Power over the Minds of Others

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Social injustice and political oppression are, obviously, to the disadvantage of those suffering from such injustice and oppression. All the more surprising and alarming is it that very often unjust and oppressive social and political structures are not only accepted by but also actively supported by the disadvantaged. How can one explain this?[1]

We propose to analyze this phenomenon as an effect of social power. Roughly: One agent or group of agents is able to shape the will of other agents in a way that suits the first but not the second.[2] However, the problem is that standard notions of power do not seem well suited to the task of describing and explaining our core phenomenon. Social power is most often understood as the ability of an agent to have his way even against resistance by others. One could call this type of very visible power "conflictive power". Standard forms of it consist in overwhelming and incapacitating others or in coercing them with (mostly negative) sanctions. But what sense does it make to say that A can shape B's will against their will? We need to supplement the standard, conflictive notion of power by a different notion of power that enables us to understand how some agents can shape other agents' attitudes and minds.

We start with an explanation of the standard notion of power: not just in order to point to its limitations but also in order to identify tools for the analysis of our core phenomenon. In a very general sense, power can be understood as the ability of agents to reach their goals. This is often called "power-to" (See, e.g., Hobbes 1909, 66 [41]), Russell 1938, 35 or Parsons 1963, 232). An agent can have the power to do one thing but lack the power to do another thing. With other words, "power-to" is relative to specific goals.[3]

Power-to need not involve social relations between different agents. However, what we need here is a more specific notion of power, a notion of social power. We are interested in power-over, that is, power that some agents have over other agents. Social power-over is a form of power-to. The classical definition which is still relevant today stems from Max Weber: "'Power' (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability

1 A topic like this requires a close cooperation between philosophy and the social sciences. – This paper uses some of Baumann and Cramer 2017.

2 We are thus using an agency-based notion of power. This leaves open whether power could also be "structural" in the sense that it is not (or not necessarily) a resource of agents. We will leave this question open here.

3 Sometimes people try to aggregate the specific powers-to of an agent into their "overall" power. However, one should be skeptical of such attempts. It is, for instance, not at all clear whether the different specific powers can be weighed against each other in a non-arbitrary way.

rests." (Weber 1978, 53).[4] Like power-to, power-over is relative to specific goals. Weber's explanation does not (as we will see) cover all forms of power but it captures core forms. Power-to can be distributed equally as well as unequally. All full citizens of a country might have an equal power to vote but only some might be able to run a marathon.[5]. In contrast, inequality of abilities and resources is necessary for power-over. Consider Weber's explanation again. Roughly, A has power over B insofar as A can reach their goal even against B's resistance. However, if B can reach their goal even against A's resistance, then A cannot have power over B. Hence, power-over is essentially asymmetric and based on an unequal distribution of the relevant resources and abilities. We get the same result if we generalize Weber's explanation a bit: Power is the ability of an agent to secure cooperation (or at least prevent disruption) from others for the attainment of their goals even if those others were initially not willing to cooperate (whether they intended to put up active resistance or not). If A and B have conflicting goals and are unwilling initially to cooperate with each other, and if A can still secure B's cooperation, then it seems to follow that B cannot at the same time be able to secure A's cooperation.[6]

In order to get a firmer grip on the notion of power-over or of social power it is necessary to make a distinction between the preferences and the goals of an agent. Preferences are relatively stable dispositions of agents to rank options or states of affairs according to their desirability for the agent.[7] I might prefer having an afternoon stroll through the park when the sun is out to spending the afternoon reading a book when the sun is out; however, when it's raining I might prefer spending the afternoon reading to strolling through the park. What I will do in the afternoon is not fully determined by my preferences; it also depends on what the circumstances of the situation are or, more precisely, what I take them to be. Given the above preferences, I will go out if the sun is out (or more precisely: if I take it to be out) but stay in if I'm assuming or expecting bad weather. My goals (to stroll through the park, to read a chapter at home) are determined by my preferences and my (perceived) circumstances. Goals are a function of preferences in combination with perceived circumstances.[8] Goals change with changing situations while the underlying preferences explain why the goals change the way they do, given changed (perceived) circumstances.

We can now distinguish between different forms of social power (power-over). First, there is a very straightforward and blunt form of power: the ability to incapacitate another agent. Only in extreme cases does this involve complete incapacitation in all respects (e.g., by killing the other agent). In the typical and most common cases the incapacitation is restricted to specific actions relevant to the goal of the agent using this kind of power. Suppose A and B are at an

4 The German word "Chance" is here translated as "probability"; one might prefer to translate it as "ability" or "chance". The phrase "despite resistance" translates "auch gegen Widerstreben", dropping the "auch" (also); perhaps "even despite resistance" would be more adequate as a translation.

