

Working Papers in Language Diversity

Paper 7.

Notes on Power

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Michel Foucault opens his *Discipline and Punish* with two vignettes. The first one is of the execution in 1757 of a man called Damiens. Damiens was publicly executed. He was burned with torches, pieces of flesh were torn out of his body with pincers, the holes thus left were filled with burning sulphur and boiling oil, liquid lead and hot resin; finally his body was torn to pieces by four horses, after which his remains were burned and his ashes scattered. The second vignette is from 1838, and it is the daily timetable of the prison for young convicts in Paris. The day is rigidly divided into measured sections, reserved for prayer, learning, labour, exercise and cleaning, and all of the inmates are subject to the same regime. The transition from this first kind of punishment – an exuberant, physical, spectacular, arbitrary and individual punishment – to the second kind of punishment – an almost invisible punishment that operates as a structure of discipline collectively and mentally – is the topic of Foucault's book.

Both vignettes illustrate the two faces of power: one is highly visible, dramatic, excessive, fast and violent, the other is quiet, almost invisible and slow. The first one is commonly also called 'power', while the second one often escapes that qualification (we call it 'order', 'discipline' or something related to that). The fact is, we tend to see more 'power' in policemen in riot gear charging against rioters than in a bureaucrat following rules while pushing his pen. Power, thus, like ideology, democracy, freedom, etc. is one of those terms that suffers from permanent lack of specification and the following notes can be no more than a shallow attempt at sketching some major lines in this field. Let us note that the elusive character of power has not prevented generations of scholars from thinking and writing on it. Plato, Machiavelli, Voltaire and Marx are names that immediately come to mind (and other minds may think of the works of Lenin, Trotsky, Mao Zedong) but closer to our times people like Althusser, Gramsci, Arendt, Foucault, Bourdieu and numerous others have devoted important parts of their oeuvre to reflections on power. Trying to sketch major patterns in this plethora of theorizing is quite an assignment. I'll try to do it in the shape of something that eventually can be seen as a little vocabulary of power notions, tailored to some extent to our concerns here.

1. The major distinction in the field of power is that between **hard** and **soft power**. This is a distinction we find most clearly in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, when he distinguishes between a 'war of manoeuvre' and a 'war of position'. The war of manoeuvre is violent, revolutionary action aimed at seizing control over the state – a putsch, rebellion or insurrection come immediately to mind as examples. According to

Gramsci, however, a successful power regime requires a war of position too: a slow and more careful battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the people. Once hard power is ours, soft power must make us accepted as rulers and must create popular support for our rule. This is where propaganda comes in and where the concept of hegemony emerges, to which we return below.

2. A similar distinction is very widespread and finds very useful codification in Hannah Arendt’s *On Violence*. Arendt distinguishes between *strength*, *power*, *authority* and *force*. Concentrating for a moment on the distinction between power and authority here, we see that Arendt follows Gramsci in suggesting that authority resides in consensual support for the regime, while power is the ultimate ‘stick’ of that regime. When the regime loses or lacks authority, it has to resort to power (and to force/violence, in order to restore its strength). For Gramsci as well as for Arendt, authority is the *dominant* form while power is the *determinant* form. To illustrate this: as long as people have confidence in elected parliaments and governments, those can rule by authority; when such confidence is lost, the government has to use its power and send the tanks in the streets to control the masses (which then often seems to prompt the political leaders to wear military fatigues or uniforms). Here, too, we see how ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ forms of power are typologically distinguished but procedurally connected: they operate in synergy with one another, and power is a *system* of composite forms. Machiavelli codified this well: his ‘Prince’ needed to be strong and gentle at the same time, cunning, smart, tolerant and well-meaning as well as ruthless, impulsive and brutal; he needed to look at immediate dangers as well as at long-term risks; and he should never be perceived as *not* in power.
3. This brings us to another level of distinction, for which Machiavelli can again be used: power as an *individual* feature versus power as a *systemic* feature. Napoleon had power; Hitler as well, and Stalin too. Consequently, a lot of literature on historical leaders describes such figures as ‘the’ men in power, the only power in the system they ruled. It is often said that Machiavelli lifted this individual absolutism to the level of doctrine in his *Prince*, but of course he was far more intelligent than that. To Machiavelli, the strong (individual) Prince needed to work *with* the people, and he required the support of his people. A purely and obsessively oppressive autocrat was not a good leader to Machiavelli; he could only be part of a larger system that upheld his power and (we can now add) his authority and to which he responded.

