Power and Social Transformation: Understanding Power from Below

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Abstract

The 2011 uprisings came as a surprise to most observers and toppled seemingly impregnable regimes. As the heady optimism of the revolutions has waned, however, it seems like normal politics has resumed. What this neglects is how the protest movements of 2011 – and social movements more generally – are able to exercise power in multiple ways that extend beyond the state. Our central contention is that we are blind to the transformations that protest effects, because we are wedded to theories of power that are ill-equipped to explain processes of social change. Conventional analyses of power present individuals as internalizing social structures in ways that govern their actions, and negate their agency and resistance. We, therefore, critique leading theorists of power and highlight their inability to explain social upheavals. We then draw on more recent understandings of power that better explain and, thus, enable, social change.

Introduction

For a few heady months in 2011 protest movements shook the world. People toppled governments, challenged taken for granted norms and suggested alternate ways of living. It was a year of massive social change and from Tahrir Square to Zucotti Park the atmosphere was ripe with the sense of possibility. The protests were so central and significant, indeed, that the otherwise staid *Time* magazine dispensed with its individualistic ethos to name 'The Protestor' as its person of the year. The Arab Spring, the 15M occupations in Spain, the Occupy movements and countless other uprisings heralded a sustained challenge to a neo-liberal world order that put the pursuit of profit and the safeguarding of financial systems above people's health and welfare. After the initial euphoria, however, optimism has slowly ebbed away. Revolutions across Africa and the Middle East have seen change at the top rather than meaningful democratisation, Occupy have decamped and moved

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on and things have returned to business as normal.

That, at any rate, is what one might think from following media reports or academic accounts. What we wish to argue instead, is that the protest movements of 2011 – and social movements more generally – are far more effective than such a superficial reading would suggest. One of the reasons we are often blind to the transformations they effect, however, is that we are still wedded to theories of power that are ill-equipped to explain processes of social change. Conventional analyses of power – especially domination - ultimately present individuals as internalizing aspects of their contextual social environments in ways that determine their future behaviour. We suggest that this conception is mistaken and stems from a commitment to theoretical models of power which view individuals' actions as the result rather than a cause, of durable social structures. We offer a critical analysis of Lukes and Bourdieu as paradigmatic theorists of power and suggest that more recent understandings of power (such as Barnes and Foucault) offer better means of understanding (and enabling) social change. We argue that social interaction is central to social phenomena meaning that collective action can alter social structures even without taking power.

Understanding Power

Our understanding of power dynamics focuses on micro-interaction. Following Collins (2000), we argue that explanatory models of power must focus on micro-situational data, explaining why groups form, what their interests are and the struggles they are engaged in. The emergence of collective shared identity and knowledge through social interaction is more fundamental to political group formation and, thus, power than the content of shared 'grand' ideological stances or macro-structural constraints. Whilst individuals may seem powerless in the face of vast systems and structures like capitalism, we aim to demonstrate the power that collectives of individuals can and could wield.

Power struggles, we argue, create new conditions, identities and ways of being in the world and can lead to the renegotiation of power by newly formed or reshaped movements and political groups. The radical possibilities explored in Iceland after the financial crash and the meteoric rise of Podemos as a new political party in Spain, for instance, highlight the impact of grassroots social and political movements. In periods of political upheaval the interplay between repression and resistance helps to constitute new identities and ways of doing things. Power, in other words, must be understood as *performative:* that is, it is in and through interaction that group formation and group transformation emerges. This essay will draw out the lessons to be learned from significant social mobilisations and offer a less defeatist account

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of our ability to effect social change. We begin, however, by delineating the main features of prominent accounts of power.

