

THE POWER OF DISCOURSE AND THE DISCOURSE OF POWER: PURSUING PEACE THROUGH DISCOURSE INTERVENTION

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Abstract

Western-liberal discourses of power and the social practices associated with them are proving inadequate to the task of creating a peaceful, just, and sustainable social order. Having recognized this, progressive scholars and social reformers have begun articulating alternative discourses of power, along with alternative models of social practice. Together, these efforts can be interpreted as a project of discourse intervention – an effort to change our social reality by altering the discourses that help constitute it. In order to advance this project, this paper deconstructs the dominant Western-liberal discourse of power, clarifies elements of an alternative discourse of power, and presents a case study of an alternative discourse community and the alternative models of social practice that it is constructing.

Introduction

The ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect the ways we act in relation to that subject. This is the basic premise of discourse theory (refer, for example, to Foucault, 1972, 1980; Hall, 1997; Phillips & Hardy, 2002). This paper is about the ways we tend to think and talk about *power*. In Western-liberal societies, our discourses of power are almost exclusively conflictual or adversarial. Power tends to be associated with competition at best, coercion or domination at worst. Given that the ways we think and talk about a subject influence the ways we act in relation to that subject, these adversarial discourses of power can be problematic because they obscure the mutualistic dimensions of power that have played a significant role in human history and that will need to play an even more significant role if we are to learn how to live together peacefully in an increasingly interdependent world.

Peace researchers such as Kenneth Boulding (1990), along with feminist writers and theorists such as Hartsock (1974) and Miller (1982), have articulated alternative ways of thinking and talking about power for precisely this reason. These efforts can be understood as a project of *discourse intervention* – an effort to change our social reality by altering the discourses that help constitute that reality. To date, this project is still in a nascent stage and thus remains an important yet incomplete intervention in the Western-liberal culture of conflict.

To further advance this project, an alternative discourse of power needs to be more clearly articulated. It also needs to be more fully reconciled with the conflictual models of power that are necessary for critical social analysis but insufficient as a normative framework for social practice. Toward this end, this paper briefly traces the contours of

prevailing discourses of power by examining them in their most explicitly articulated form: academic discourses of power. After identifying the limitations of these existing discourses, the paper outlines an alternative vocabulary, along with a simple analytical schema, for thinking and talking about power in both its mutualistic and adversarial expressions. The paper concludes with an examination of how one alternative discourse community – the international Bahá'í community – is already constructing alternative models of social practice.

Power as Domination

As a central concept within Western social theory, the academic study of *power* has been approached in many ways, yielding diverse and valuable insights. For example, some theorists have focused on the different forms that power takes, as well as the bases or resources that permit the exercise of power (Wartenberg, 1990; Wrong, 1997); some have explored the complex relationship between the quantitative distribution of power and the processes of social consent that legitimate various expressions of power (Hindess, 1996); some have examined the changing ways that power circulates throughout societies, constructing social institutions as well as individual subjectivities, as it imposes order and discipline in historically specific ways (Foucault, 1980); and others have approached the subject of power from other theoretical perspectives. A review of such a rich and complex body of literature is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. What this article will focus on is a dominant current of thought within late-twentieth-century scholarship that reflects popular Western-liberal discourses and assumptions regarding power.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, theorists of power began to invoke what has become a widely-used distinction between two broad ways of thinking and talking about power. This distinction is made by contrasting the expression “power to” with the expression “power over” (e.g., Connolly, 1974; Coser, 1976; Dowding, 1996; Hartsock, 1974, 1983; Lukes, 1986; Macpherson, 1973; Pitkin, 1972). As Wartenberg (1990, p.27) 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.

The predominant model of power in Western social theory – what I call the *power as domination* model – derives from the latter of these expressions. Although “power to” is the basis of models in the physical and natural sciences, “power over” highlights issues of social conflict, control, and coercion, which have been the primary focus of Western social and political scientists. This *power as domination* paradigm traces back, either implicitly or explicitly, through the writings of diverse social and political theorists, from Machiavelli (1961) to Weber (1986) to Bourdieu (1994). It informed Hobbes’ (1968) notion of a “war of all against all” as well as Marx and Engels’ (1967) theory of historical

materialism. Indeed, as Giddens (1984, pp. 256-7) points out, this conflictual model of power underlies virtually all major traditions of Western social and political theory, from the left and the right.

The extent to which Western social and political theory has developed within the boundaries of this paradigm can best be seen in the American “community power debates” of the mid-twentieth century. Within these debates, prominent power theorists from various sides of the political spectrum, including Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes, all proposed different operational definitions of the term *power*. Yet all of these definitions fell squarely within the boundaries of the *power as domination* paradigm. In brief, Dahl (1969, p. 80) conceptualized power in simple behavioral terms, explaining that “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do”. In response to this simple behavioral definition, Bachrach and Baratz (1970) argued that power over others can also be exercised in more subtle ways that involve “the mobilization of bias” within a social or political system in a manner that prevents some people or groups from advancing their own self-identified interests. As they (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970, p. 7) explain:

Power is also exercised when *A* devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to *A*. To the extent that *A* succeeds in doing this, *B* is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that in their resolution might be seriously detrimental to *A*’s set of preferences.

