise of social power. On the level of communal political decisions, for example, it was argued that the real power might indeed lie where efficient agenda setting is exercised, so that certain questions are not even posed. Power here is not only exercised through action but also, and maybe more importantly, through the structuring of the space of possible actions. In yet another influential step, a "third face" of power was detected in exactly those actions and mechanisms that influence and distort what people think to be their own interest and will. This is indeed a "radical view," as Steven Lukes has called it, that transforms the whole framework of the standard concept of

power. Leaving open the possibility of radically manipulated wills and consciousness (i.e., of ideology in the strong sense) makes it impossible to rely on social actors' own expressed intentions and self-explanations. *Power* therefore ceases to be a term that can be dealt with in the framework of the theory of action alone and calls for a more sociological elaboration.

Power and Its Forms

This is where a multiplicity of theories comes in that try to account for structural power. In their view, power not only refers to individual actions but to networks of intersubjective and institutional relationships that crucially determine which actions can be taken by individual actors. Social power, as it were, is also the power of structuration, and it cannot be assessed on the level of individual behavior alone. Although this perspective gives priority to social institutions and material inequalities among social groups, others have argued that it is foremost on the level of discourse and meaning where power is generated and distributed. On this view, it is epistemic and symbolic patterns of knowledge and meaning that decisively shape social action. Such systems of discursive or symbolic power prove effective to the extent that they manage to neutralize conflicts between different social groups by discursively creating symbolic hierarchies between them. Differences in status and worth can therefore become naturalized and almost invisible. In these cases, the most pervasive form of power is one that is not even observed by the social actors involved.

But all of these revisions leave the original idea intact that says that power is basically to be seen as an impediment to action or a suppression of freedom. It is therefore fair so say that the standard notion of power works from a concept of domination and envisions the paradigmatic scene of power as an asymmetric relation between single actors struggling for superiority. Of course, many of the different theories falling under the rubric of the standard notion allow for quite different forms of power, and for many of these theories it has become a key interest to draw distinctions between different forms of exercise of power. The dominant and most plausible view in this framework is to think in terms of a spectrum that reaches from actions almost totally determined by power on one extreme to actions almost fully autonomous on the other extreme. Near the first extreme, forms of "raw" power as physical violence, brute force, or coercion can be found. In the middle, there are various forms of repression, regulation, control, and sanction, but also milder cases of influence and guidance. Ideological manipulation and discursive framing might also be placed somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Near the second extreme, there are forms of persuasion and seduction, various kinds of authority, and arguably even the power of rational argumentation. To draw clear-cut distinctions between these forms has proven difficult, but the mainstream of political theory has followed this general model in one form or another. Its core idea from Hobbes to Weber and Lukes is to think about power in terms of greater or lesser degrees of impediment to agency. It remains, therefore, ultimately a model that conceptualizes power in terms of domination.

Power and Constitution

Whereas the standard model of power, rooted in the theory of action but extending to more general versions of social theory, views power as essentially negative (i.e., detrimental to agency), alternative accounts have stressed another of its semantic connotations. The second sense of power clearly appears in the distinction between the two Latin terms for power, namely *potestas*, in the sense of command and domination, and *potentia*, in the general sense of capacity. This second sense (which is also present in the Italian *potenza*, the French *puissance*, and the German *Vermögen*) refers to power as a productive force that brings about rather than represses something. This meaning is sometimes referred to as "power to" in opposition to "power over" (in the sense of domination), but this side of power might be best termed "constitutive." Several theories of power have tried to articulate this side or function of power by focusing less on individual acts of power exercise between people and more on the very creation of social relationships or even social entities through

power.

In these quite heterogeneous alternative frameworks, rather than referring to acts that repress or impede, power refers to the media or processes in which sociality, consensus, and communality are brought about and shaped (e.g., in the theories of Hannah Arendt or Talcott Parsons). This sets power in sharp contrast to domination and expresses the idea that power has to be created collectively and is not just there to be found. But it also shows that power is the very basis on which collective social action is possible and that it can never be fully substituted by the rule of force or violence. Power, as it were, manifests itself as empowerment, as the bringing about of new forms of agency.