Traditional conceptions of power

Weber's classic definition of power described it as 'the ability of an actor to sway the actions of another actor or actors, even against resistance' (Piven 2008: 3). The focus here is on power over others, but this formulation has been challenged and reworked since. Key theorists such as Steven Lukes (1974) and Pierre Bourdieu (1995), for instance, have tried to reveal the 'hidden' nature of power dynamics. As Lukes famously put it: 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests - *whether they know their interests or not'* (Lukes 1974: 27). This account comes close to a theory of false consciousness; the idea that the oppressed do not know what their own interests are. Bourdieu, similarly, has described an individuals' lack of knowledge about their own oppression as 'symbolic violence'; a hidden form of coercive power achieved by a process of naturalization. The unconscious embodiment of class traits or the neoliberal ideology of meritocracy, for instance, mean that they become 'doxic' beliefs, or taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. In other words, we come to see them as natural aspects of the social world rather than understanding how they arise from exploitation.

Despite their different approaches to power, the above authors have a common denominator. They all, ultimately, conflate power with domination and view it as a thing that can be possessed. Simplifying somewhat, traditional conceptions of power can be summarised as containing the following features:

  b) *Power as 'domination':* Whether power is seen as is overt and coercive or hidden and symbolic, society is presented as driven by conflict between groups who attempt to maximise their own 'profits' (economic, social or cultural) at the expense of other groups.
  a) *A zero-sum view of power*: power is understood as a finite resource meaning that its possession by some, entails its lack for others. Whether it stems from a particular social status, a masculine sexual identity, or political and economic wealth, such theorists of power envisage those who possess such resources as powerful and others as lacking 'power'. The dominating groups strive constantly to maintain the status quo which benefits them by exploiting and undermining the dominated groups.
  b) *The belief in a singular society:* Both the conflictual nature of social dynamics and the zero-sum character of power convey a notion of a society dominated by a singular hierarchical structure. These theories rely on analytical concepts such as macro-structural systems which govern all social groups and social phenomena (for instance patriarchy

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or capitalism). At one extreme, structural analyses of systems of domination like caste have argued that subordinate groups live in 'deep cultural consensus' with the system that oppresses them.

c) *An 'extrinsic' conception of power:* The sum of the above is a view of power as external to – and independent of - individual interactions. Power is granted to some (groups of) individuals by virtue of their structural position in the social field. Power thus lies outside individual activity and guides it, rather than being the result of it.

In line with such understandings, power in capitalist society hinges on one's position in the relations of production. Owners and financiers possess more resources and more power. To the extent that workers have power, it relates to their ability to withdraw labour and halt production. In authoritarian regimes, by extension, power arises from the capacity for coercion. Traditional interpretations of power, in other words, are conflict centred: i.e. A gets B to do something that B would not otherwise do and where there is a conflict of interest between the two. This conflict, however, is said to remain hidden to the dominated. 'Coercion and intimidation', as Castells (2012: 5) puts it, '… are essential mechanisms for imposing the will of those in control of the institutions of society. However the construction of meaning in people's minds is a more decisive and more stable source of power'. Lukes' 'third' dimension of power – the manufacture of desires, and Bourdieu's idea of bodily incorporation of social structures, help explain why systems of domination endure by pointing towards the unwitting way in which subjects collude in their own subordination.

Failings of traditional theories of power

Such traditional theories of power, thus, tacitly oscillate between macro-structuralism and methodological individualism. Put differently, they understand individuals as isolated entities not susceptible to other individuals but rather operating in relation to macro-phenomena. For instance class struggle as the struggle against the structures of 'capitalism' or women's oppression as the result of systemic forms of patriarchy. This perspective, ultimately conceives of agents as shaped by their early socialization and responding to alterations in 'objective' structures rather than effecting such alterations.

The upshot is that such models emphasise the permanence and rigidity of power structures and downplay the possibilities for change. This is what we call an *extrinsic* model of the social world in which structural features endow individuals and groups with differential power and this, in turn, determines the power struggles and dynamics in which they will engage (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007). Importantly, such understandings of power create a particular conception of agency. Individual's practices, here, are seen as epiphenomenal

to the structural arrangements. Individual agency is analytically explained as conforming to existing group alignments and non-reflexive. Consequently change and resistance are presented as 'slips' rather than conscious efforts to change the world. Following Bourdieu to the letter, people are literally incapable of thinking beyond the situations they inhabit. Rather than rail at injustice in a neo-liberal world, for instance, they internalise the discourse of meritocracy and see their own precarious positions as personal failure and inadequacy. Resistance is explained as arising only when external events generate profound social crises which reveal the 'arbitrary' nature of the world.

