

Concepts of Power

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Introduction

For purposes of working together, the following is one way we could conceptualize power to have a common language for understanding it, interpreting our experience of it, and facilitating its strategic use. In the Gettysburg project we encourage examining ways to strategize power more effectively “internally” with respect to our constituencies, across our organizations, more collaboratively, and to address challenges in the institutional contexts within which our organizations operate.

Understanding Power

Dr. Martin Luther King defined power as “the ability to achieve purpose” - adding, “whether it is good or bad depends on the purpose.” Understanding power requires looking at it as relational: influence created in the interaction of one’s purposes – or interests — and resources required achieving them. If I can realize my interests entirely with my own resources I have all the power I need. And if acting on my interests requires access to your resources as much as your acting on your interests requires access to mine, we can collaborate to create more “power with” each other than on our own. But if my need for your resources exceeds your need for my resources you get some “power over” me: you may access my resources to act on your interests at the expense of my own. So power is not a thing one has, a resource, but influence created at the intersection of what one has what one needs.

But neither interests nor resources are fixed. De Tocqueville argued that through association with others, one could “rightly understand” one’s “self-interest”: we not only may we learn more about our interests but we may also discover interests we have in common. So one well-known way to alter power relationships is to combine resources in pursuit of common interests so as to turn individual dependence into collective interdependence (boycotts, strikes). In reality, interests and resources are highly contextualized. So an interest can be understood as any goal-driving purpose rooted in one’s values - from financial security in the form of keeping a job to a need for the status in the form of tenure. And a resource can be anything useful for acting on one’s interests: economic, political, cultural, social, etc. Appreciation of this fluidity of meaning, and its “power”, is one of the key components of strategic imagination.

One example of turning a “power over” relationship on its head was action by Montgomery Bus Boycotters to turn individual dependence on bus riding (resource) to get to work (interest) into the bus company’s dependence for profits (interest) on collective bus fare (resource) withheld. At the same time boycotters created more “power with” each other by forming a car pool that linked the resources of those with cars who wanted to end segregation with those sacrificing to fight segregation, but needed rides to work. The common interest that sustained the car pool, however, grew out of participation in a struggle that went far deeper than the relatively narrow interest of “bus riders” to that of ending segregation itself.

Understanding power as relational grew out of the work of R.M. Emerson, often described as “dependency theory” as well as that of Bernard Loomer. Its value is in enabling us to discern

patterns of interdependence within which we operate to identify points of strategic leverage.ⁱⁱ

Observing Power

Sometimes we can easily observe power at work, as when one side wins a vote on a city council and the other side loses. But at other times, power is *hidden* in that it rests with those who decide what gets on an agenda in the first place, who gets to decide, and who sets the rules of making decisions. Still other times power may be *invisible* in that it has been “baked” into our understanding of “the way things are.” This is described as the three faces of power, detectable by asking three questions: who wins (face #1), who sets agendas (face #2), and who benefits/who loses (face #3). This approach is based on the work of Steven Lukes and John Gaventa.ⁱⁱⁱ

This way of looking at power can help distinguish strategy that focuses only on dealing with a symptom, like a segregated bus, from contesting the policy of bus segregation, from getting at the inequality of power responsible in the first place. For example, during the economic meltdown some people were getting thrown out of their houses by police, sheriffs, or security agents (face #1). Decisions as to when, where, and who would be evicted were made by banks in collaboration with courts, following the rules (face #2). But who held the power to set these rules in the first place, where did it come from, and how is it sustained (face #3)

Structuring Power

Power is exercised in particular settings, arenas, or domains shaped by political, economic, social, or cultural structures. Structures can be understood as sets of rules, practices, norms within which actors mobilize resources to act on interests. Structures themselves result from earlier power struggles, the settlement of which resulted in new “structures.”

In the political context we often think of local, state, national, and global domains within which, and across which, power may be exercised. We may try to solve a local problem by mobilizing power locally, but if the problem is a result of power being exercised nationally, we would be wise to find allies beyond our locality. Work in this area includes that of Schattschneider, Skocpol, and others.^{iv}

We may have an economic problem, but find we must organize politically or culturally to acquire the resources to influence the interests of those responsible for our economic problem. In other words we may be able to translate “economic capital” into “political capital” or “cultural capital” into economic capital. Work focusing on domains in which power is exercised includes that of Weber, Mann, Bourdieu and others.^v

We also structure the use of power within and among organizations through which we may organize people to solve problems produced by other organizations created to pursue other interests. Who holds the resources that drive our organizations? Do we depend more on temporal or financial resources to do our work? Who decides how these resources are used, at what level, over what period of time? Work on the structuring of organizations that exercise “voice” (as opposed to goods and services providers) includes Michels, Lipset, Wilson, and

