

Recasting power in its third dimension

Review of Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005

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Lukes's (1974) *Power: A Radical View* has become a widely cited classic in contemporary political sociology. Referencing his three dimensions of power, particularly the third dimension, has become a standard way of mapping the schools of thought regarding power. Now Lukes (2005 [1974]) offers a new second edition that includes the original 1974 text plus two new chapters that respond to criticisms of his earlier work and show how he has developed, indeed changed, his thinking on the topic over the last 30 years. While it is unclear that the 2005 work will enjoy the success of the 1974 statement, it usefully shows contemporary shifts in thinking on this important issue, notably the recent influence of European thinkers, like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, on the American "faces of power" debate in the 1960s and early 1970s that pitted pluralist, elite, and class structure perspectives against each other.

Historical context of first edition

It is worth recalling, as Lukes does, the power debate that the original book addressed. The behaviorist, decision-making approach made famous by political scientist Robert Dahl represented, for Lukes, the first dimension of power, one that was positivist in outlook, focusing on empirical identification of actors who participated in decision-making where influence over others could be readily discerned. Dahl's work had challenged the elite theories of Mills (2000 [1956]) and Hunter (1953). A significant community power debate emerged around Dahl's (1961) study *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* regarding the distribution of power in the post-World War II United States.

Dahl's approach was soon challenged, however, by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) for leaving out of consideration "what does not happen" in decision-making settings; namely, those issues that are unwittingly neglected or consciously excluded from the agenda. Power can be exercised through non-issues and non-decision making as well. For Lukes, this represented the second dimension of power: control of the agenda.

It was, however, in the third dimension – power through domination – where Lukes saw his principal contribution and where his early work most shaped subsequent thinking by offering a “radical critique” of the approaches limited to just the first two dimensions. The effects of power are not exhausted by decision making and agenda construction but could operate at a deeper more invisible level. Influenced in particular by Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony,” Lukes argued that the third dimension of power consists of deeply rooted forms of political socialization where actors unwittingly follow the dictates of power even against their best interests. Power as domination – the third dimension – asks “how do the powerful secure the compliance (unwilling or willing) of those they dominate?” Lukes’s first work was devoted for the most part to stressing the importance of this third dimension of power.¹

Conceptual shifts

In two new chapters, Lukes addresses key criticisms of the first edition and shows how his thinking has shifted. There are five limitations he now finds in his earlier conceptualization (pp. 64–65, 109).

First, a broad definition of power should not commit the “exercise fallacy” by limiting, as the behaviorists do, focus to the visible exercise of power. Rather, one needs to think of power as a *capacity* or *ability* that may or may not be explicitly activated in given situations. Nor would an adequate definition commit the “vehicle fallacy.” A generic definition of power should not be limited to valued resources. Power includes both “resources” and “exercise” but, Lukes stresses, both point to a “potentiality, not an actuality.” Lukes stresses even more now that power is a “dispositional concept.” This is the conceptual language of Bourdieu.

Second, the definition of power should not be limited to only *asymmetric* power relations, or “power over.” It also needs to deal with “power to.” Whereas the first edition focused on power as domination, the second edition acknowledges the distinction long made by numerous critics between “power to” and “power over.”² Lukes is now willing to admit that not all power is negative and zero sum. Some forms of power, including forms exercised in relations of dependency can be positive, productive, and transformative. Hence, domination is now seen as just one type of “power over” rather than capturing the essence of all relations of dependency. Yet, the focus of his second book remains the demeaning kind of power, domination. “How is willing compliance to domination secured?” (p. 10) was the central question addressed by the first book and remains so in the second (pp. 85–86).

This distinction is a needed one and shows a significant shift in Luke’s thinking from the mid-seventies. The influence of Michel Foucault in particular seems important here as power is no longer presented exclusively in zero sum terms; power not only represses but also creates new significant effects.

¹ While all three dimensions are operative and important to research, Lukes argues that in terms of the effects of power they can be ranked in terms of their importance. Decision making presupposes an established agenda and defining the agenda often calls on those less visible, subtle power dynamics that give consent. The third dimension shapes the first and second dimensions and hence is the most fundamental.

² Indeed in the work Lukes (1974) was dismissive of a focus on power as a capacity, ability, or facility because he argued it did not point directly to asymmetrical relationships of conflicting interests and domination that should be “the central interest in studying power relations in the first place” (p. 34).

Third, Lukes now considers his third dimension of power to include several types of “power over” not all of which are zero sum and negative in their effects on subordinates. Lukes writes that “power over others can be productive, transformative, authoritative and compatible with dignity,” even for dependents under certain conditions. The teacher–student relation is a power relation though hopefully not always one of domination but mostly a productive and transformative one in which the student grows intellectually – and perhaps the teacher as well – even if in a relation of dependence.³

The focus of this revised edition, however, is limited to power as domination, the type of “power over” where the interests of subordinates are distorted.

Fourth, his earlier conceptualization tended to assume that actors in asymmetrical relations have unitary and opposing interests. But now he stresses that actors have multiple interests and some may be conflictual.