Explaining Resistance

On the face of it, these dominant models of power appear to make sense and explain both the durable nature of inequalities or despotic governments and the relative quiescence of those subject to forms of domination. If people were the active, autonomous and creative agents that people like James Scott (1985, 1990) celebrate, why don't we experience revolutionary waves more often? The fact that protests often occur in cycles, indeed, reinforces the argument that people are incapable of seeing through the veil of power and understanding exploitation for what it is, save in extraordinary situations or moments of crisis. The uprisings of 2011 could be presented as the fall-out of a debilitating financial crisis that stripped the legitimacy from financial institutions and political regimes that had been able to persuade people of their inevitability up until that point.

As Scott, notes, however, the idea of a subject who is blind to his or her own subordination is an authoritarian fantasy. The trouble with such accounts is that they struggle to explain the rich and varied history of rebellion, let alone the pervasive acts of resistance that occur on an almost daily basis around the world. If people are 'unconscious' of their oppression, then we cannot explain their decisions to resist inequality or engage in time-consuming and costly acts of rebellion. Significantly, a lack of knowledge about alternate social arrangements does not mean that the slave or serf cannot imagine 'the world turned upside down' and a total reversal of the existing distribution of resources. There are countless examples across all continents of subaltern groups envisaging egalitarian societies without the distinctions that they experience.

Furthermore, in most contexts the dominant are called on to explain why a particular social order is in the best interests of the subordinate. In so doing, they create a social contract against which they can be judged and held to account. E.P. Thompson's (1991) concept of 'legitimising notions' captures the popular discourses and moral codes to which people appeal in contesting or breaking laws that they object to. In the contemporary world, Olesen (2005)

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suggests that regimes and systems of governance are increasingly obliged to legitimate their actions in democratic terms. This legitimisation, in turn, leaves them open to contestation by social and political movements.

Scott notes that outside of extreme situations of socio-political isolation, systems of social control tend to create social spaces (by lumping particular categories of people together in residential or labour settings) where the oppressed can talk in comparative safety. Safe from persecution and freed from the fear of coercion, these backstage areas allow for the emergence of what Scott (1985) terms 'the hidden transcript' – people's critiques, grumbles, rumours and visions of different worlds. People do not buy into systems that suppress them, this suggests, so much as recognise the difficulties of openly confronting them.

Power from Below?

Let us, at this point, step back from the theoretical jargon for a while and consider a number of empirical examples in which collective actors have sought to change the world. Having outlined these struggles, all too briefly, we will ask whether existing models of power adequately explain them or not. The three cases on which we will focus here are the Arab revolutions, the Fairtrade movement and the pots and pans revolution in Iceland.[i] These cases are not chosen as representative or typical in any way, but as relatively recent mobilisations that allow us to discuss a range of forms and outcomes of collective action.

'Every revolution', says Bayat (2013: 586), speaking of the uprisings across the Arab world in 2011, 'is a surprise'. He notes how intelligence agencies, the media, academic commentators and the regime itself saw Mubarak's grip on power as firm enough to withstand demonstrations. Traditional power theorists would have concurred with their assessment and pointed to the successful crushing of dissent in the 2000s. In explaining the fall of Mubarak, furthermore, they could point to the decision by the army to stay on the sidelines as constituting a significant shift in power. Whilst the army undoubtedly played a key role in the unfolding of the Egyptian revolution, any analysis that begin with the revolution obscures the precursors to revolt. Bayat, for instance, details the widespread nature of hidden dissent. The regime, he notes, could subdue collective actors, but they could not put a stop to 'the diffused but simultaneous practices of "non-movements"' (2013: 589). His account of the pervasive undercurrent of dissent is vividly captured in *Writing Revolution* – an extraordinary collection of activist voices from across the Arab world (Al-Zubaidi and Cassel 2013). Time again, those who experienced fear, torture and repression temper their celebration of the revolutionary moment and call instead, for a processual understanding of

change. Crucially, what that book and others powerfully demonstrate is people's capacity to envisage alternate ways of living even in the midst of brutal dictatorships. The capacity for calculative action, it is clear, remains ever-present.