Lukes (1974), in turn, insists that both of these conceptualizations are too simplistic. According to Lukes, power over others can also be exercised by preventing them from identifying or recognizing their own interests. In other words, power can be exercised over others by cultivating what Marx and Engels (1967) referred to as *false consciousness*, or by exercising what Gramsci (1971) referred to as cultural *hegemony*. As Lukes (1974, p. 23) explains:

A may exercise power over *B* by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?

Though Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and Lukes each advanced different operational definitions of the term *power*, all of these definitions were contained within the boundaries of the *power as domination* paradigm. To his credit, Lukes, along with a number of other *power as domination* theorists since him, have acknowledged the possibility that “power to” could serve as the basis for an alternative model of social power. However, this acknowledgment has typically been made in order to dismiss “power to” models as largely irrelevant to social and political theory. As Lukes (1974, p. 30) originally contended, “power to” models have less conceptual value than “power

over” models for two reasons. First, he asserted that these “revisionary persuasive redefinitions [i.e., “power to” definitions]... 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” (Lukes, 1974, pp. 30-31). Second, Lukes (1974, p. 31) asserted 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”. In this vein, Lukes (1974, p. 31) argues that “power to” theories end up “concealing from view the central aspects of power which they define out of existence”. Ironically, by dismissing “power to” theories, Lukes did the same thing in reverse.

Similar tendencies characterize the work of many other power theorists. For instance, Wartenberg (1990, p. 5), after drawing the distinction between “power to” and “power over” quoted at the beginning of this paper, 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 (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 5) thus asserts, is “the primary meaning of ‘power’”. And, like Lukes, Wartenberg (1990, p. 5) 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”.

Even Foucault, despite his radical re-thinking of the nature and function of power, was unable to escape the gravitational pull of the “power over” model in his own writing. Foucault (1980) understands power as a relational force that permeates the entire social body, connecting all social groups in a web of mutual influence. As a relational force, power constructs social organization and hierarchy by producing discourses and truths, by imposing discipline and order, and by shaping human desires and subjectivities. In this context, Foucault sees power as simultaneously productive and repressive: a social body cannot function without it, despite its perennially oppressive manifestations. By recognizing the productive function of power, Foucault gives a nod to the “power to” theorists. However, in his actual analyses, Foucault situates himself squarely within the power-as-domination tradition, and his over-arching project is clearly one of resistance to such expressions of power. Furthermore, he explicitly calls for others to do the same: “We should direct our researches on the nature of power”, he (Foucault, 1980, p. 102) writes, “towards domination and material operators of power”, and we should “base our analyses of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination”.

Finally, it is worth noting that most social and political theorists do not even acknowledge “power to” concepts in their writings. In keeping with the conventional definition of power as domination, most authors simply assume that the two concepts are synonymous – as they also tend to be in popular discourses on social power. In this way, Western social and political theorists tend to highlight only one facet of a potentially complex and multifaceted concept. In the process, other expressions of social and political power tend to be ignored or obscured.

Power as Capacity

Though the *power as domination* model has prevailed within Western social and political theory, alternative traditions do exist. Giddens (1984, pp. 15, 257), for example, defines *power* as “transformative capacity” or “the capacity to achieve outcomes” – a definition which is consistent with the “power to” locution introduced above. Though Giddens frequently associates power with domination in his writings, he (Giddens, 1984, p. 257) recognizes that “power is not necessarily linked with conflict... and power is not inherently oppressive”. Indeed, there is power in cooperation among equals, and even when power is unequally distributed it can still be express in forms that are not oppressive – as in the empowering relationship that can exist between a nurturing parent and child. Efforts to reconceptualize power along these lines have been most fully developed among feminist theorists, as well as some peace researchers and systems theorists.

A Feminist Model of Power

Feminism, of course, is not a uniform or homogenous theoretical tradition. It embodies diverse currents of thought and accommodates internal difference of perspective. Accordingly, the following discussion does not imply that all feminists speak with one essential voice. However, many feminist scholars have offered similar critiques of the *power as domination* paradigm. All of these critiques derive from an understanding that the normalization of aggressive and competitive behaviors within Western societies has served, historically, as a structure of male privilege. On the most obvious level, this has occurred through the direct physical domination of women by men. When competitive power struggles are seen as inevitable expressions of human nature, this places most women at a physical disadvantage to most men.

In addition to overt physical domination, the *power as domination* paradigm has also served as a more subtle structure of male privilege. Throughout the public sphere, in our economy, political institutions, judicial systems, educational systems, and so forth, systems of reward tend to privilege conventionally “masculine” adversarial traits over conventionally “feminine” traits such as caring and cooperation. Given the historical association of aggression and competition with masculinity, these systems of reward often serve as systems of male privilege.

In addition, even when women do adopt aggressive and competitive attitudes, they have historically not received equivalent rewards for equivalent behaviors. Male expressions of aggression and competition have historically been rewarded because they have been viewed as natural and appropriate. Female expressions of aggression and competition have not been rewarded because they have been viewed as unnatural and inappropriate (Lakoff, 1975; Moulton, 1983).