5 Unequal distribution of power-to is not sufficient for power-over. You may be a better singer than I but that as such does not give you power over me.

6 One might protest here and claim that an "equilibrium" of power is possible and even often happens. One can reply to this that these cases are rather ones of an equilibrium of powers-to rather than of powers-over. But even if one accepted a notion of power that is not essentially asymmetric cases of equilibrium would still be special cases. We would still have good reasons to regard the cases involving inequality of resources and abilities as the primary ones.

7 We are using the notion of a strict preference here which excludes indifference between two options. 8 Another way to express this is to say that choices are the result of subjective utility functions and subjective probability

functions. For more on this see, e.g., Resnik 1987. We are using this kind of view as a descriptive tool rather than a normative guideline about how to make choices.

auction. A would like to make an offer and raise his arm. B, however, does not want A to make an offer. B is stronger than A and by sheer force keeps A's arm down. Incapacitating power enables agents to prevent disruption (rather than secure active cooperation).

A second from of social power is based on the use of sanctions. The case of negative sanctions is perhaps more salient than the case of positive sanctions. An agent A has social power over an agent B based on negative sanctions just in case A can credibly and effectively threaten B into acting a certain way. This is relevant in a situation where both have different and conflicting goals: A wants B to do X (e.g., hand over his wallet) rather than Y (keep his wallet) while B initially prefers doing Y to X. A's credible threat makes B believe that A will bring about negative consequences for B (e.g., being shot at) if B does Y (and will not bring about those negative consequences if B does X). If the threat is effective, B comes to believe that the negative consequences will be so bad for him that according to his underlying preferences (e.g., preferring being alive without the wallet to losing the wallet and perhaps also his life) he changes his goals from Y to X and acts in the way desired by A.

The case of positive sanctions is somewhat parallel. An agent A has influence over an agent B based on positive sanctions just in case A can make a credible and effective offer to B, which motivates B to act in a certain way. Suppose B initially prefers keeping his car to giving it away to A while A has the reverse preferences. A credible offer (e.g., of a good sum of money) makes B believe that A will bring about positive consequences for B (receiving a good sum of money) if B hands over his car (and will not do so if he doesn't hand over his car). If the offer is effective, B comes to believe that the positive consequences will be so good for him that according to his underlying preferences (e.g., preferring having the money but not the car to keeping the car but missing the money) he changes his goals from keeping to handing over his car and acts in the way desired by A. Not all uses of positive sanctions are cases of power but some arguably are (like, e.g., the excessively low offer for the car of someone who is in desperate need of money).

In both cases of sanction-based social power it is essential that the other person understands and acts accordingly. Threats or offers fail if the addressee panics, loses his mind or faints. In both cases the agent using power influences the goals of the other agent but not their underlying preferences: They are given as fixed. Sanction-based power is one form of the ability of an agent to bring about and secure cooperation from others; it is quite different from incapacitating power.

There are further forms of power, apart from incapacitating or sanctioning power, which are not coercive in the sense of overpowering the will of another person. The two forms of power mentioned so far have in common that the preferences of the other person remain unaffected. A third possibility is that an agent has power insofar as they can change the underlying preferences of the other person so that the possibility of conflict doesn't even arise in the first place (and coercion is absent from the start). This is what we need to understand and explain our target phenomenon. So, what exactly is this third form of social power?

Even though thinking about social power has traditionally focused on "harder" forms of power like incapacitation, the use of sanctions and similar methods, there is also a tradition of thinking about power over the preferences of others. One can think of the 16th Century author Étienne de la Boétie and his idea of "voluntary servitude" (see La Boétie 1978).[9] Marxist

9 Compare the later echo in Deleuze & Guattari 1972, 306: "Il arrive qu'on désire contre son intérêt. Comment expliquer que le désir se livre à des opérations qui ne sont pas des méconnaissances, mais des investissements inconsients parfaitement réactionnaires?" (see also 325ff.).

conceptions of ideology or hegemony also come to mind (see amongst many Marx and Engels 1978 on the first or Gramsci 1971 on the second).[10] More recently, Joseph Nye has presented his view of "soft power" (see Nye 2011). A bit before, Steven Lukes presented his "radical view" of power (see Lukes 1974, 2005). All these very different authors are up to something important but we also think that they have left most of the work to be done here to all of us. We cannot go into any detailed critique of any of these views here[11] but will rather be constructive and propose some ideas for an understanding and explanation of our target phenomenon and the power over the preferences of others. We approach this question by asking what factors determine preferences.