4. **Systemic power** has of course been the mainstay of Karl Marx's work. *Capital* describes a system of production which systemically exerts power over the working classes. This power is not individual; destroying capitalism therefore requires more than just imprisoning Bill Gates. Resistance against this power is a matter of *changing the whole system*, either by violent revolutionary means that would destroy the fabric of the old system (Gramsci's 'war of manoeuvre') or by evolutionary ones, aimed at extensive and deep participation of the oppressed classes in the system of power. The power system described by Marx (and several Marxists after him) is one in which power is **distributed** over a wide variety of actors: the state collaborates with industrial capital and with the social classes that have immediate benefits from it, against those who have no benefits from it (the working classes). Power, thus, has not one locus, but is spread all over the system of social organization.
5. A crucial ingredient of this systemic power, less theorised by Marx than by Gramsci, Althusser and Lenin, is **ideology**. As Gramsci said, a regime can only be successful if it has acquired 'soft' power. He saw that the bourgeoisie not only controlled the (hard) means of production and the powers of the state, but that they also controlled the fields of culture, spirituality, ideas and science. They ruled not just by force and exploitation, but also by **ideological hegemony**: the complete dominance of their culture and ideas in society. Thus, a bid for power also needs to be a bid for hegemony, for control over the hearts and minds of the people. People must accept the new ideology as a *non-ideology*, as a *normal* state of affairs.
6. This point, of the **normalization of power**, became a central ingredient in Bourdieu's views of **habitus**. Habitus was the way in which we, as individuals, had **incorporated social structure** (that is: the structures of inequality that define societies), and the way in which we articulate our position in that social structure in every 'habitual' act, including speaking and writing (see especially his *Distinction*). Bourdieu's view of **symbolic violence** revolve around very much the same pivots as the ones we saw in Gramsci's work: the power of the ruling elites is also **cultural power**, and that cultural power is no longer perceived as power, it has become the normal state of things and it has begun to organise our lives in such a way that we don't any longer perceive it as oppressive, irrational or questionable (which is why we are sometimes embarrassed about our working-class or non-native accents). Thinking about consumerist societies is greatly helped by this insight.

7. Foucault, too, very strongly oriented towards this point in his work, while he, too, described power as **an all-pervasive system**. Foucault described in his oeuvre the gradual becoming of a particular regime of power, which went hand in hand with forms of knowledge. Power and knowledge became one. The birth of the modern prison went alongside the emergence of modern criminology, psychology and psychiatry, and sociology. These knowledge domains – *épistèmes* – provided ‘rational’ arguments for sustaining a particular power regime, which became, in Foucault’s terms, **capillary power** (power that stretches into the smallest and most private aspects of life), **biopower** (power that controls the way we live our lives as physical entities, through hygiene, public health, formal education), and **governmentality** (the bureaucratisation of all aspects of life). These forms of power create the modern subject – the individual which is at the core of our self-perception – and **the individual is thus a product of power**. Through such shifts, power became largely invisible, a series of commonsense and inevitable ingredients of life in a modern society, and a thing we accept ‘for our own good’. Rather than ‘power’ in its widespread sense, therefore, Foucault rather talks about ‘**surveillance**’: power is exerted by means of a **panoptic organisation** of society, in which all aspects of our lives are visible and open for inspection by (often invisible and unnamed) people ‘in power’. Decentralised, capillary power thus strengthens the power of the centre rather than to weaken it.

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