Finally, beyond the relative disadvantages that women experience within these structures of male privilege, many feminists also express concern regarding the domination of masculine *qualities* (as opposed to male persons) over feminine *qualities* (as opposed to female persons) – regardless of whether these qualities are displayed by women or men (e.g., Brocke-Utne, 1989; Reardon, 1993). The flip side of a culture that privileges aggressive and competitive qualities is a culture that devalues caring and

mutualistic qualities. By devaluing these latter qualities, such a culture rewards conformity, by both men and women, to the established norms of a patriarchal order. In doing so, it also promotes a deficit of nurturing and cooperative traits among those who occupy the most influential positions at the top of existing hierarchies in government, business, law, and so forth. On the margins of this (arguably male) culture of competitive power struggles, many women employ alternative ways of thinking and talking about power. In the 1940s, Mary Parker Follett (1942, pp. 101-6) articulated a distinction between “coercive” and “coactive” power, or “power over” and “power with”. Follett argued that the usual understanding of power relations as coercive was limited and problematic. She (Follett, 1942, pp. 101) argued instead for an expanded understanding – a “conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power” – that could serve as a new normative basis for social and political relations.

This distinction was soon echoed by others, including Dorothy Emmett (1953) and Hannah Arendt (1969). In Arendt’s (1969, p. 44) words, “power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert”. The conflation of power with domination, she (Arendt, 1969, p. 43) warned, results “in a kind of blindness” to human social reality. “It is only after one ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion”, she (Arendt, 1969, pp. 43-44) asserted, that “human affairs will appear, or rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity”.

Although Arendt, Emmett, and Follett did not write as “feminists”, per se, their ideas were clearly picked up by many feminist writers and theorists in the following decades. For instance, in the 1970s, the distinctions that Arendt, Emmett, and Follett had been making were utilized and elaborated upon by Jean Baker Miller. The word *power*, Miller (1976, p. 115) wrote, has

acquired certain connotations [that] imply certain modes of behaviour more typical of men than women. But it may be that these modes are not necessary or essential to [its] meaning. Like all concepts and actions of a dominant group, “power” may have been distorted and skewed. It has rested almost solely in the hands of people who have lived with a constant need to maintain an irrational dominance; and in their hands it has acquired overtones of tyranny.

“It is important then”, Miller (1976, p. 116) argues, “to look into some of the meanings of power... to see whether, as women struggle in the economic, political, and other fields, they can redefine power”. As she (1982, p. 1) explains elsewhere:

Women have exerted enormous powers in their traditional role of fostering growth in others, and they have found that empowering others is a valuable and gratifying activity. Empowering other people, however, does not fit accepted conceptualizations and definitions of power... Women’s views have [thus] not been taken into account in most studies of power.

Miller (1982, pp. 1-2), in turn, advocates a broad redefinition of power based on the “capacity to produce change”, which includes activities such as “nurturing” and “empowering others”. “To be powerful in ways that simultaneously enhance, rather than

diminish, the power of others”, she (Miller, 1982, p. 5) concludes, “is a radical turn – a very different motivation than the concept of power upon which this world has operated”.

In the 1980s and 1990s, efforts to redefine power in less masculine ways began to echo throughout an emerging body of feminist literature. Commenting on what she calls “the feminist theory of power”, Nancy Hartsock (1983) concludes that

theories of power put forward by women rather than men differ systematically from the understanding of power as domination. While few women have theorized about power, their theories bear a striking similarity... (p. 210)

The common thread... is the writer’s concern to argue against the understanding of power as dominance or domination; to attempt to point to other meanings of the term more associated with ability, capacity, and competence; to urge reconsideration of assumptions about power. Theorizations of power such as these have become widespread in the literature of the contemporary women’s movement... (p. 224)

Women’s stress on power not as domination but as capacity, on power as a capacity of the community as a whole, suggests that women’s experience of connection and relation have consequences for understandings of power and may hold resources for a more liberatory understanding (p. 253).

A Systems Model of Power

Many systems theorists have articulated a theory of power that is remarkably similar to the feminist theory outlined above, yet derived from the relational complexities that characterize the study of dynamic systems. The fundamental premise of systems theory is that different types of complex systems – physical, biological, ecological, social, and so forth – exhibit many structural and functional similarities. In systems terminology, complex systems are characterized by *emergent properties* that do not characterize any of their component parts in isolation. These emergent properties are made possible by the internal *interdependence* of a system’s parts or subsystems, which exist within complex networks of relationships with one another, characterized by mutual influence and interchange (for overviews of systems theory, refer to Bertalanffy, 1998; Englehart, 1995; Skyttner, 1996).

Complex dynamic systems can therefore be understood as *functional* unities. They perform various functions that their component parts or subsystems could not perform alone. For instance, a cell can metabolize energy while its component elements, in isolation, cannot. An organ can perform specialized physiological functions that its component cells, in isolation, cannot. A living organism can reproduce itself while its component organs, in isolation, cannot. And a species can evolve while individual organisms, in isolation, cannot. Each of these functions is made possible through increasing levels of system complexity and integration.

Human societies can also be understood as functional unities – at least potentially. Interpretations vary widely, however, regarding the functionality of contemporary Western social systems. Many conventional theorists have argued that Western social,

political, and economic systems are highly functional. The writings of Talcott Parsons (1986), for instance, exemplify such thought (for a critique of Parsonian functionalism, refer to Giddens, 1968). This *conventional functionalism* has frequently served as a framework of apologetics for Western-liberal civilization.

