

be difficult even to recognize that you are living in a culturally and historically specific discursive formation at all. To the extent that hegemonic dominance has been effective, that formation will appear not as a cultural construct at all but simply as 'reality' itself – normal, natural and inevitable.

We are thus born into culturally constructed worlds that are not of our own making. This is not to suggest that people cannot be agents in changing or reconstructing the cultural worlds they inhabit. In light of the ultimate fluidity of cultural codes, such possibilities are always present. Such changes, however, are contingent upon our ability to recognize the historical specificity of our cultural environment and to step outside of it, if only in our imaginations at first – as subsequent chapters of this book attempt to do with regard to the culture of contest.

## 2

## Power

The previous chapter suggests that human cultures can be understood, in part, by studying the discourses that constitute them. Based on this model, discourse analysis can be seen as a valuable method of cultural analysis. In order to understand the culture of contest, we can start by analysing the ways that people within it think and talk about *power*. In a culture of contest, people tend not only to be preoccupied with relations of power but tend to think and talk about power as though its exercise is inherently competitive and conflictual. Given that the ways we think and talk influence the ways we act, this has significant social implications.

**Contests of Power**

All contests are based on the competitive exercise of power. The forms of power that are relevant in a given contest depend upon the specific nature of the contest. In athletic contests, like football or tennis, physical powers such as strength, stamina, skill and coordination determine the outcome. In mental contests, like chess or bridge, intellectual powers such as strategic thought, concentration and memory determine the outcome. In all contests, however, the goal is to win – to dominate or defeat opponents – by overpowering them in some manner.

Contests thus provide a specific framework for thinking and talking about power. Within a culture of contest, to say that a

person or group is powerful implies that they are in a position to dominate, defeat or impose their will upon others. Popular discourse is filled with expressions that convey this sense of the word *power*. The following statements, gleaned from popular media discourse and ordinary conversations, are but a few illustrations of this usage:

Politics is war by other means. A successful politician knows how to wield power . . .

Power is money and money is power. Those who control the reigns of power are those with the most money . . .

It's like the old cliché, 'power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. That's why we need a separation of powers in government – in order to minimize the abuse of power. And that's why the press needs to act as a watchdog on government – to expose abuses of power . . .

Why do people seek power? Power is strength. Power is privilege. It's the ability to influence or control others; to get them to do what you want. It's human nature to seek power . . .

I can't be bothered to vote anymore. I feel powerless to make a difference. The interest groups, with their financial contributions, have all the power . . .

We have to beat them at their own game. There's power in numbers . . .

The United States is the most powerful nation in the world today. It can act unilaterally, imposing its will on other nations . . .

The multinationals have the real power. They do as they please. They impose their will on domestic governments. The nation state has become obsolete . . .

Protest. Organize. Resist. Fight the system. Fight the power . . .

If statements such as these sound familiar it is because they exemplify the ways that people think and talk about power in a culture of contest. Yet there are other ways that people can think and talk about power.

## Two Models of Power

For several decades now people who study power have drawn a distinction between two broad ways of thinking and talking about power. This distinction is generally made by contrasting the expressions 'power to' versus 'power over'.<sup>1</sup> As Wartenberg explains,

the expressions *power-to* and *power-over* are a shorthand way of making a distinction between two fundamentally different ordinary-language locutions within which the term 'power' occurs. Depending upon which locution one takes as the basis of one's theory of power, one will arrive at a very different model of the role of power in the social world.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, 'power to' is understood as a generalized *capacity* to accomplish something. People may have the 'power to' lift a heavy weight, construct a bridge, coordinate a journey to the moon or establish a system of democratic governance. On the other hand, 'power over' refers to the capacity of some people to exercise control over others – to dominate, defeat or exploit them in some manner.<sup>3</sup> The historical domination of one race over another, one gender over another or one nation over another are all classic examples that have received much attention in the literature on power. This 'power over' usage is generally consistent with the culture of contest, in which power is understood in a competitive and conflictual manner. The 'power to' usage suggests another way of thinking and talking about power. It denotes a cooperative and mutualistic exercise of power. It denotes power as capacity rather than conflict.