If the Arab Spring promised radical change, the Fairtrade movement may seem like an odd case study for a paper on power. Fairtrade, in brief, is the attempt to create a parallel supply-chain in which the pursuit of profit is displaced as the primary end-goal for businesses intent on bring ethics back into consumption. 'Fairtrade is a strategy for *poverty alleviation* and sustainable development. Its purpose is to create opportunities for producers and workers who have been economically *disadvantaged or marginalized by the conventional trading system'* [Fairtrade Foundation, emphasis in original]. It advances these goals by paying more than the market price for raw products (coffee, cocoa, tea etc), and by working with producer communities in various ways. Ultimately, however, the strategy depends on consumers deciding to spend more for Fairtrade branded products than they otherwise would. This ability to charge more to niche products initially led market analysts to see Fairtrade as a clever manipulation of middle-class guilt. Consonant with traditional models of power, the feeling was that niche marketing enabled large corporations to cash in on diverse markets and maintain a healthy balance sheets for themselves whilst the producers themselves remain in poverty.

Webb (2007), however, dismisses such analysis. Focusing on coffee sales she asks why the big corporations felt the need to invest in Fairtrade when they dominated the market anyway. Rather than a top-down model of market manipulation, she charts the mobilisation by a coalition of charities, NGOs and religious groups that contested the unfettered pursuit of profit and put pressure on corporations to alter their practices. Whilst the end-goals of the movement are reformist rather than revolutionary, the concerted action of multiple individuals as channelled through social movement organisations has resulted in the creation not just of alternate products, but of an alternate supply chain and what Lewin et al (2004) refer to an a whole new 'trade paradigm' in which social, environmental and ethical concerns are pre-requisites for participation.

Finally, let us turn to the possibilities suggested by the Icelandic revolution of 2008-2011. As Castells (2012) and Burgess and Keating (2003) illustrate, Iceland's banking industry collapsed following the global economic crash in 2008. Its three largest private banks were put into receivership and its stock market lost 90% of its value. Unemployment reached 10%, housing prices dropped precipitously as did the currency rate, while inflation increased. A single protester, Hordur Torfuson, started singing protest songs outside

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parliament in an act that Castells credits with precipitating the 'Pots and Pans Revolution'. In January 2009, the government capitulated. New elections brought a leftist Social Democratic/Green coalition to power headed by Johanna Sigurdardottir - the first openly gay head of government in the world. Despite its progressive leanings, however, the new government continued to pursue bank-friendly policies backed by the IMF. The Icelandic public was expected to pay millions for the empty promises of private banks that had gone bankrupt. Following protests there was a referendum on the issue and the people voted to default on these debts. Leading bankers were arrested and prosecuted as was the former PM! Economic experts predicted disaster, and following existing understandings of how resources are distributed in the neo-liberal world economy we would expect them to be correct, but the economy bounced back in part *because* the government did not have to repay debts. Unemployment fell to 5% and Iceland also produced a new constitution that was effectively crowd-sourced and embraced transparency and common ownership of public resources. Since this heady period a new government has come to power and some of the gains of the revolution have been scaled back. Despite this, the Icelandic case suggests that social movements can reshape state and society in meaningful ways that defy the 'compulsions' of a macro-structural order. Iceland is a small and homogeneous state and so its example may be hard to emulate, but its challenge to the accepted wisdoms of our world are compelling.

Rethinking Power

The problem is, that none of the above cases can be explained or indeed understood whilst we are wedded to theories of power that view it as arising from macro-structural conditions. **'We must'** as Foucault (1977: 194) puts it, 'cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms, it 'excludes', it 'represses' … in fact power produces, it produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth'. Foucault is one of only a few authors who have highlighted the constitutive nature of micro-activity in relationship to power dynamics. One of the key insights of Foucauldian understandings of power is that structural phenomena themselves emerge as the effect of the continuous actions of individuals.