In contrast, many *critical functionalists* have concluded that contemporary Western-liberal social systems are largely dysfunctional because they are socially unjust and/or ecologically unsustainable. In a series of *Heretical Reflections on Today's Values, Culture and Politics*, systems theorist Ervin Laslo (1989) asserts that idealized norms of aggression, competitive acquisition, and unregulated competition are no longer sustainable in an increasingly interdependent global society. In place of these traditional Western-liberal norms, Laslo (1989, pp. 109-15) calls for a reorientation of basic human relationships from adversarial “negative-sum” and “zero-sum” relations toward mutualistic “positive-sum” relations.

Another prominent systems theorist and peace researcher, Kenneth Boulding, has articulated a theory of power that is consistent with Laslo's analysis. Boulding's (1990) *integrative theory of power* provides an alternative way of thinking and talking about social relations in an age of interdependence. *Integrative power*, he (Boulding, 1990, p. 25) explains, is “the capacity to build organizations, to create families and groups, to inspire loyalty, to bind people together, to develop legitimacy”. According to Boulding, it embodies cooperation and reciprocity, friendship and collective identity, the growth of a sense of community, the ability to create and pursue constructive images of the future together, and the belief that one's own welfare is increased through an increase in the welfare of others. Drawing on his background in systems theory, economics, and peace research, Boulding concludes that functional social and political systems can only be constructed on the normative basis of these integrative power relations. Though he acknowledges the historical existence of adversarial power relations, and even accepts their necessity in some limited contexts, Boulding (1990) argues that contemporary world conditions demand a much wider recognition of the importance of integrative power in human affairs.

From the perspectives of Laslo, Boulding, and other like-minded theorists, adversarial power relations are becoming anachronistic in the context of human social evolution. Militarism, nationalism, sectarianism, racism, competitive materialism, and other expressions of social dysfunction reflect a failure to adapt to changing historical conditions – a failure to model social systems according to the “positive sum” or “integrative” relations needed to promote collective human interests in an age of increasing interdependence. Indeed, Laslo (1989, pp. 128-9) concludes that the “obsolete modes of thinking and acting” embodied in contemporary Western cultures have reached the upper limits of their stability within these new conditions of global interdependence.

Toward a Unified Schema

As many feminists and systems theorists point out, understanding power merely in terms of domination does not provide an adequate basis for social and political theory. It obscures as much as it reveals. As a basis for normative social theory it is especially problematic. At the same time, the *power as domination* paradigm serves a very

important analytical function. “Power over” relations do exist and they warrant sustained critical attention – especially in the context of peace research, given that social justice is often an important precondition to peace. What is needed, however, is a comprehensive framework that recognizes the complex and multifaceted nature of power relations and provides an adequate basis for critical as well as normative social theory.

Elements of such a framework can already be found, scattered across the writings of diverse social and political theorists, including many of those cited above. Though the distinction between “power to” versus “power over” is widely used to denote the major fault lines among power theorists, other ways of thinking and talking about power cut across this distinction in complex ways. For instance, one concept that does not fit neatly into the “power to” versus “power over” schema is the concept of “balance of power” (or “intercursive power”, e.g., Blau, 1964; Gamson, 1968; Reismann, Denny, & Glazer, 1951). Neither do the expressions “power with” (Follett, 1942) and “power against” (Wrong, 1997). All of these expressions point to slightly different models of power. What has been lacking, to date, has been an effort to integrate all of these models into a unified and comprehensive schema.

The first step in formulating this schema is to recognize that the categories “power to” versus “power over” are, in fact, neither parallel nor mutually exclusive categories. “Power to”, in the broadest sense, denotes *power as capacity*. This is an overarching definition of the term power. “Power over” on the other hand, is a special case of this overarching concept. If we say that we have “power over” someone, this is simply another way of saying that we 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. For the purposes of delineating a more comprehensive schema of power relations, the first step is to recognize that “power over” is more accurately viewed as a sub-category of the more general *power as capacity* concept.¹

“Power over”, however, is not the only sub-category of *power as capacity*. Feminist and systems models point to other relations of power that do not entail exercising “power over” others. In keeping with these models, one could say that people who are acting in a cooperative or mutualistic manner in the pursuit of a common goal are exercising “power with” one another. For definitional purposes, this “power with” category will be referred to as *mutualistic power relations* – which constitutes another subcategory of the *power as capacity* concept.

The two categories identified above, associated with the phrases “power over” and “power with”, are still not parallel or 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 powers in a cooperative or mutualistic manner either.

In this context, one 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. For definitional purposes, this latter category will be referred to as *adversarial power relations*. Together, *mutualistic power relations* and *adversarial power relations* constitute two parallel and mutually exclusive relational categories of 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 stalemate referred to above. What distinguishes “balance of power” relationships from “power over” relationships 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 as *power equality* (i.e., “balance of power”) and *power inequality* (i.e., “power over”).

Likewise, *power equality* and *power inequality* have mirror counterpoints 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. 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.²

POWER AS CAPACITY			
ADVERSARIAL RELATIONS “power against” competition		MUTUALISTIC RELATIONS “power with” cooperation	
INEQUALITY “power over” coercion domination oppression win/lose	EQUALITY “balance of power” stalemate compromise frustration lose/lose	INEQUALITY “assisted empowerment” education nurturance assistance (win)/win	EQUALITY “mutual empowerment” synergy collaboration coordination win/win

Figure 1. Power: A Unified Schema

The schema outlined above provides a simple yet comprehensive framework for thinking and talking about the entire field of power relations – as the visual summary in Figure 1 illustrates.

