

# INTRODUCTION

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Thirty years ago I published a small book entitled *Power: A Radical View* (hereafter *PRV*). It was a contribution to an ongoing debate, mainly among American political scientists and sociologists, about an interesting question: how to think about power theoretically and how to study it empirically. But underlying that debate another question was at issue: how to characterize American politics – as dominated by a ruling elite or as exhibiting pluralist democracy – and it was clear that answering the second question required an answer to the first. My view was, and is, that we need to think about power broadly rather than narrowly – in three dimensions rather than one or two – and that we need to attend to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation: that, indeed, power is at its most effective when least observable.

Questions of powerlessness and domination, and of the connections between them, were at the heart of the debate to which *PRV* contributed. Two books, in particular, were much discussed in the 1950s and 1960s: *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills (Mills 1956) and *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* by Floyd Hunter (Hunter 1953). The first sentence of the former reads:

The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. (p. 3)

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But all men, Mills continued, ‘are not in this sense ordinary’:

As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women . . . they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. Whether they do or do not make such decisions is less important than the fact that they do occupy such pivotal positions: their failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater consequence than the decisions they do make. For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They run the big corporations. They run the machinery of state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy. (pp. 3–4)

Mills’s book was both a fiery polemic and a work of social science. Alan Wolfe, in his afterword to its republication in 2000 justly comments that ‘the very passionate convictions of C. Wright Mills drove him to develop a better scientific grasp on American society than his more objective and clinical contemporaries’, though his analysis can certainly be criticized for underestimating the implications for elite power and control of ‘rapid technological transformations, intense global competition and ever-changing consumer tastes’. Yet he was, in Wolfe’s words, ‘closer to the mark’ than the prevailing social scientific understanding of his era as characterized by ‘pluralism’ (the idea that ‘the concentration of power in America ought not to be considered excessive because one group always balanced the power of others’) and ‘the end of ideology’ (the idea that ‘grand passions over ideas were exhausted’ and henceforth ‘we would require technical expertise to solve our problems’) (see Wolfe 2000: 379, 370, 378).

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Hunter's book, though much more low-key and conventionally professional (Mills described it as a 'workmanlike book' by a 'straightforward investigator who does not deceive himself by bad writing'), made claims similar to those of Mills about elite control at local levels of US society. It is a study of 'leadership patterns in a city of half a million population, which I choose to call Regional City'. His findings were that the

policy-makers have a fairly definite set of settled policies at their command. . . . Often the demands for change in the older alignments are not strong or persistent, and the policy-makers do not deem it necessary to go to the people with each minor change. The pattern of manipulation becomes fixed . . . the ordinary individual in the community is 'willing' that the process continues. There is a carry-over from the minor adjustments to the settlement of major issues. . . . Obedience of the people to the decisions of the power command becomes habitual. . . . The method of handling the relatively powerless understructure is through . . . warnings, intimidations, threats, and in extreme cases, violence. In some cases the method may include isolation from all sources of support, including his job and therefore his income. The principle of 'divide and rule' is as applicable in the community as it is in the larger units of political patterning, and it is as effective . . . the top leaders are in substantial agreement most of the time on the big issues related to the basic ideologies of the culture. There is no threat to the basic value systems at this time from any of the understructure personnel. . . . The individual in the bulk of the population of Regional City has no voice in policy determination. These individuals are the silent group. The voice of the professional understructure may have something to say about policy, but it usually goes unheeded. The flow of information is downward in larger volume than it is upward.

So, for instance, Hunter described how 'the men of real power controlled the expenditures for both the public and private

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agencies devoted to health and welfare programs in the community', and how the various associations in the community 'from the luncheon clubs to the fraternal organizations . . . are controlled by men who use their influence in devious ways, which may be lumped under the phrase "being practical", to keep down public discussion on all issues except those that have the stamp of approval of the power group' (Hunter 1953: 246–9).

