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## power and luck

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*Power and Luck*

HOW TO CONCEIVE of power and how to study power structures and power relations are matters that have been subject to endless debates, which show no signs of imminent resolution. Underlying such debates is a significant methodological issue. Should one take power to be a purely analytical concept that is independent of normative judgments such that “theorists and critics from divergent ethical and political stances” who are “unlikely to agree upon the legitimacy of the actions of the powerful” will be “able to share a common analysis of the distribution and exercise of power within a given social and political context” (Hay 2002, pp. 186-187)? Can we all, despite our differences, be brought to agree about who the powerful are, where power lies, and when and how it is exerted? Or is every conception of power normatively loaded — that is, interpreted from a particular moral and political viewpoint? If, as we believe, the latter is true, it will, of course, also be true of any conception of power that is offered as a purely analytic concept for the purpose of the social scientific study of power and power relations. In this paper we seek to support this position (presented more fully in Lukes 2004) by showing how a narrowly-defined account of power that has recently been proposed for studying power and modelling the power structure is no less normatively loaded than any other account and that to use it is to close off, by depoliticising them, a series of questions in the answers to which, as social and political actors as well as analysts, we are inevitably interested.

The concept of power we propose to examine has been developed in an attempt to apply rational choice theory to the debates about power. Rational choice theory treats of structured interactions among strategic actors, and our larger intention (not pursued here) is to suggest that such a focus limits unduly our understanding of power by closing off questions which a wider focus opens up. Specifically, it has been claimed, from a rational choice perspective, that distinguishing power from luck has significant implications for how we should assess the incidence and distribution of power. Of course we can be factually mistaken about who

has power and how much they have. But the question is: are we sometimes mistaken for *conceptual* reasons when we (whether as social scientists or as social actors) suppose that some individuals and groups have power over others? Should we sometimes rather say that the former are beneficiaries of good and the latter victims of bad luck? And if so, when should we speak of power and when of luck? It has been suggested that when

we model the power structure we find that we need to introduce a separate concept — that of luck — which enables some to get what they want without trying. Luck is not power and it is the failure to understand luck that led much of the earlier debate astray. (Dowding 1996, p. x)

Is this true? Does distinguishing power from luck yield new and important insights into the nature of power? And does understanding luck and how it differs from power enable us to avoid hitherto prevalent errors?

The topic of power is not widely addressed in an explicit manner by rational choice theorists, but two recent writers have developed this theme: Brian Barry and Keith Dowding. In the first part of this article we shall focus on Dowding's presentation of a rational-choice approach to power. Our purpose, in criticizing this author's work, is to discuss the larger issues on which his analysis concentrates our attention, with a view to exemplifying the limitations of such an approach, which, we believe, become particularly clear when one examines the way in which both these authors attempt to distinguish power from luck.

Dowding's analysis takes off from an earlier article of Brian Barry's entitled "Is it better to be powerful or lucky?" Barry takes power to be an individual's "ability to change outcomes from what they would otherwise have been in the direction he desires". Of course, Barry observes, "the likelihood that outcomes will correspond to his desires does not depend solely on his power" but also on "what the outcome would have been in the absence of his intervention". This Barry calls luck. "Power", he adds, is also "an inherently counterfactual notion": an actor's power is "his ability to overcome resistance" (which may or may not occur). So, if "luck" is "the probability of getting what you want without trying" and "decisiveness" is "the increase in the probability of getting what you want that occurs if you try", then "an actor has more power the greater the range of unfavourable distributions of preferences within which he is decisive, in other words the more opposition he can overcome" (Barry 1989, pp. 272, 297, 296, 300). Likewise, actors have more luck, though not more power, the more closely their interests correspond to the interests of powerful friends. For example, if Mexico's interests tend to

coincide more closely with those of the United States than Costa Rica's interests, Mexico cannot be said on that account to be more powerful than Costa Rica, only luckier. Luck can also change, as in the case of the Taliban, whose interests were consistent enough with those of the United States in the 1980s, while in 2001 their luck ran out.

Dowding takes this further, but in pursuit of a different argument (with which Barry in turn takes issue: see Barry 2002). Like Barry, he takes power to be attributable to agents, not structures: it is "a mistake to think that because we are mapping the structure *of* power, that structures *have* power" (Dowding 1996, p. 28). Agents have power within structures and to talk of the power of structures is either redundant or misleading. He redefines power, "rather clumsily", as he writes, as follows:

The probability of getting what you want if you act in all possible worlds which are the same as the actual one with the exception of the preferences of all other actors.