This visual schema provides a vocabulary of ideal types by which broad patterns and distinctions can be recognized and discussed. Most obviously, it reveals that “power to” and “power over” are not equivalent categories. In doing so, it also demonstrates that an exclusive focus on “power over” cases obscures many other important categories. This exclusive focus also conflates and confuses the relational aspects of power (adversarial vs. mutualistic) with the distributive aspects (inequality vs. equality).

Beyond these basic analytical clarifications, this schema permits other conceptual distinctions that tend to be obscured in conventional discourses on power. For instance, though *power inequality* may be oppressive when coupled with *adversarial power relations*, *inequality* can lead to empowerment in the context of *mutualistic power relations* – as in the nurturing relationship between a parent and child or the mentoring relationship between a teacher and student referred to above. 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 – provide examples of assisted empowerment on a socio-structural level.

Hierarchy, as an organizational principle, can also be seen as a desirable form of inequality under some circumstances. In a social or organizational context, hierarchy refers to unequally structured power relations. Not surprisingly, many people equate hierarchy with oppression. But this equation again conflates *power inequality* with *adversarial power relations*. In the context of *mutualistic power relations*, hierarchy can be a valuable organizing principle. When any group of equal people is too large to effectively engage every member in every decision-making process, the group may benefit from delegating certain decision-making powers to smaller sub-groups. This consensually agreed upon 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.

Though this schema illustrates that hierarchy cannot automatically be equated with oppression, it also cautions that hierarchy cannot automatically be equated with empowerment, as some conventional functionalist theorists conversely assume (e.g., Parsons, 1986). Within competitive or adversarial power relationships, which are common in contemporary societies, hierarchy does lead to oppression, exploitation, and other undesirable outcomes.

Even as this 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 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 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 will arguably continue to reign as long as massive stockpiles of nuclear weapons exist. MAD is a classic example of an adversarial relationship defined by that otherwise desirable characteristic: power equality (measured here in units of destructive nuclear capacity). 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 ordinary 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 a competing system of nation states in the nuclear age – might just as well stand for Mutually Assured Disempowerment.

As these few examples illustrate, the schema outlined above provides a simple but comprehensive map of power relations. Indeed, by representing the 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 Figure 2 illustrates.

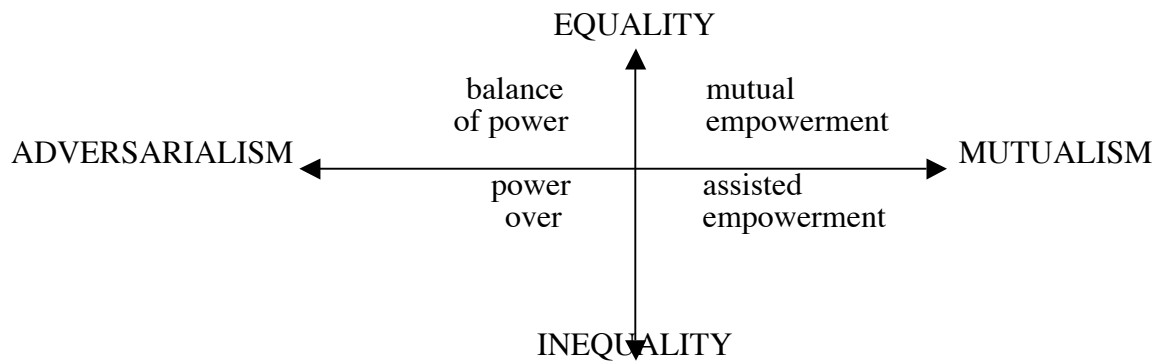


Figure 2. Relational and Distributive Dimensions of Power

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 reciprocation, coordination, and other “mutual empowerment” relations are situated in the upper-right quadrant.

This conceptual map helps us recognize 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 *more* or *less* mutualistic than others, just as some distributions of power might be *more* or *less* equal or unequal than others. 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

toward a state of relative equality, as indeed is the goal in most parental and educational relationships. Conversely, a relationship may become more adversarial or more mutualistic over time, as in oscillations toward or away from political partisanship and bipartisanship (or 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” relations are contained in the lower-left quadrant, “power to” – or *power as capacity* – constitutes the entire *plane* on which both of the axes (*adversarialism* ↔ *mutualism* and *equality* ↔ *inequality*) are inscribed.

This conceptual map, of course, is a metaphorical rather than mathematical construct. Actual social relations cannot be precisely located and compared according to exact, ordinal coordinates on this plane. Nonetheless, the map can serve as a useful analytical aid and can provide a common vocabulary – or a common discourse – for thinking and talking about power.

From Discourse to Social Practice

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, *power* is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Though divergent ways of thinking and talking about power highlight different facets of this phenomenon, the schema outlined above provides an effective vocabulary for distinguishing between the relational and distributive dimensions of power. Given that our ways of thinking and talking about a subject influence the ways we act in relation to that subject, this schema has significant implications for social practice.