These striking depictions of elite domination over powerless populations produced a reaction on the part of a group of political scientists and theorists centred on Yale University. In an article entitled 'A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model', published in the *American Political Science Review* in 1958, Robert Dahl was caustic and crisp. It was, he wrote,

a remarkable and indeed astounding fact that neither Professor Mills nor Professor Hunter has seriously attempted to examine an array of specific cases to test his major hypothesis. Yet I suppose these two works more than any others in the social sciences of the last few years have sought to interpret complex political systems essentially as instances of a ruling elite.

Dahl's critique was straightforward. What needed to be done was clear:

The hypothesis of the existence of a ruling elite can be strictly tested only if:

- 1 The hypothetical ruling elite is a well-defined group;
- 2 There is a fair sample of cases involving key political decisions in which the preferences of the hypothetical ruling elite run counter to those of any other likely group that might be suggested;
- 3 In such cases, the preferences of the elite regularly prevail. (Dahl: 1958: 466)

This critique and proposed methodology issued in Dahl's classic study *Who Governs?* (Dahl 1961), which studied power and decision-making in the city of New Haven in the 1950s, and

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spawned a whole literature of community power studies. The critique was of the ‘ruling elite model’ and, more generally, of Marxist-inspired and related ideas of a ‘ruling class’. The methodology was ‘behaviorist’ with a focus on decision-making. This essentially meant identifying power with its exercise (recall Mills had written that actually making decisions was less important than being in a position to do so). As opposed to what these scholars saw as Mills’s and Hunter’s sloppy usage, power was seen as relative to several, separate, single issues and bound to the local context of its exercise, the research question being: how much power do the relevant actors have with respect to selected key issues in this time and place, key issues being those that affect large numbers of citizens – in Dahl’s case urban renewal, school desegregation and party nominations. Power was here conceived as intentional and active: indeed, it was ‘measured’ by studying its exercise – by ascertaining the frequency of who wins and who loses in respect of such issues, that is, who prevails in decision-making situations. Those situations are situations of conflict between interests, where interests are conceived as overt preferences, revealed in the political arena by political actors taking policy stands or by lobbying groups, and the exercise of power consists in overcoming opposition, that is, defeating contrary preferences. The substantive conclusions, or findings, of this literature are usually labelled ‘pluralist’: for example, it was claimed that, since different actors and different interest groups prevail in different issue-areas, there is no overall ‘ruling elite’ and power is distributed pluralistically. More generally, these studies were aimed at testing the robustness of American democracy at the local level, which, by revealing a plurality of different winners over diverse key issues, they claimed largely to vindicate.

Both methodological questions (how are we to define and investigate power?) and substantive conclusions (how pluralistic, or democratic, is its distribution?) were at issue here, as was the link between them (did the methodology predetermine the conclusions? did it preclude others?). These matters were explored in the debate that ensued. Critics challenged in various

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ways the rather complacent picture of pluralist democracy (Duncan and Lukes 1964, Walker 1966, Bachrach 1967), they doubted its descriptive accuracy (Morriss 1972, Domhoff 1978), and they criticized the ‘realistic’ (as opposed to ‘utopian’), minimally demanding conception of ‘democracy’ that the pluralists had adopted, which proposed that democracy should be understood as merely a method that provides, in one of those critics’ words, ‘for limited, peaceful competition among members of the elite for the formal positions of leadership within the system’ (Walker 1966 in Scott (ed.) 1994: vol. 3, p. 270). This conception was derived from Joseph Schumpeter’s revision of ‘classical’ views of democracy. For Schumpeter, and his pluralist followers, democracy should now be seen as ‘that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ (Schumpeter 1962[1950]: 269). The pluralists’ critics – misleadingly called ‘neo-elitist’ – argued that this was far too unambitious, and indeed elitist, a vision of democracy, that its conception of equality of power was ‘too narrowly drawn’ (Bachrach 1967: 87), and that its very conception of *power* was too narrow. Power, argued Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, had a ‘second face’ unperceived by the pluralists and undetectable by their methods of inquiry. Power was not solely reflected in concrete decisions; the researcher must also consider the chance that some person or association could limit decision-making to relatively non-controversial matters, by influencing community values and political procedures and rituals, notwithstanding that there are in the community serious but latent power conflicts.