Such constructionist accounts share an interest in linking power dynamics to knowledge and its role in constituting new forms of social life. They view the micro-dynamics of individuals' activity in relation to sharing, distributing, negotiating knowledge within a collective as the basis of power configurations and power struggles. We call this an 'intrinsic' model of power, because it arises from the micro-dynamics of interactions among collectives of individuals. In sum, an *interactive and constitutive* conception of power holds that power is created in its exercise. Power is not something possessed or

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wielded by powerful agents, rather is created by those who support it, practice it or resist it. Power is thus constitutive. This does not, however, mean that it is 'easy' for dissenters to effect change.

Even in situations where everyone is aware of the dynamics of oppression, collective protest does not emerge until particular conditions are in place. Indeed, the collective sharing of knowledge is essential to the emergence of new social movements and political parties. This is what Castells (2012) is getting at in his idea of 'communication power'. Significantly, Castells argues that the rise of the internet and forms of what he calls 'mass self-communication' have significantly disrupted hegemonic narratives. Following Barnes: 'The problem of why a power is obeyed is not deeper than that of why a traffic-light is obeyed' (Barnes, 1988:59). By this he means that power is the result of shared knowledge among *all* the participants of a particular power field.

Shared knowledge actually underpins the power held by different groups. The possibility to share and spread information through the internet and social media has disrupted the ability of those in power to dominate information flows. It has allowed the dispersed knowledge that already exists among previously unconnected individuals and collectives to become the 'common knowledge' of a much larger and wider collective. This effectively empowers groups and facilitates more efficient resistance and collective action. One of the central achievements of networked communication has been the disruption of dominant groups to 'divide and rule' by means of the manipulation and restriction of information.

Barnes argues that social life is the effect of the self-referential activity of a collective of mutually susceptible individuals. That is, social phenomena (such as power) emerge from the references to it made by a collective of individuals. This complex theoretical language highlights an important social process. It refers to the fact that all of us as individuals help to construct the world around us by using agreed categories. For instance, a 'leader' is who and what we collectively take to be a leader and refer to as such. Leadership, thus, is a *social institution* which both shapes social practices and the individuals or groups who are named as leaders. Whilst we commonly speak of charismatic or 'natural' leaders, leadership is fundamentally a social relationship. When a leader loses legitimacy, therefore, their charisma and authority can crumble.

From this perspective, to conceive power as something which is *possessed* by someone who can impose her wishes onto others, does not address *what* power is or *how* it emerges. Rather than accepting asymmetries of power, Barnes (1988: 7) suggests that we must ask 'why it is that someone happens to be in a position of being able to enforce influence or coercion onto others'?' Whereas traditional models of power such as Lukes' (based on Weber's distinction in legitimate and coercive power) distinguish between 'granted' power (e.g. a political leader) and coercive power (a dictatorship), for

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performative models such as Barnes' even the capacity to use of brute force should be seen as a self-referential activity underpinned by the *collective belief* in power. When that belief evaporates – as it did across the Arab world in 2011, the consequences for despots can be catastrophic.

It is necessary to highlight that understanding power as the product of the sharing of knowledge between heterogeneous calculative individuals who necessarily bring into the interaction differing beliefs, practices and dispositions leaves power always under-determined and open ended. Individuals never operate identically to one another. There are always multiple ways to interpret, negotiate and carry out a command. Authority, therefore, is never static. Change is not the result of external, structural forces but is and inevitable part of social relations and processes.

In grappling with what all this means for our understanding of power, we have found Kusch's (1991) persuasive reconstruction of Foucault most helpful. Kusch argues that productive power should be understood as an *internal-essential relation of interaction* and not an *external-accidental relation of comparison*. Now this may seem somewhat impenetrable, but perhaps an example can help to clarify the key points: Accidental attributes are those which do not constitute identity whereas essential attributes do (hair length is an accidental attribute of sex identity, whereas reproductive organs are essential). An external relation of comparison is that which happens when attributes are already formed (A is taller than B) whereas an internal relation is that in which the interaction constitutes a *social* identity: A becomes a teacher and B a student through *interaction*; or, more pertinently, A becomes a creditor and B a debtor or A becomes a Brahmin and B an untouchable in and through interaction.