After setting up this distinction, many scholars dismiss the



'power to' usage as largely irrelevant to social analysis. In this dismissal, however, we can see the extent to which the culture of contest shapes not only popular discourse but also scholarly discourse. Steven Lukes, an influential social theorist who has written extensively on the concept of power, exemplifies this tendency. In his writings, Lukes has explicitly dismissed the 'power to' model by arguing that it is of less analytical value than 'power over'.<sup>4</sup> He cites two reasons. First, he asserts that 'power to' theories 'are out of line with the central meanings of "power" as traditionally understood and with the concerns that have always centrally preoccupied students of power'. Thus Lukes acknowledges scholarly tradition as his first reason for dismissing the relevance of 'power to' as a model for thinking about power. Second, Lukes asserts that when one focuses on 'power to' concepts, 'the conflictual aspect of power – the fact that it is exercised over people – disappears altogether from view. And along with it there disappears the central interest of studying power relations in the first place.' Lukes continues by stating that 'power to' theories end up 'concealing from view the central aspects of power which they define out of existence'.

Ironically, however, by dismissing the 'power to' model, Lukes, like so many other social theorists, does the same thing in reverse. He conceals 'power to' categories from view by defining them as irrelevant to social inquiry and observation – and in the process he reveals the extent to which his own views and assumptions have been shaped by the culture of contest. In this regard, Lukes's argument is doubly ironic given his reference to scholarly tradition as a justification for dismissing 'power to' theories. The irony arises here because scholarly tradition is seen by most critical theorists as a potential hegemonic constraint on critical thought – and thus something to be perpetually critiqued rather than uncritically accepted. Yet Lukes invokes tradition while at the same time explicitly subscribing to the theory of hegemony.

Though Lukes acknowledges that 'power over' is only one way of thinking about power relations, he explicitly privileges it as the primary, if not exclusive, focus of social analysis. This tendency characterizes the work of many other theorists of power as well. For instance, after drawing the same distinction between 'power

to' and 'power over', Wartenberg also goes on to argue that 'a theory of power has, as a first priority, the articulation of the meaning of the concept of power over because social theory employs this concept as a primary means of conceptualizing the nature of the fundamental inequalities in society'. 'Power over', he thus asserts, is 'the primary meaning of power'. And, like Lukes, he argues that a focus on 'power to' relations merely 'shifts the theorist's gaze away from the set of phenomena that a theory of social power must comprehend, namely the illegitimate inequalities that exist in modern societies'.<sup>5</sup>

Many other scholars do not even acknowledge other ways of thinking and talking about power in their writing. They simply assume that the word *power* is synonymous with 'power over'. And they seldom need to acknowledge or qualify this assumption because it is entirely consistent with popular usage within the culture of contest.<sup>6</sup>

As the discussion in chapter 1 reminds us, however, discursive constructs are not simply passive or neutral linguistic devices. They affect the ways that people perceive the world around them. And our perceptions affect our actions. When our discourses focus our attention on competitive and conflictual relations of power, cooperative and mutualistic relations begin to recede from view. As a result, we tend to make assumptions about human nature, and prescribe models of social organization, that we otherwise might not – as will be discussed in the next chapter. First, however, in order to understand the full implications of this conventional discourse on power, we need a more effective vocabulary for thinking and talking about the full range of power relations.

### Rethinking Power

Understanding power merely in terms of domination does not provide an adequate basis for social theory or social practice. What is needed is a more comprehensive schema for thinking clearly about the entire field of social relations. The distinction between 'power to' and 'power over' that has dominated the academic literature on power for several decades provides a



starting point for expanding our understanding of power but it still is not adequate.

The distinction between 'power to' and 'power over' implies two parallel and mutually exclusive models of power, as though we either think about power one way or the other. On closer inspection, however, these models are neither parallel nor mutually exclusive. 'Power to', in the broadest sense, simply denotes *capacity*. Giddens, for example, defines *power* as 'transformative capacity' or 'the capacity to achieve outcomes'.<sup>7</sup> This is an overarching definition of the term *power*. 'Power over', on the other hand, is a special case of this overarching *power as capacity* concept. If I say that I have 'power over' someone, this is simply another way of saying that I have the 'power to exercise control over' that person. All possible expressions of 'power over' can be understood in this way, as the power to exert control over others. Therefore, the first step in developing a more comprehensive schema for thinking and talking about power is to recognize that 'power over' relations are merely one special case of the more general 'power to' concept.<sup>8</sup>