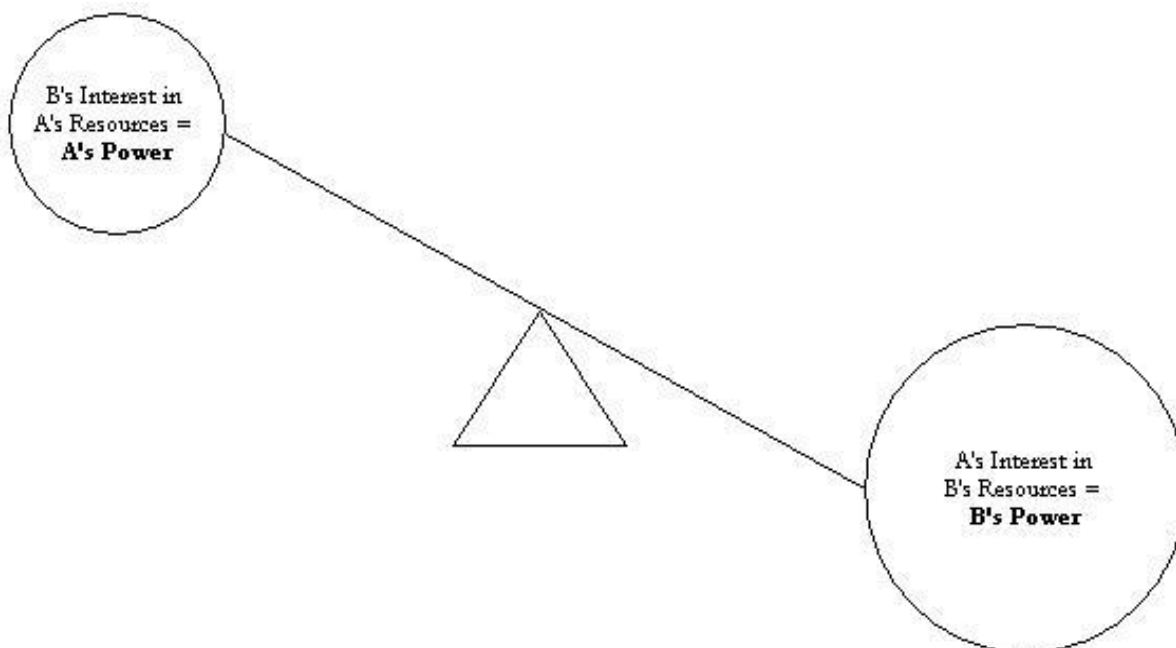
others.^{vi}

Strategizing Power

Strategizing is how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want – so it is all about power. Analyzing power in terms described above requires identifying the actors, their interests, their resources and the patterns of interdependency among them. We would look at the visible, hidden, and invisible ways power is being exercised as well as structural contexts in which it is operating. Strategy is often not so much about how to get more resources or even alter one's interests, but how to use one's resources so as to get all the leverage one can from them. In the chart below, it would be less about changing the size of the balls as is it would be moving the fulcrum.

Reconfiguring power, from an action perspective, begins with finding ways actors can redeploy their resources or redefine their interests. When we focus on a particular problem we may need to ask ourselves if it is only that problem we hope to solve or is it a general policy or rule affecting that type of problem, or is it the configuration of power, often structural, than created the problem in the first place. This is not a matter of long or short term strategizing but, rather, of how deep; i.e., how tactical or strategic we need to be in tackling problems we are tackling.

Relational Power



POWER WITH

Sometimes we can create the change we need just by organizing our resources with others, creating power with them. For example, creating a cooperative day care, or a community credit union, or a volunteer service bank.



POWER OVER

Sometimes others hold power over decisions or resources that we need in order to create change in our lives. In that case we have to organize our own power with others first in order to make a claim on the resources or decisions that will fulfill our interests.



CHANGING POWER OVER

When we have to engage with those who have power over us in order to create change, we ask ourselves four basic questions.



The Strategy Question:

5. What's our theory of change? How could we organize our resources to give us enough leverage to get what we want?

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ⁱⁱ Emerson, Richard M. 1962. "Power-Dependence Relations." *American Sociological Review*. 27: 31-41, Loomer, Bernard. "Two Conceptions of Power." *Process Studies* 6.1 (1976): 5-32. De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Section 2, Chapter VIII.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View* (McMillan, New York); Gaventa, John, 1982. *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Gaventa, New York)

^{iv} Schattschneider, EE. 1975. *The Semi-Sovereign People: a realist's view of democracy*. (Cengage, New York); Skocpol, Theda. 1992. *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: the origin of the American welfare state* (Harvard, Cambridge);

^v Weber, Max. 1887. "Class, Status and Party" in *From Max Weber* (1958), Gerth and Mills (Oxford, NY); Michael Mann, 1986 – 2013, *Sources of Social Power Vol.1 -4* (Cambridge, New York); Bourdieu, P. (1986) The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, Greenwood), 241-258.

^{vi} Michels, Robert. 1915. *Political Parties* (Crowell-Collier, New York); Lipset, Trow and Coleman. 1956. *Union Democracy*. Wilson, James. 1974. *Political Organizations* (Princeton). Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson, 2000. "Nation of Organizers: the institutional origins of civic voluntarism in the US" (APSR, Sept, 2000).