First, preferences are neither given nor fixed but develop in environments and in response to traits of the environments. It is not surprising that a taste for skiing is more prevalent amongst people living in higher mountains than in flatter environments. Adaptive preferences – the adaptation of what one wants to what one can get (or thinks one can get) – are an inversion of the case in which one tries to change the world according to one's preferences (see, e.g., Elster 1982). However, to some degree all preferences are "adaptive": in the sense that in different environments different preferences are more or less likely to develop. Hence, an agent who can shape the environment of another agent in a certain way can thus also shape their preferences. Work organizations, for instance, are often very good at creating an environment that creates or strengthens certain work motivations. One could also mention the long-term effects of agenda setting and constraining feasible options which can influence the preferences of others. We can call this "channel" of influence on preferences "ecological".

Preferences also depend on other attitudes of an agent. The environment of an agent interacts with their preferences through their beliefs about the environment. Someone who can influence and manage the information another agent gets or is able to get, can thus also influence their preferences. Sometimes people are not informed or misinformed about the availability of certain alternatives; given the adaptivity of preferences, someone who can control the information available to others can thus also influence their preferences (see, e.g., Rorty 1983, 808ff.).[12] Another relevant attitude are emotions. They also influence preferences, especially in the long run. It is not hard to imagine, for instance, parents who instill a fear of homosexuals in their children and thus influence their perception of their own sexual preferences. What one could call "emotion politics" is an important resource of power. Finally, we would like to mention the resource of self-confidence, which is often distributed unequally in social groups, organizations and societies. Agents who suffer from a relative lack of self-confidence are more open than others to the shaping of their preferences by others. Thus, leaders of cults and sects have better chances of shaping their followers' wills if the latter have low self-confidence. We can call this kind of channel of influencing others' preferences "attitudinal".

10 For a darker version (not directly related to the notion of power) see in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno 1969, 128-176 on "Kulturindustrie" (culture industry) or Marcuse 1964 on "one-dimensional society".

11 Marx and Engels, for instance, only left some hints towards a theory of ideology but nothing of a developed form. The "old" Frankfurt School didn't offer the kind of conceptual analysis or detailed empirical insight we have in mind (and often rather a gloomy view from the terraces of the *Grand Hotel Abgrund*). Nye is too vague at the conceptual level and not solid enough in his empirical basis. Lukes comes closest to what we have in mind but also faces serious problems. These very brief remarks must suffice here. For some criticism of Nye and of Lukes see Baumann and Cramer 2015, 2017.

12 This is closely related to sociological accounts of the "definition of the situation" and the power influencing it. See, as a classic source: Thomas & Znaniecki 1958, I, 68.

Less tangible is a third channel. Preferences and volitive states in general are indeterminate in two different ways. First, they are not spelled out in all possible detail but many things are left open. I might have a strong preference for living in a particular city but lack any attitude towards different neighborhoods (which is not the same as being indifferent between them). Second, preferences themselves are partly constituted by what the subject thinks they are (see, e.g., Bem 1970, 50, passim). Suppose I want to go to the theatre tonight – but why? Is it the main actor I want to see or do I just need some company? There might not be a fact of the matter before I give a particular answer to that question (see Waismann 1983, 134-135 for this example). An agent who can influence the interpretative schemata another agent uses to make sense of their preferences can thus also influence their preferences. We can call this channel of influence on others' preferences "interpretational".

Finally, preferences and motivational states in general are also subject to normative expectations. Human beings are able to form evaluative and normative attitudes (higher-order attitudes) towards their own volitional states (see Frankfurt 1971). Someone might want to have a cigarette but also prefer not to have that wish. Agents' normative attitudes towards their first order preferences can shape and change those preferences – sometimes or to some degree. An agent who can influence another agent's normative ideas about their own preferences can thus also influence their preferences. Work organizations, for instance, might propagate a certain work ethics and thus shape their members' work attitude, including their work-related preferences. We can call this channel of influence on others' preferences "normative".

To these four channels correspond four forms of power over the preferences of others: ecological, attitudinal, interpretational and normative power over other agents' preferences.[13] What is needed to turn such influence into power is a certain inequality or asymmetry. If one agent (A) in a social relation but not the other agent (B) is able to secure the other's cooperation (or at least prevent disruption) even if the other agent was not initially willing to cooperate, and even against their rational freedom (that is, circumventing the other agent's free and rational consent), then A has power over B's preferences (see above).

What we have presented here is not anything like a developed theory but rather a proposal of a strategy for a better understanding and better explanations of how it can be that social structures and institutions can find support amongst those who don't benefit that much from them.

13 On normative power more generally see, e.g., Etzioni 1968, 357ff. or Mann 1986, 22ff. on "ideological power" which has elements of normative influence as well as power over the definition of the situation.

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