Although this might seem too optimistic a view, power as constitutive has also been taken to refer to its capacity to bring about the very elements of the social, like systems of knowledge, patterns of conduct, and social institutions (e.g., in the work of Michel Foucault). To say that power not only acts on but even "produces" bodies and subjects requires speaking about power in terms of social ontology and the very constitution of the social. This does not mean that power as constitution is not bound up with systems of control, repression, and hierarchization. On the contrary, one can argue that the efficacy of certain systems of control and regulation exist only on the basis of their capacity to produce and shape the affects, mentalities, and self-conceptions of subjects. Although the alternative frameworks differ enormously on how to spell out (and how to evaluate) power's productive or constitutive function, they share a common criticism of the standard model. The latter remains too fixated on the case of the power of existing social actors over others, and it neglects the constant reconfiguration of the social world through mechanisms of power.

Power and Critique

The relationship between the standard model and the alternative models is a complex one, and it seems clear that this is not a matter of theoretical preference. Several attempts have been made to integrate both sides or dimensions of power, domination and constitution respectively, into a single theoretical framework that could account for the entire realm of phenomena that can be described as instances of power. These integrated models, however, tend to become rather abstract because the gap between the theoretical perspectives of the theory of action and social ontology has proven difficult to bridge.

There also remains the question how the concept of power should function in a political theory. Some theorists insist on the neutrality and purely descriptive nature of the term, but for many others the concept of power refers to a web of concepts with normative implications. In the case of many political theories following the standard concept, the strong negative link between power, agency, and freedom suggests that a society should strive for the critical exposure and active struggle against all forms of power that cannot be given acceptable legitimacy. Such political theories will then need to give an account of the very criteria that decide on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of power in general and on the exercise of legitimate political power in particular. Theorists that work from the broader ontological understanding of constitutive power, however, hesitate to call for a critique of power as such. They tend to suggest more context-specific analysis and local resistance to specific forms of power, and they insist on the deep ambiguity of power. Most importantly, they refer to the fact that the very capacities to think critically about and turn against power may themselves be products of power. This demands a self-critical and reflexive stance toward one's own implication into and complicity with networks and practices of power.

Finally, the diversity of understandings and models of power in the history of political thought, as well as in contemporary political theory, suggests that power is less a "perennial problem" than a moving target of theoretical analysis and political critique. By giving priority to certain cases of power (e.g., armed violence, class struggle, symbolic violence) over others, by conceptualizing the basic mode of power differently (e.g., as conflict or consensus), and by envisioning the aim of politics in a particular way (e.g., as a balance of forces or the eradication of illegitimate violence), political theories themselves take side in a struggle about the adequate

understanding and the preferable practice of politics.

- political theory
- power and political theory
- power with
- actors
- domination
- political power
- social power

Martin Saar
http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958660.n359
See also

- Agency
- Arendt, Hannah
- Domination
- Foucault, Michel
- Ideology
- Subject
- Weber, Max

Further Readings

Allen, A. (1999). The power of feminist theory: Domination, resistance, solidarity. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Arendt, H. (1970). On violence. London: Penguin.

Clegg, S. R. (1989). Frameworks of power. London: Sage.

Dahl, R. A. (1986). Power as the control of behavior. In S.Lukes (Ed.), Power (pp. 37–58). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Foucault, M. (2000). Power: Essential works (J.Faubion, Ed.; Vol. 3). New York: The New Press.

Hindess, B. (1996). Discourses of power: From Hobbes to Foucault. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Lukes, S. (2005). Power: A radical view (2nd ed.). London: Palgrave.

Scott, J. (2001). Power. London: Polity.

Wartenberg, T. E. (1990). The forms of power: From domination to transformation. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Weber, M. (1978). Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology (G.Roth, & C.Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press.