Other categories of 'power to' relations can also be identified. Consider, for example, a group of people that collectively and consensually decide to build a bridge or establish a school. These people would be exercising their power to work together cooperatively in pursuit of a common goal. While this case fits within the broad concept of 'power to', it is clearly not an example of 'power over'. People who are acting in a cooperative or mutualistic manner in the pursuit of a common goal are exercising 'power with' one another rather than 'power over' one another. For definitional purposes, this 'power with' category will be referred to as *mutualistic power relations* – which constitutes a basic subcategory of the *power as capacity* concept.<sup>9</sup>

But 'power with' and 'power over' are still not parallel and mutually exclusive categories. To demonstrate this, consider the example of two equal adversaries that are exercising 'power against' one another in a manner that results in mutual frustration, or a stalemate. Neither of these adversaries is exercising 'power over' the other. Yet they are clearly not exercising their 'power with' one another in a cooperative or mutualistic manner either.

In this context, we could say that people either exercise 'power with' one another in a mutualistic manner or they exercise 'power against' one another in an adversarial manner.<sup>10</sup> For definitional purposes, the second of these basic categories will be referred to as *adversarial power relations*. Together, *mutualistic power relations* and *adversarial power relations* constitute two parallel and mutually exclusive relational categories within the more general concept *power as capacity*.

So where does 'power over' fit into this schema? For analytical purposes, *mutualistic power relations* and *adversarial power relations* can each be divided into two additional subcategories and it is at this level that the concept of 'power over' can be located. Exercising 'power over' others is clearly a subcategory of *adversarial* rather than *mutualistic* power relations. The other subcategory of *adversarial power relations* would be 'balance of power' relations, such as the example of the stalemate referred to above.<sup>11</sup> What distinguishes 'balance of power' relations from 'power over' relations is the relative *equality* or *inequality* of the adversaries. In a 'balance of power' relationship, power is distributed equally so that neither adversary can dominate the other. In a 'power over' relationship, power is distributed unequally so that one adversary can dominate the other. For definitional purposes, these parallel and mutually exclusive subcategories of *adversarial power relations* will be referred to simply as *power equality* (i.e. 'balance of power') and *power inequality* (i.e. 'power over').

*Power equality* and *power inequality* have mirror counterparts within the category of *mutualistic power relations*. In other words, two or more agents acting cooperatively can also be characterized by equal or unequal distributions of power. The consequences, however, are quite different when the relationships are mutualistic as opposed to adversarial. Power equality within a mutualistic relationship results in the 'mutual empowerment' of all cooperating agents. An example would be a buying or marketing cooperative created by a group of people with similar economic resources. On the other hand, power inequality within a mutualistic relationship results in the 'assisted empowerment' of the less powerful agent(s) by the more powerful agent(s). An example would be the nurturing relationship between a parent



and child, or the mentoring relationship between a teacher and student.<sup>12</sup> In both of these cases, power inequalities can be understood as necessary yet temporary characteristics of these relationships. The ultimate goal of these relationships, when they are healthy, is to nurture and educate the unequal parties until they arrive at a state of relative equality.

The schema outlined above provides a comprehensive framework for thinking and talking about the entire field of power relations, as the following visual summary illustrates.

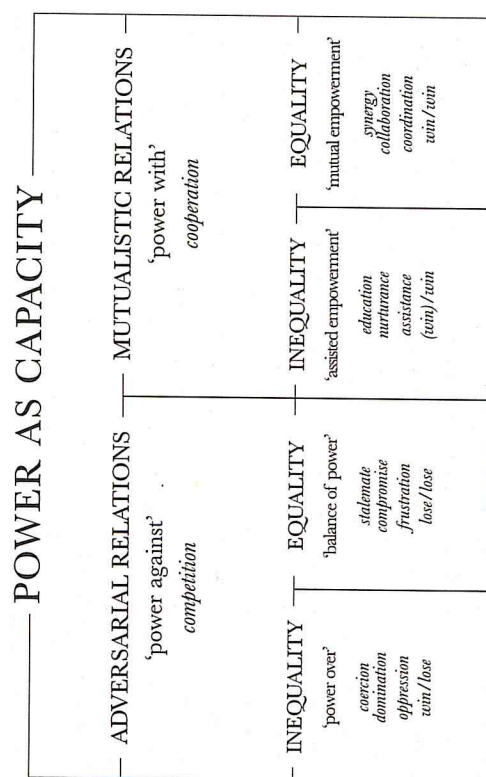


Figure 1: Power: A Comprehensive Schema

This visual schema, of course, is merely a conceptual model – a visual and mental representation intended to aid thought and discussion. The categorizations are not intended to be rigid or precise. Rather, they provide a vocabulary of *ideal types*, as Weber used the term, by which broad patterns and distinctions can be recognized and discussed.