Consider the practical implications of the conventional focus on adversarial power relations. Based on this relatively one-dimensional understanding of human relations, Western-liberal theorists have generally assumed that the ideal forms of social organization are those that harness competitive impulses in a manner that promotes the maximum social good. Based on this assumption, Western-liberal societies have structured their political systems as partisan contests, their justice systems as contests of legal advocacy, their economic systems as contests of material production and consumption, and their educational systems as contests of intellectual achievement (all reinforced by the fact that most recreation activities are structured as contests of physical or mental performance). This “culture of contest” (Karlberg, 2003) has become so naturalized that it is difficult for most people to imagine alternative models of social organization. But are these contest models sustainable in an age of increasing social and ecological interdependence? And do these models really derive from an essentially competitive and adversarial human nature? In other words, are they the best that we can do as a species?

In response to the first of these questions, a look around at current world conditions should at least raise some concerns about the social and ecological sustainability of this culture of contest. Steadily growing extremes of wealth and poverty, both within and between virtually every country on earth, should certainly raise some concerns. Our ongoing inability to address the root causes of war, terrorism, and other social conflicts, should raise further concerns. And our frustrated efforts to respond

in a collective and coordinated manner to mounting ecological crises (on local, national, and global scales) should raise still more concerns. Though only time will tell whether these contest models prove sustainable under conditions of increasing social and ecological interdependence, it seems that we would do well to at least start examining and experimenting with alternatives – if for no other reason than to hedge our bets.

In response to the second and third questions, the schema outlined above suggests that contest models of social organization are not inevitable expressions of human nature because adversarial relations are not the only form of relations we are capable of. By recognizing the full field of power relations that we live and grow within, we can see that our species has the capacity for both adversarial and mutualistic forms of behavior and social organization. Which of these capacities is more fully developed and finds fuller expression in our social order appears to be a function of our cultures rather than an invariable expression of our biological natures. Indeed, the conclusion that human beings are equally capable of cooperation and competition, and that our cultures determine the relative social expression of each capacity, is gaining ground in many scientific and social-scientific disciplines, challenging the long-held assumptions about human nature and social organization that underlie most Western-liberal institutions (e.g., Axelrod, 1984; Bandura, 1973; Bateson, 1985; Becker, 1976; Bergstrom & Stark, 1993; Brocke-Utne, 1989; Carrithers, 1989; Casti, 1994; Collard, 1978; Hammond, 1975; Hollander, 1990; Howell & Willis, 1989; Kohn, 1990; Leakey & Lewin, 1977; Lewontin, 1991; Lunati, 1992; Mansbridge, 1990; Margolis, 1982; Margulis, 1998; Margulis & Fester, 1991; Mark & Ervin, 1970; Montagu, 1976, 1978; Rose, Lewontin, & Kamin, 1987; Ross, 1993; Seville, 1987; Simon, 1990; Sugden, 1982; Zamagni, 1995).

Yet, a skeptic might ask, if contest models of social organization are not inevitable expressions of human nature, what are the alternatives? How can a complex modern society construct governing institutions based on less competitive assumptions about human nature? In a previous iteration of this article, the response of one anonymous reviewer was particularly illuminating in this regard. The reviewer wrote that this article made

some wild assertions about how Western-liberal societies have structured their political systems in terms of contestation. What is the contrast, modern non-liberal societies? Are these run in terms of “power with”? But of course all societies require cooperation. A political party is a coalition of interests. Parliaments, courts, driving down the road, all require cooperation even if they also involve conflicts. There have been many societies in the past with few conflicts, but generally speaking these societies were hunter-gatherer societies with low populations, and since there was no accumulation (hunter-gatherer’s only pick enough food for a few days at a time) there was no room for non-producers. Only with agriculture can we develop elites, bureaucracy and other non-producers of the stuff of life who can come to dominate others. Do the authors want us to return to hunter-gatherer lifestyles?

This line of skepticism has become quite familiar to most scholars who question the prevailing assumptions that underlie the Western-liberal social order. To this line of

skepticism I offer a three-part response: (1) I agree that all societies are clearly characterized by both competition and cooperation. In fact, the purpose of the schema developed in this article is to keep the latter of these characteristics from becoming obscured within our discourses of power – which is the perennial tendency within Western-liberal societies, especially among social theorists. (2) I am not advocating a return to hunter gatherer lifestyles. Not only do I believe this would be impossible, I do not believe it would be desirable. (3) I am not suggesting that conflict can or will ever disappear in complex modern societies (nor do I believe, for that matter, that it was absent in hunter-gatherer societies). What I am suggesting is that conflict should not continue to serve indefinitely as the normative principle upon which we construct our governing institutions and conduct our affairs, as it currently does in Western-liberal societies, where democracy is confused with partisanship, where justice tends to be confused with legal contestation, and where economy is confused with competitive material acquisition. There is a significant difference between recognizing the occurrence of conflict in human affairs, on one hand, and prescribing conflict as the organizing principle for our most important social institutions, on the other. The latter, I assert, cultivates unnecessary levels of conflict.