Thus, ‘to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power’ (Bachrach and Baratz 1970: 8). And in support of this idea they cited the eloquent words of E. E. Schattschneider:

All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of

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others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out. (Schattschneider 1960: 71)

But this, in turn, raised further questions. How *was* the researcher to investigate such ‘influencing’ (which they called ‘nondecisionmaking’) – especially if it went beyond behind-the-scenes agenda-setting, incorporation or co-optation of potential adversaries and the like and could be ‘unconscious’ and include the influencing of ‘values’ and the effects of ‘rituals’? Under the pressure of counter-attack by pluralist writers, Bachrach and Baratz retreated somewhat, stating that there must always be observable conflict if their second face of power is to be revealed; without it one can only assume there to be ‘consensus on the prevailing allocation of values’. Without observable conflict (overt or covert) one must assume ‘consensus’ to be ‘genuine’. But why should one exclude the possibility that power may be at work in such a way as to secure consent and thus prevent conflict from arising?

This thought, alongside Schattschneider’s idea of the ‘bias’ of the system suppressing latent conflicts, called irresistibly to mind the Marxist concept of ideology and, in particular, its elaboration by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* in the form of the notion of ‘*egemonia*’ or ‘hegemony’.<sup>1</sup> Confronting the failure of revolution in the West in his prison cell in Fascist Italy, Gramsci had grappled with the question: how is consent to capitalist exploitation secured under contemporary conditions, in particular democratic ones? How was such consent to be understood? His answer – of which there was more than one interpretation – was of considerable interest in the post-1960s world on both sides of the Atlantic.

In one interpretation, Gramsci’s view was that in ‘the contemporary social formations of the West’ it was ‘culture’ or ‘ideology’ that constituted ‘the mode of class rule secured by consent’ (Anderson 1976–7: 42) by means of the bourgeoisie’s monopoly over the ‘ideological apparatuses’ (Althusser 1971). Gramsci, as Femia (1981) writes,

seized upon an idea marginal (or, at most, incipient) in earlier Marxist thought, developed its possibilities, and gave it a central place in his own thought. In so doing, he rerouted Marxist analysis to the long-neglected – and hopelessly unscientific – territory of ideas, values, and beliefs. More specifically, he uncovered what was to become a major theme of the second generation of Hegelian Marxists (i.e. the Frankfurt School): the process of internalization of bourgeois relations and the consequent diminution of revolutionary possibilities.

On this interpretation, when ‘Gramsci speaks of consent, he refers to a *psychological* state, involving some kind of acceptance – not necessarily explicit – of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order.’ Consent was voluntary and could vary in intensity:

On one extreme, it can flow from a profound sense of obligation, from wholesale internalization of dominant values and definitions; on the other from their very partial assimilation, from an uneasy feeling that the status quo, while shamefully iniquitous, is nevertheless the only viable form of society. Yet Gramsci . . . is far from clear about which band or bands of the continuum he is talking. (Femia 1981: 35, 37, 39–40)

In an alternative, non-cultural interpretation, Gramsci’s ideological hegemony has a material basis and consists in the co-ordination of the real, or material, interests of dominant and subordinate groups. For, according to Przeworski, if ‘an ideology is to orient people in their daily lives, it must express their interests and aspirations. A few individuals can be mistaken, but delusions cannot be perpetuated on a mass scale.’<sup>2</sup> So the ‘consent’ of wage-earners to the capitalist organization of society consists in a continuing, constantly renewed class compromise where ‘neither the aggregate of interests of individual capitals nor the interests of organized wage-earners can be violated beyond specific limits’. Moreover,



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*The consent which underlies reproduction of capitalist relations does not consist of individual states of mind but of behavioral characteristics of organizations.* It should be understood not in psychological or moral terms. Consent is *cognitive* and *behavioral*. Social actors, individual and collective, do not march around filled with ‘predispositions’ which they simply execute. Social relations constitute structures of choices within which people perceive, evaluate, and act. *They consent when they choose particular courses of action and when they follow these choices in their practice.* Wage-earners consent to capitalist organization of society when they act as if they could improve their material conditions within the confines of capitalism.