This schema, however, does help us make a number of distinctions that are often lost in western-liberal discourses on power. Most obviously, the schema visually demonstrates that a narrow focus on 'power over' relations obscures a wide range of other social relations. This narrow focus also conflates and confuses the relational aspects of power (the adversarial vs. mutualistic

distinction) with the distributive aspects of power (the inequality vs. equality distinction). By conflating the two, it becomes very difficult to think about relations of power clearly.

Beyond this, the schema also provides a framework within which one can understand many other types of social relations that are generally obscured in discourses on power. For instance, within the schema, *power inequality* cannot be automatically equated with relations of domination, exploitation and so forth. *Power inequality* may be oppressive when coupled with *adversarial power relations* but in the context of *mutualistic power relations*, *inequality* can actually be empowering, as in the nurturing relationship between a parent and child or the educational relationship between a teacher and student. Relations of domination between entire social groups can even potentially be reformed into relations of assisted empowerment in order to rectify historical inequities of power. Affirmative action policies and progressive taxation schemes – when they are well-conceived and well-intentioned – provide examples of such assisted empowerment on a socio-structural level.

*Hierarchy*, as an organizational principle, can also be seen as a potentially desirable form of inequality. In a social or organizational context, hierarchy refers to unequally structured power relations. Not surprisingly, many people equate hierarchy with oppression. But this equation conflates *unequal power relations* with *adversarial power relations*. In the context of *cooperative relations*, hierarchy can be recognized as a valuable and often necessary organizing principle. When any group of otherwise equal people is too large to effectively engage every member in every decision-making process, the group may benefit by intentionally delegating certain decision-making powers to smaller, often elected, subgroups. This consensually structured inequality – or hierarchy – can empower a group to accomplish things it could otherwise not accomplish. In the process, it can also relieve the burden of ongoing decision-making responsibilities from large numbers of people who are thereby freed to devote their time and energy to other productive pursuits that can benefit the entire group.

Hierarchy can therefore be a valuable and desirable organizing principle under the right conditions. But these conditions



include cooperative relations among otherwise equal people. In this respect, while the schema illustrates that hierarchy cannot automatically be equated with oppression, it also cautions that hierarchy cannot automatically be equated with empowerment, as many conventional 'functionalist' theorists often conversely assume.<sup>13</sup> Under conditions of adversarial relations, hierarchy does tend to lead to oppression. And these conditions are widespread in the prevailing culture of contest.

Even as the schema reveals the positive and negative dimensions of power inequality, it also reveals the positive and negative dimensions of power equality. While power equality is clearly a desirable condition in many mutualistic power relations, where it leads to mutual empowerment, it can be highly dysfunctional in many adversarial power relations, where it often leads to mutual frustration. Consider, for instance, the partisan gridlock that characterizes so much contemporary political decision-making in western-liberal democracies. Such gridlock not only disempowers equally powerful political parties, it disempowers the entire public by rendering its only means of collective decision-making largely dysfunctional.

Or consider the more extreme example of the nuclear arms doctrine known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) that reigned throughout the cold war and arguably still reigns today with the continued existence of massive nuclear stockpiles around the world. MAD is a classic example of an adversarial relationship defined by that otherwise desirable characteristic 'power equality' (nuclear parity in this case). Yet this adversarial expression of equality keeps human populations hanging in a delicate balance that, if upset, could result in mutual annihilation. At the same time, it also places a massive burden of ongoing military expenditures on the backs of working people whose lives are unceasingly threatened by it. In this respect, it not only threatens to destroy us but it also guarantees to disempower us. The doctrine of MAD – which is in many ways an inevitable outcome of an adversarial geo-political structure characterized by relative equality of nuclear capacity – might just as well stand for Mutually Assured Disempowerment.