And fifth, his earlier account tended to look only at binary relations between actors. Yet in many situations there can be multiple actors, and with divergent interests.

Power and domination defined

With these criticisms and shifts in view in mind, Lukes updates his definition of power to include “agents’ abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively.” He sees this definition as a generic, ahistorical, analytical, and universal. As a subcategory of this generic definition of power, domination is now defined as “the capacity to secure compliance to domination through the shaping of beliefs and desires, by imposing internal constraints under historically changing circumstances.” Much of the new book defends the claim that power as domination is important to research, despite the thorny conceptual and methodological issues it raises, because it can help us evaluate the order of society.

Lukes reaffirms his earlier and frequently cited claim that power is “essentially a *contested* concept” and therefore inescapably political. Power cannot be a fully objective concept because value judgments will always enter into selecting which outcomes of power matter most. There are no decision rules inherent in the concept of power for determining which outcomes are most important. The significance of outcomes is generally thought of in terms of the interests involved. But where real interests lie is “inherently controversial.” This normative aspect of power is stressed even more in the revised work where Lukes abandons any presumption favoring a materialist understanding of real interests. Social actors, he writes, “do not have unitary or dual, but multiple and conflicting interests, which are interests of different kinds, and their identities are not confined to their imputed class positions and destinies” (p. 145). Religion, race, gender, patriotism – and a host of others – as well as class can become identification loci that generate their own particular interests. Along with recognizing an expanded array of possible interests, Lukes re-conceptualizes the Marxist notion of “false consciousness” to think of domination as anything that misleads and compromises individual autonomy. This of course expands enormously the range of possibilities and enriches the research agenda; but if one abandons a baseline reference by which one identifies real interests, what happens to explanation? Lukes

³ Lukes’s (1974) statement was closer to the climate of the 1960s, when traditional pedagogical relations were sharply criticized for resembling “power over” rather than cultivating “power to” dispositions.

answers by simply declaring that the real interests identified are “a function of one’s explanatory purpose, framework, and methods, which in turn have to be justified” (p. 148). If this is the case, then Lukes seems to embrace a radical theoretical pluralism or recourse to empirical data as the final arbiter.

Still, Lukes insists that power remains a useful *analytical* concept. He rejects the position taken by some, like Bruno Latour, that, because of its inherently normative character, power must be discarded as an analytical tool. And it can be *explanatory* if that is not understood in positivist terms meaning “law-like explanations of outcomes that yield determinate predictions.” Yet it is not clear what kind of explanation Lukes wants if the power to mislead can occur over a great variety of interests. What is the most vital interest that cannot be realized in any given situation because of domination?

Drawing from Foucault and Bourdieu

Lukes therefore enumerates a new, enlarged definition of power and a more complex, nuanced, and qualified definition of the particular form of “power over” that he calls domination. In doing so, he draws from a number of empirical and theoretical works since 1974, absorbing and integrating their contributions into his own revised definitions. But in doing so he does not confront the full force of the works from which he draws and therefore gives a fragmented interpretation of their contributions. Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu are two thinkers whom Lukes sees as contributing to a richer understanding of his third dimension of power. But Lukes does not really confront Foucault and Bourdieu, only aspects of their thinking to impose his own definition.

Foucault

Lukes sees Foucault helping to enhance awareness of how domination is secured through compliance. Foucault’s insights into the intimate connection between power and knowledge, particularly expert knowledge, and the corporal as well as cognitive expressions of power have helped increase awareness of the third dimension of power. Moreover, Foucault stresses the productive as well as constraining dynamics and effects of power. However, Lukes divides rather schematically Foucault’s thinking on power into two phases: his early work on discipline and the first volume on sexuality and the subsequent writings from 1978 to his death in 1984 on what he called “governmentality.” In the first phase power is pervasive throughout all of social life. It not only constrains by setting up limits, boundaries, etc; it also constitutes “subjects” themselves. There is no escape from power.

Although this gives power a positive side, the problem, says Lukes, is that this key idea comes clothed in a “Nietzschean rhetoric” that seems to deny the sheer possibility of freedom and truth independent of the effects of power. It undermines completely the ideal of a “rational, autonomous moral agent.” Completely lost is any kind of emancipatory ideal in which individuals are able to free themselves, at least to some extent from the negative effects of power or that power could be based on the “rational consent of its subjects.” Lukes rejects this “ultra-radical view,” believing that it “made no sense,” though Lukes finds some hope in the second phase of Foucault’s work where he believes the French theorist backed away from the earlier claims for the all pervasive reach of power. Still,

Lukes seems perplexed that Foucault's writings have had such an extraordinary impact on a generation of scholars. Why? Lukes can only conclude that it is because Foucault has himself exercised an "interesting kind of power" – the "power of seduction." And he backs up this claim in a note with Rodney Needham saying something similar of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* – probably all wrong but great capacity to generate explanations. But what are we to conclude from this – yet another frustrated Brit out maneuvered by the ever resourceful French!

