

On the Generic Sense of Power

Brandon Joyce

I. *The Generic Sense of Power*

What *is* power? Here's my definition: power is whatever actuates or possibilizes, or in negative terms, whatever prevents or impossibilizes. This is the broad sense of power shared, I think, by a whole cloud of roughly synonymous concepts: capacity, ability, control, might, potential, influence, strength, efficacy, resistance, and so on. This "generic" definition of power is more comprehensive than what you usually find in the social sciences, that in so far as they are *empirical* sciences, tend to study power in overt, quantifiable forms and operations. The generic definition is also more comprehensive than many other power theorizations, such as De Jouvenel's, that primarily equate power with the State — that is, with the usual suite of "juridico-administrative-military" powers, and thus the domain of "politics" in the journalistic sense. However, even when power is not fully conflated with the State, it's often unduly beholden to the State as a paradigm—to state-like terms and metaphors. The more state-like the forms and operations of power, the more readily they're recognized as power.

The generic definition, as definition alone, withholds judgment. Intrinsicly, power is neither good nor bad, neither more nor less just, neither emancipatory nor oppressive. This is in contrast with the theoretical and popular tendency to construe power, explicitly or otherwise, as *domination*— as pejorative, excessive, command-oriented, merely as power *over*. Even where it's not exactly limited or pejorative— think of Nietzsche, where the Will-to-Power is the governing principle of all nature and society and culture and morality and life— power is still frequently domination of varying degrees. Domination is admired as life-affirming, and something to be strived for— even cynically as the "way of the world." The conflation of power and domination even leaches into harder-nosed social science, as when Robert Dahl offers the following formula: "*A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.*"

The generic sense of power encompasses empowering and overpowering forms, and is formulated in order to get beyond three common biases: power as the State, power as domination, and power only in its observable and quantifiable forms. Much or perhaps *most* power cannot be understood in strictly empirical terms. Steven Lukes writes: "*My view was, and is, that we need to think about power broadly rather than narrowly— in three dimensions rather than one or two— and that we need to attend to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation: that, indeed, power is at its most effective when least observable.*" Likewise, much or *most* power operates outside of the domain of the State. All other modes of power— economic power, physical power, cognitive power, technical power, and so on— have equal place and priority in the equations of power.

Power is not equivalent to domination. The point of critique is to distinguish the better, healthier, juster configurations of power from the worse, crueler, less just, and shittier ones we think of as domination, such as tyranny, exploitation, and violence. Power, in whatever mode, is intrinsically neither good nor bad. Power is in fact always both good *and* bad; power is always ambivalent. It's ambivalent, yet by definition never neutral: it always produces effects. I agree with Lukes that power works most insidiously where it operates unrecognized, where for instance, it assumes a neutrality or naturalness through ideology. Popular conceptions of power, as well as a critiques tend to lag behind currently dominant modes or configurations, and this is happily exploited. The generic sense is better suited for a *generalized* critique, as well as a broader suspicion of power— even in its newer or seemingly benevolent forms.

II. Power, Causality, and Possibility.

The generic sense of power covers both everyday, efficacious, empowering forms, on the one hand, and overbearing, over-concentrated, overpowering forms on the other. It includes both empowerment and domination, ability and resistance, the power *to* and power *over*, as well as all of the following: “absolute power,” “biopower,” “the power of persuasion,” “the power of love,” “the power of money,” “knowledge-power,” “girl power,” “powerplay,” “horse power,” and “power ballade.” The different kinds of power— state power, economic power, physical power, and so on — I specifically call the different “modes” of power, rather than simply “kinds,” “forms,” or as Michael Mann describes them, the “sources” of power. The way in which power is variously arranged, distributed, balanced, and directed I'm calling the “configurations” of power. “Mode” because differences are operative and active rather than substantial or essential. Power isn't the *stuff* or substratum underlying, say, political or economic power. Power is indistinguishable from what it does or how it relates. “Mode” rather than “kind” because it doesn't designate distinct species of power. Modes are only bundles of functions, forces, and conditions, operatively grouped together, sometimes for no longer than a conversation. For instance, if it served us, we could translate something like vision into terms of “eye power” or “ocular power.” We could distinguish and name the powers associated with ants, iron, choreography, each as their own distinct mode: formic power, ferric power, choreographic power. Most of the time, this would be unhelpful or pretty redundant. However, one virtue of thinking through power, as a methodology, is the number of disparate things can be translated into a common conceptual medium of exchange, then weighed in common balance.

Power *names* nothing, however. Power is not by itself an *explanans*. It works in much the same way that “force” works conceptually in Newton's *Principia* or line, point and angle work axiomatically in Euclid's *Elements*. Newton does not explain a movement or change by revealing that “*a force did it.*” Of course a force did it; a force does everything. The question is how, why, and which particular interactions were involved. Likewise with power. In physics, mass, movement and force are mutually constitutive concepts; they define one another. Power and change must likewise be understood in relation to one another, and both in opposition to *static-*

thinking. In one sense, power may “only” be a schema for seeing the interrelations between one array of forces and another. And speaking of the “schematic” or “generic,” there’s a good reason that power has been so slippery for empirically-minded social scientists: power is not entirely, nor even primarily, empirical. In fact, it comes closer to being a category, in a Kantian and, to a degree, Aristotelian sense. Here’s a second, even sharper definition of power that might clarify the first: power is a composite concept or category of two others, causality and possibility.

To speak about power is, essentially, to say that something *could cause* something else, and the meaning of power requires both causation and possibility. Power is not merely what “does” or “will” cause; potentiality is central to its meaning. The sovereign has the power to do many things, often over matters of life and death, whether or not they choose to do them. Even unused, a firearm has the power to maim, to kill, and to persuade; it may, might, *could* cause death, injury, or quicker decisions. Similarly, power does not mean that something “could be” or “could occur” in the sense of it possibly raining tomorrow or possibly pulling three aces in a row— an eventuality or a probability. Power requires linking causes to effects, linking results to agency, will, and direction.

Causality and possibility are what we might call, for a couple of reasons, *dynamic* categories. One, because they necessarily involve change, as opposed to the categories that describe states or the static: space, quality, quantity, substance, and so on. And two, because together they comprise power, or as the Greeks called it, “δύναμις.” Just as causation is not simply *out there*, empirically in the world, and just as possibility is not simply *out there*, empirically in the world, power is not simply found in the world. All three have to be, so to speak, narrated.

However, if power is not entirely empirical, neither is it entirely transcendental. Power cannot be understood according to a strict schematism; we can’t examine it abstractly then afterwards see how it affects the world. Power must be studied immanently— as history, economics, politics, culture, biography, experience— if we want to say anything meaningful or substantial. This also means we cannot delimit an arena of power from the realm of non-power, or contest from incontestability. The various understandings of power are themselves crucial parts of the equations of power, and all terms— all the forms, modes, figures, operations— are themselves contestable.