As these few examples illustrate, the schema above provides an

expanded vocabulary with which to think and talk more clearly about relations of power. It gives us a more useful map of power relations. In fact, by representing this schema in a two-dimensional manner, it can literally allow us to 'map' various power relations relative to the two axes *adversarialism* « *mutualism* and *equality* « *inequality*, as the figure below illustrates.

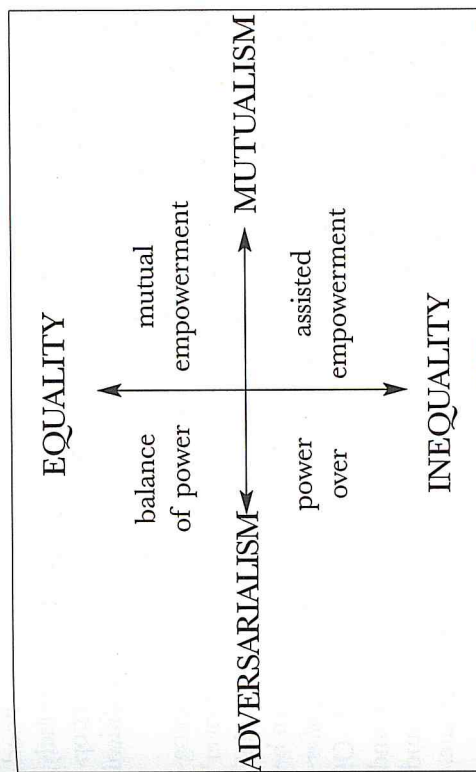


Figure 2: Relational and Distributive Dimensions of Power

On this conceptual map, 'power over' relations constitute only one of four possible quadrants, situated in the lower left of the diagram. Compromise, gridlock and other 'balance of power' relations are situated in the upper-left quadrant. Nurturing, educating and other 'assisted empowerment' relations are situated in the lower right quadrant. And reciprocity, coordination and other 'mutual empowerment' relations are situated in the upper right quadrant.

This conceptual map also helps us recognize (more effectively than the schema in figure 1) the *relative* nature of *adversarialism* and *mutualism* on the one hand, or *equality* and *inequality* on the other. Some relations are *more* or *less* adversarial or mutualistic than others, just as some distributions of power might be *more* or *less* equal or unequal than others. Thus extreme adversarialism or extreme inequality can be distinguished from more moderate



expressions of both, while mutualism and equality can be understood as ideals that might be worth striving towards in many contexts, even if we cannot perfectly achieve them.

Furthermore, this conceptual map reminds us that *movement* or change is possible along either axis. A nurturing relationship may begin with a high degree of inequality and steadily progress towards a state of relative equality, as in the case of parenthood, education and other developmental relationships. Or, conversely, a relationship may become either more adversarial or more cooperative over time, as in oscillations towards or away from political partisanship and bipartisanship (or even non-partisanship).

Finally, this conceptual map provides another way of recognizing the problematic nature of 'power to' versus 'power over' distinctions. For while 'power over' is represented as the lower left quadrant, the concept of 'power to' – or *power as capacity* – can be understood as the entire *plane* on which both of the axes (*adversarialism* « *mutualism* and *equality* « *inequality*) are inscribed. Of course, this conceptual map is merely an aid for thought and discussion. Actual social relations cannot be precisely located and compared according to exact, ordinal coordinates on this plane.

### From Theory to Practice

The discussion above provides a more comprehensive schema for thinking and talking about power. But why bother with this intellectual exercise? The reason is simple. The ways we think and talk tend to influence the ways we act. Competitive and conflictual discourses of power provide a clear example of this as they translate into competitive and conflictual models of social practice. This should come as little surprise. If conflict and competition appear to be inevitable states of human interaction, because this is what our popular as well as academic discourses tend to highlight, it makes sense to structure our collective affairs as contests in order to harness those competitive and conflictual forces for the maximum social good.

However, even if conflict and competition have been the primary driving forces of history, which is a questionable assumption in itself, it is easy to confuse human affairs as-they-

have-been or as-they-are with human affairs as-they-could-be or as-they-ought-to-be. This is the problem of naturalization. By naturalizing competitive and conflictual relations, we become relatively blind to the significant role that cooperative and mutualistic relations can and do play in human affairs. Non-adversarial models of social organization therefore remain under-theorized, under-researched and under-prescribed. In their place, we accept and prescribe contest models as a social norm. The culture of contest, in other words, rests upon a premise of *normative adversarialism*.