Alternative Discourse Communities and the Case of the Bahá'ís

What, then, are the alternatives to the Western-liberal culture of conflict? As a species, we have barely begun to exercise our social imagination in these ways, constrained as we are by the inherited discourses that structure so much of our thought. Despite these constraints, alternative social practices, rooted in alternative discourses, are emerging on small and large scales around the planet. Many non-governmental organizations and social movements around the world are gaining significant experience with non-partisan models of collective decision making and self-governance. Alternative dispute resolution models are attracting the interest and support not only of disillusioned lay-people but also of disillusioned judges and lawyers. And cooperative economic experiments, voluntary simplicity movements, and alternative models of economic prosperity and quality of life are beginning to attract interest on every continent. All of these social experiments embody less competitive and adversarial ways of thinking and talking about social power and social reality.

One particularly instructive example of an alternative discourse producing non-adversarial models of social organization is the case of the international Bahá'í community. As a universally inclusive faith community, a global social movement, and an international non-governmental organization, the Bahá'í community defies conventional categorization. For the purpose of this analysis, however, it can be understood as a distinct *discourse community*: a community of people who share a common way of thinking and talking about social reality, from which derive unique social structures and practices. As a discourse community, the Bahá'í community currently includes over six million members, from over two thousand ethnic and religious backgrounds, representing every socio-economic strata, and residing in every nation on the planet (Bahá'í World Centre, 1998). It thus represents a microcosm of the entire human race.

For simplicity and clarity, Bahá'ís are referred to collectively in the discussion below, as though they speak with a single voice. In part, this is a stylistic choice intended to make the discussion more readable. However, it also reflects the unusual degree of consensus that exists among Bahá'ís regarding their core principles and practices. Because the Bahá'í community is a voluntary association of individuals who have been drawn together by a commitment to a clearly-articulated set of principles and practices, these principles and practices are not in dispute within the community, and Bahá'í discourse therefore displays a remarkably high level of internal consensus and coherence.

According to Bahá'ís, contemporary world conditions are pressing humanity toward an age of global integration that will require new models of social organization and new levels of maturity in human interactions (Bahá'í World Centre, 2001). Among other things, Bahá'ís believe this will require a rethinking of contemporary attitudes toward power.

To contemplate a transformation of society on this scale is to raise both the question of the power that can be harnessed to accomplish it and the issue inextricably linked to it, the authority to exercise that power. As with all other implications of the accelerating integration of the planet and its people, both of these familiar terms stand in urgent need of redefinition.

Throughout history power has been largely interpreted as advantage enjoyed by persons or groups. Often, indeed, it has been expressed simply in terms of means to be used against others. This interpretation of power has become an inherent feature of the culture of division and conflict that has characterized the human race during the past several millennia... Its chief effect has been to confer on its beneficiaries the ability to acquire, to surpass, to dominate, to resist, to win (BIC Haifa, 1995, pp. 22-3).

While acknowledging the technological and material productivity that this culture of conflict has historically yielded, Bahá'ís assert that inherited “attitudes related to the use of power... have reached the outer limits of their effectiveness” (BIC Haifa, 1995, p. 23). “Today”, they maintain, “persistence in the idea that power means advantage for various segments of the human family is profoundly mistaken in theory and of no practical service to the social and economic development of the planet” (BIC Haifa, 1995, p. 23). “The human race”, they continue,

is being urged by the requirements of its own maturation to free itself from its inherited understanding and use of power. That it can do so is demonstrated by the fact that, although dominated by the traditional conception, humanity has always been able to conceive of power in other forms critical to its hopes. History provides ample evidence that, however intermittently and ineptly, people of every background, throughout the ages, have tapped a wide range of creative resources within themselves (BIC Haifa, 1995, pp. 23-4).

Foremost among these creative resources, Bahá'ís believe, is what they refer to as the “power of unity” (ʿAbdu'l-Bahá, 1982, p. 15). For Bahá'ís, the term *unity* does not denote uniformity or any homogenization of human diversity. Rather, it denotes cooperative interdependence and reciprocity – or what the schema above refers to as mutualism. In fact, Bahá'ís view diversity as an invaluable resource that strengthens and enriches humanity's collective capacities. The call for unity thus

does not ignore, nor does it attempt to suppress, the diversity of ethnical origins, of climate, of history, of language and tradition, of thought and habit, that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. It calls for a wider loyalty, for a larger aspiration than any that has animated the human race. It insists upon the subordination of national impulses and interests to the imperative claims of a unified world. It repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity (Effendi, 1974, p. 41).

Furthermore, Bahá'ís point out that “such principles can operate only within a culture that is essentially democratic in spirit and method” (BIC Haifa, 1995, p. 25). “To say this, however,” they (BIC Haifa, 1995, p. 25) elaborate,

is not to endorse the ideology of partisanship that has everywhere boldly assumed democracy's name and which, despite impressive contributions to human progress in the past, today finds itself mired in the cynicism, apathy, and corruption to which it has given rise. In selecting those who are to take collective decisions on its behalf, society does not need and is not well served by the political theater of nominations, candidature, electioneering, and solicitation. It lies within the capacity of all people, as they become progressively educated and convinced that their real development interests are being served by programs proposed to them, to adopt electoral procedures that will gradually refine the selection of their decision-making bodies.