To identify power, thus, we must locate *the essential, rather than accidental,* attributes being constituted. We must, in other words, start by empirically identifying those mechanisms underlying the constitution of group markers – in particular those which signify their identity and social status within a particular social order. This, to put it in less technical terms, is precisely what Occupy Wall Street did with their idea of a debtor's strike. As Piven (2014: 226) notes, the idea gets to the heart of the interactive nature of social structures: 'just as industrialists depend on workers for production and profit, so do the financial titans who have extended vast sums of credit – to homeowners and students and credit card holders and government agencies that float bonds – depend on these borrowers, whose loans constitute a good portion of the capital of the financial industry'. Such analysis, as Piven notes, entails a 'redefinition of the nature and value of social contributions' and the inherent possibilities for disruption that each of us enjoys.

Recovering reflexive agency

An important aspect of *performative* conceptions of power is that it understands agency and calculative action as central to the constitution, reinforcement, resistance and disruption of particular configurations of power. This is very much in opposition to Bourdieu's and Lukes' conception of the agency of the dominated as bypassing conscious reflexion. All forms of power (legitimized or coercive) rely on the active calculative practices of the individuals of a collective. To follow a command or to yield to a threat it *must be understood*. In other words, power can continue to be exercised not because it overrides calculative agency *but precisely because of it*.

It is our contention that performative theories of power allow for a more realistic understanding of the empirical realities of power relationships by focussing on the micro-activity of knowledge generation and distribution. They, therefore, provide a better explanation of resistance to particular instances of social domination and the emergence of new social movements of protest. An intrinsic conception of power allows to understand instances of domination as contextualized, under-determined and open ended. Emerging social movements of protest are equally the result of a multiplicity of contingent events coming together. Power, this suggests, is not located in reified overarching macro-structural entities like that of capitalism or patriarchy but rather in localized instances of actual individuals engaging in social relations and utilizing a multiplicity of different mechanisms which result in the formation of power holders and power subjects. Political, social and ideological transformations are the result of transformations of this common knowledge about power.

In *Change the World without Taking Power*, John Holloway (2002) offers a vision of social activism that is not tied to attempts to seize state power. In describing how the acts he advocates do not seek to impose on others, Holloway coins the term 'anti-power'. For all his other virtues, we find this term deeply unhelpful. Indeed, such an account could further serve to obscure the possibilities inherent in collective action. The activists who grow their own vegetables as part of the transition town movement, who retrieve produce from skips rather than perpetuate forms of consumerism, or who seek forms of consensus are not seeking state power. Whilst this is true, however, as we hope to have shown, they also have power and – in exercising it – they bring about subtle alterations in social relationships and patterns of knowledge. When those disparate and diffused practices of dissent come together, tyrants are toppled and new worlds are envisaged. As Piven notes by reference to the idea of a debtors strike, exercising such power can be difficult, the failure to recognise its possibilities, however, makes such exercise less likely still.

In closing, it is worth reflecting what we can learn from this analysis of power relations. If this is no more than an academic or theoretical exercise then its value is limited. What we contend, however, is that an understanding of power as arising from the actions and interactions of individuals and collectives can be empowering. It emphasises two critically important points: firstly, that all of us have the capacity to change things. Freed from a view of power that presents some as powerful and others as powerless, we can begin to think through how we might co-ordinate dispersed individuals in order to achieve change. Equally, we might be better placed to think through what possible purchase we might have on regimes of power. The idea of a debtor's strike speaks to the capacity of those marginalised by a consumer society could make a difference if their actions were co-ordinated. In the context of a caste society, activists note how recognising one's own complicity in perpetuating caste boundaries, can help you to change your own behaviour and attitudes. Secondly, and relatedly, his view of power speaks to the cumulative effects of small actions if they are co-ordinated. The mass boycott of South African produce played a vital role in weakening the apartheid state. Rather than wondering how things can ever change, this perspective suggests, we can recognise the power inherent in everyday acts of resistance.

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i   Elsewhere (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007; Rafanell and Gorringe 2010) we have applied these insights to a study of caste.