Consent, thus understood, ‘corresponds to the real interests of those consenting’, it is always conditional, there are limits beyond which it will not be granted and ‘beyond these limits there may be crises’ (Przeworski 1985: 136, 145–6).<sup>3</sup>

The questions to which Gramsci’s hegemony promised answers had become live issues in the early 1970s, when *PRV* was written. What explained the persistence of capitalism and the cohesion of liberal democracies? Where *were* the limits of consent beyond which crises would occur? Were capitalist democracies undergoing a ‘legitimation crisis’? What was the proper role of intellectuals in contesting the status quo? Were revolution or socialism on the historical agenda in the West, and, if so, where and in what form? In the United States the politics of free speech, antiwar, feminist, civil rights and other social movements had refuted the end of ideology thesis and put the pluralist model into question. In Britain, both the class compromise and the governability of the state seemed, for a decade, to be in question, and in Europe Eurocommunism in the West and dissident voices in the East seemed, for a time, to give new life to old aspirations, Neo-marxist thought – Hegelian, Althusserian and, indeed, Gramscian – enjoyed a revival, albeit almost exclusively within the academy.

It was in this historical conjuncture (to use a characteristic phrase of that time) that *PRV* was written. Today it seems

plausible to claim that the large, central issue which that slender text addressed – how is willing compliance to domination secured? – has become ever more pertinent and demanding of an answer. Reaganism in the United States and Thatcherism in Britain were succeeded, after the fall of Communism, by the extraordinary diffusion across the globe of neo-liberal ideas and assumptions (see Peck and Tickell 2002). If this constitutes a mega-instance of ‘hegemony’, an adequate understanding of its impact would seem to require, among many other things, an appropriate way of thinking about power and, in particular, of addressing the problem well posed by Charles Tilly: ‘if ordinary domination so consistently hurts the well-defined interests of subordinate groups, why do subordinates comply? Why don’t they rebel continuously, or at least resist all along the way?’

Tilly most helpfully provides a checklist of the available answers to the problem:

- 1 The premise is incorrect: subordinates are actually rebelling continuously, but in covert ways.
- 2 Subordinates actually get something in return for their subordination, something that is sufficient to make them acquiesce most of the time.
- 3 Through the pursuit of other valued ends such as esteem or identity, subordinates become implicated in systems that exploit or oppress them. (In some versions, no. 3 becomes identical to no. 2.)
- 4 As a result of mystification, repression, or the sheer unavailability of alternative ideological frames, subordinates remain unaware of their true interests.
- 5 Force and inertia hold subordinates in place.
- 6 Resistance and rebellion are costly; most subordinates lack the necessary means.
- 7 All of the above. (Tilly 1991: 594)

Reflecting on this list, several comments are in order. (7) is, clearly, correct: the other answers should not be seen as mutually exclusive (or, indeed, jointly exhaustive). Thus (1), as we will

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see, captures an important aspect of everyday covert and coded resistance (explored, for instance, in the work of James Scott<sup>4</sup>) but it is highly unlikely (contrary to what Scott suggests) ever to be the whole story. (2) is (as Przeworski's materialist interpretation of Gramsci suggests) a major part of the explanation of the persistence of capitalism, but also, one should add, of every socio-economic system. (2) and (3) together point to the importance of focusing on actors' multiple, interacting and conflicting interests. They also raise the contentious and fundamental question of materialist versus culturalist explanation: of whether, and if so when, material interests are basic to the explanation of individual behaviour and of collective outcomes, rather than, for instance, interests in 'esteem' or 'identity'. But it is (4), (5) and (6) that relate specifically to power and the modes of its exercise. As Tilly remarks, (5) emphasizes coercion and (6) scant resources. It is, however, (4) that pinpoints the so-called 'third dimension' of power – the power 'to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things'. It is for the recognition of this that *PRV* argues and it is this that Chapter 3 of this volume seeks to articulate further. It was and remains the present author's conviction that no view of power can be adequate unless it can offer an account of this kind of power.