Bourdieu

Lukes draws on Bourdieu to help with understanding how power as domination is internalized as part of the habitus, particularly Bourdieu's claim that the effectiveness of power as domination is enhanced by its "naturalization," where what is arbitrary and unequal appears to actors as natural and objective, and by the "misrecognition" of its origins and modes of operation. These insights, Lukes believes, offer intriguing avenues for empirical investigation into how compliance becomes an internalized disposition.

But Lukes differs with Bourdieu in weighing the degree to which symbolic power is effective and causal. Lukes agrees with Bourdieu that power is more effective the less visible it is to the consciousness of actors. But Lukes would grant to actors a greater degree of reflective awareness than Bourdieu in general seems to do. Power may elicit more resistance than Bourdieu seems to grant. More importantly, it may not go as undetected as "naturalization" and "misrecognition" suggest for there may be a high degree of consciousness of oppressive structures and yet consent to comply for some measure of happiness, success, and security. Lukes considers that the dominated can acquiesce in their domination in the thin sense (mere resignation to dominant values) as well as the thick sense (actual belief in dominant values) to draw on Scott's (1990) conceptual distinction.

But Lukes picks up only on the symbolic power aspect of Bourdieu's work. While certainly one of the most distinctive features of Bourdieu's conceptual framework, there are two other aspects of Bourdieu's thinking on power that merit attention. Bourdieu analyzes power in three overlapping but analytically distinct ways: power in legitimation (symbolic violence), power in valued resources (various types of capital), and power in specific spheres (fields) of struggle.

In Bourdieu's sociology, power also takes the form of resources, which Bourdieu calls capitals, that can be created, accumulated, exchanged, and consumed. His idea of cultural capital is most widely known but his work includes an array of capitals, such as social capital, economic capital, academic capital, and statist capital, that are unevenly distributed among social classes. Lukes does not consider Bourdieu's other types of capitals, only symbolic power. Moreover, capitals, as forms of power, exist not in isolation but are relational. They operate in what Bourdieu calls "fields," which are structured spaces of struggle over specific types of capitals. Lukes does not consider Bourdieu's concept of field, yet in Bourdieu's thinking field is also helpful in addition to symbolic power to understand why the dominated come to accept their positions of domination: they become caught up in the logic of the competitive games they play in fields. Lukes misses this key point as he seems to think that power goes misrecognized in Bourdieu's thinking only because of the action of habitus. Nor does he consider the particular power field, the political field, where the accumulation of power for its own sake, seems to be the operative logic and hence creates a particular kind of power resource, political capital, that does not reduce to other forms of capitals in other fields.

Conclusion

Lukes is right to see both French thinkers as contributing to our understanding of forms of power that are both discursive and corporal and that shape much of social life. Yet, Lukes offers a reading of Foucault and Bourdieu essentially designed to enrich and elaborate his preferred conception of power as domination (the third dimension of power). One would not want to look at this work for a general assessment of these two French thinkers' views on power.

Furthermore, Lukes's focus on a particular type of domination leaves unexplored key expressions of power, such as the capacity of the state to act on its subjects or inter-state relations. Here Lukes's treatment of power reflects the terms of the American power debate that the 1974 book was designed to address; namely, whether and in what way local and national politics might be dominated by factions, sectorial interests, or social class. Missing in that debate and in Lukes's work is the capacity of the state to legislate and regulate broader and broader areas of social life. The important shift to state centered analyses of power, illustrated in *Bringing the State Back In* (Evans, Rueschemeyer, & Skocpol, 1985), gives greater attention to the various capabilities of state power that were not central to the earlier American debate nor in either of Lukes's two books.

At the end of the book, Lukes offers suggestions for further reading on power but he does not offer exemplary empirical studies that apply the framework he is suggesting, beyond Gaventa's (1980) study of Appalachian miners and Crenson's (1971) study of air pollution in two US cities that he rightly lauded in his 1974 statement. He references some recent Foucault inspired works that both exemplify and point up the limitations of Foucault's thinking, notably that of Hayward (2000), *De-facing Power*. Even Bourdieu's extensive empirical work goes unexplored. Yet Lukes is clearly interested in empirical research and wants his work to generate more. But he offers no new model empirical studies that illustrate what he is proposing. More disconcerting is that it is not clear what an empirical study following his framework would look like. The book offers no methodological suggestions for the researcher interested in following Lukes's conceptual framework in both choosing and analyzing an empirical object of power. Just what kind of empirical research would his framework lead to? Lukes does not say.

Nor does Lukes propose mechanisms of institutionalization to reduce the perverse effects of domination. If conceptualizing power is not simply an armchair pastime, and presumably for Lukes it is not, then a framework might be expected to point to types of research and perhaps even action that might hold the most promise for checking the type of domination that Lukes believes is real, widespread, and very limiting to individual potential. We do not find such suggestions in this book.

Still, Lukes has written a book that shows how an important thinker revisits an influential statement and revises and expands it. This work shows evidence of a first-rate mind that is not afraid of expanding and altering earlier conceptualizations. And it shows increased awareness of key conceptual issues that need addressing in research on the more subtle yet real effects of power.

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