This is one of the areas where Bahá'í discourse clearly translates into innovative social practice. The international Bahá'í community governs its affairs through a system of democratically elected assemblies that have been established locally, nationally, and internationally in over 15,000 communities throughout the planet (Bahá'í World Centre, 1998). Yet the Bahá'í system of governance, which embodies legislative, judicial, and executive functions, is entirely non-partisan and non-competitive. In brief, all adult community members are eligible for election and every member has the reciprocal duty to serve if elected. At the same time, nominations, campaigning, and all forms of solicitation are prohibited. Voters are guided only by their own conscience as they exercise complete and real freedom of choice in voting for those they believe best embody the qualities of recognized ability, mature experience, and self-less service to others. Through a plurality count, the nine individuals that receive the most votes are called to serve as members of a governing assembly. Because no one seeks election, elections are a call to service and sacrifice rather than a pathway to power and privilege,

and the process is shielded from the material corruptions to which competitive electoral systems are so susceptible. (For a more comprehensive presentation of the Baha'i electoral system, refer to the Universal House of Justice, 1990.)

All decision making within these assemblies is, in turn, guided by consultative principles that tend to make decision making a unifying rather than divisive process. Participants strive to regard the tremendous diversity within the Bahá'í community as an asset rather than a source of conflict, and they seek to inform themselves by soliciting the perspectives, concerns, interests, and expertise of all segments of the community. They also strive to transcend the limitations of their own egos and perspectives, strive to express themselves with respect and moderation, strive to raise the context of decision-making to the level of principle, and strive for consensus but settle for a majority when necessary (for an overview of Baha'i consultation, refer to the Universal House of Justice, 1980). Of course, individual Bahá'ís are not perfect in their efforts to translate all of these principles into practice. Yet they view participation in these institutions as the means by which they can learn and refine the skills and attitudes that Bahá'í discourse prescribes. In this regard, Bahá'í institutions are designed to facilitate training in the non-partisan governance and non-adversarial decision making that Bahá'ís are committed to. Despite the imperfections of individual Bahá'ís, and notwithstanding the developmental process by which Bahá'ís learn to translate their principles into practice, Bahá'í electoral and decision-making practices already stand in stark contrast to the competitive and confrontational electoral and decision-making practices that dominate Western-liberal societies.

As a result of their considerable accumulated experience, Bahá'ís offer these practices as models for others to study, learn from, and adapt – a strategy which, in turn, reflects the non-adversarial method by which Bahá'ís pursue social change. In this regard, Bahá'ís refrain from putting their energies into “the culture of protest” that represents yet another expression of conventional attitudes toward power (BIC Haifa, 1995, p. 12). Instead, Bahá'ís pursue a purely constructive approach to social change. This involves the construction of visible alternatives to prevailing social structures and practices, followed by reliance on the “power of attraction” that these models exert when they demonstrate their efficacy (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, 1968, p. 88). As the Bahá'í community grows in capacity and prominence, many of its structures and practices, such as its electoral model, are indeed attracting the attention of outside observers, such as the United Nations, which has recognized its potential as an electoral system that nation states might emulate (United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1989, pp. 6-7).

As a distinct discourse community, with an alternative way of thinking and talking about social power and social reality, the Bahá'í community is thus one of many social experiments occurring around the world today that warrant the attention of those who are looking for more peaceful and just models of social practice. Of course, the purpose of the preceding discussion is not to proselytize the Bahá'í model. Other faith communities, other social movements, and other non-governmental organizations have much to offer, and much to learn from one another, in this regard. The discussion above should be interpreted as an invitation for all such communities and movements and organizations to articulate and share their experiments with more mutualistic models of social organization, based on alternative assumptions regarding social power. Through this process we can all benefit from the collective experience that is emerging in diverse social experiments around the planet. And to the extent that other social experiments

yield results that parallel those of the Bahá'í community, we may gain confidence in rejecting conflict and competition as the normative principles underlying our social order.

Conclusion

This article began with the basic premise of discourse theory: the ways we think and talk about a subject influence and reflect the ways we act in relation to that subject. The problematic nature of Western-liberal discourses of power have been recognized by many, and diverse attempts at discourse intervention are emerging in response. Yet the overall project of discourse intervention is far from complete. Alternative discourses of power need to be more clearly articulated. They also need to be more fully reconciled with the adversarial models of power that are necessary for critical social analysis but insufficient as a normative framework for social practice. As a contribution to this project, this paper outlines an analytical schema for thinking and talking about power in its relational and distributive dimensions. This schema helps us recognize and respond to oppressive power relations that are a cause of widespread conflict and instability in the world around us, while it simultaneously enables us to articulate and work toward more just and peaceful alternatives. From a peace studies standpoint, it reminds us of the power of discourse, helps us evaluate contemporary discourses of power, and enables us to recognize discourse intervention as an important area of social theory and praxis.

Notes

1. Although “power over” has been acknowledged as a special case of the more general concept of “power to” by authors such as Giddens (1979), Parsons (1986), and Wrong (1997), none of these authors situate these concepts within a comprehensive schema of power relations.
2. Wartenberg (1990) acknowledges the possibility that some unequal power relationships can be beneficial to the less powerful agents in the manner described above. He refers to these as “transformative power” relationships, and uses the examples of nurturing and education to illustrate his point. Yet, because he conflates the distinction between adversarialism and mutualism with the distinction between equality and inequality, he concludes that transformative power is a special case of “power over” relationships. The schema outlined in this article suggests that this conclusion is problematic.

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