*PRV* was a *very* small book, yet it generated a surprisingly large amount of comment, much of it critical, from a great many quarters, both academic and political. It continues to do so, and that is one reason that has persuaded me to yield to its publisher's repeated requests to republish it together with a reconsideration of its argument and, more widely, of the rather large topic it takes on. A second reason is that its mistakes and inadequacies are, I believe, rather instructive, and rendered the more so in prose that makes them clearly visible (for, as the seventeenth-century naturalist John Ray observed, 'He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth, like the cuttlefish, hide himself for the most part, in his own ink'). So I have

decided to reproduce the original text virtually unaltered, alongside this introduction, which sets it in context.

There are two subsequent chapters. The first of these (Chapter 2) broadens the discussion by situating the reprinted text and its claims on a map of the conceptual terrain that power occupies. The chapter begins by asking whether, in the face of unending disagreements about how to define it and study it, we need the concept of power at all and, if we do, what we need it for – what role it plays in our lives. I argue that these disagreements matter because how much power you see in the social world and where you locate it depends on how you conceive of it, and these disagreements are in part moral and political, and inescapably so. But the topic of *PRV*, and much writing and thinking about power, is more specific: it concerns power *over* another or others and, more specifically still, power as domination. *PRV* focuses on this and asks: how do the powerful secure the compliance of those they dominate – and, more specifically, how do they secure their *willing* compliance? The rest of the chapter considers the ultra-radical answer offered to this question by Michel Foucault, whose massively influential writings about power have been taken to imply that there is no escaping domination, that it is ‘everywhere’ and there is no freedom from it or reasoning independent of it. But, I argue, there is no need to accept this ultra-radicalism, which derives from the rhetoric rather than the substance of Foucault’s work – work which has generated major new insights and much valuable research into modern forms of domination.

Chapter 3 defends and elaborates *PRV*’s answer to the question, but only after indicating some of its mistakes and inadequacies. It was a mistake to define power by ‘saying that *A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*’s interests’. Power is a capacity not the exercise of that capacity (it may never be, and never need to be, exercised); and you can be powerful by satisfying and advancing others’ interests: *PRV*’s topic, power as domination, is only one species of power. Moreover, it was inadequate in confining the discussion to binary relations between actors assumed to have unitary

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interests, failing to consider the ways in which everyone's interests are multiple, conflicting and of different kinds. The defence consists in making the case for the existence of power as the imposition of internal constraints. Those subject to it are led to acquire beliefs and form desires that result in their consenting or adapting to being dominated, in coercive and non-coercive settings. I consider and rebut two kinds of objection: first, James Scott's argument that such power is non-existent or extremely rare, because the dominated are always and everywhere resisting, covertly or overtly; and second, Jon Elster's idea that willing compliance to domination simply *cannot* be brought about by such power. Both John Stuart Mill's account of the subjection of Victorian women and the work of Pierre Bourdieu on the acquisition and maintenance of 'habitus' appeal to the workings of power, leading those subject to it to see their condition as 'natural' and even to value it, and to fail to recognize the sources of their desires and beliefs. These and other mechanisms constitute power's third dimension when it works against people's interests by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment. To say that such power involves the concealment of people's 'real interests' by 'false consciousness' evokes bad historical memories and can appear both patronizing and presumptuous, but there is, I argue, nothing inherently illiberal or paternalist about these notions, which, suitably refined, remain crucial to understanding the third dimension of power.