Thus:

The decisiveness and luck of an actor vary according to the preferences of other actors, but an actor's power remains the same. It is a disposition, analyzable counter-actually by taking into account possible preference changes. (Dowding 1996, p. 53) (1)

Dowding elsewhere distinguishes two kinds of power: "outcome power" as "the ability of an actor to bring about or help bring about outcomes" and "social power" as "the ability of an actor deliberately to change the incentive structure of another actor or actors to bring about or help bring about outcomes" (Dowding 1996, p. 5). So, he concludes, actors are socially powerful "because of the resources they bring to a bargain with other actors". Thus, "social power always depends upon a coalition of mutual or allied interests" (Dowding 1996, p. 53).

### *Good luck: not Having to Act*

Given this "resource-based account of power", Dowding spells out his account of its relation to luck. He begins by viewing "the position of actors in social situations as their luck" and warns against the "blame fallacy" of thinking that "the powerlessness of people entails that there are other powerful people stopping them from achieving their aims". (Strictly speaking, this should be the "responsibility fallacy", since the

(1) Dowding uses this term instead of the usual "counterfactually".

alleged fallacy consists in wrongly holding people responsible for outcomes by exercising power, but this could apply also to desirable outcomes, for which they would normally deserve credit, not blame). He develops this conception of luck in order to show that “elites tend to get what they want as much through luck as through actually wielding power, though they may keep their power in reserve for when it is needed”. The distribution of luck in society, he goes on to claim, is “not mere happenstance”, but *systematic*. There are, he claims, reasons why some groups in society are able to get what they desire “without having to act”, by having their wishes supplied by others as a by-product of the latter’s actions. Likewise, lack of outcome power may well be the result of the hostile application of the social power of others, but it may not be. The “powerless may be impersonally oppressed by the logic of situations as well as by the directed social power of others”. Thus:

Some groups of people are lucky: they get what they want from society without having to act. Some groups are systematically lucky: they get what they want without having to act because of the way society is structured. It may seem odd to think that luck can be systematic; but it denotes the fact that people may get what they want without trying and this property attaches to certain locations within the social and institutional structure. Luck in this sense is closer to fortune or destiny than to simple chance. (Dowding 1996, pp. 10, 16, 45, 71)

To illustrate this last claim, Dowding cites what he calls the systematic luck of capitalists who benefit, following Adam Przeworski’s analysis (Przeworski 1986; Przeworski and Sprague 1985), from the electoral constraints and short-term time horizons that prevent any government from moving to a socialist economy: they “have no need to intervene partly because they are lucky, and partly because the politicians may be afraid to act in ways contrary to the interests of business lest businessmen do intervene” (Dowding 1996, p. 74). Capitalists are lucky, he thinks, because they are “capitalists within a capitalist system with a competitive party structure [...]. They may be powerful as well, but there is an empirical difference between the two. If they are systematically lucky and not powerful, then when their interests are challenged they will not be able to respond; if they are powerful then they can respond” (Dowding 1991, p. 154). He also cites, against “elitist” analyses of the so-called “growth machine” (Molotch 1976; 1990), cases where developers and local pro-growth elites act “with the acquiescence of the majority of the local population”, claiming that these show not the power of such elites but their “systematic luck”. This is, presumably, because they get what they want because what they want is what most relevant others want. In short,

The cards are stacked in developers' favour. The structure of capitalist society makes capitalists systematically lucky. (Dowding 1996, pp. 79-80, 82)

But, in the first place, capitalists are in a position to constrain what politicians do, simply by pursuing the normal business of capitalism (see Barry 2002). They can do this without trying, intervening or responding (if this is meant to suggest taking politically motivated actions). For, precisely within a "competitive party structure", the electoral prospects of governments (and thus how politicians behave, both in and out of office) are heavily dependent upon how capitalists behave. This is true of their behaviour within the realm of economic and financial decision-making but also more widely in respect of their significant influence over policy-making through the structure of lobbying and over public opinion through mass media. So of course capitalists benefit from the dispositions of elected politicians, which they, as normal, practising capitalists, in turn, significantly constrain.

Secondly, of course, individuals may see themselves, and be seen by others, as lucky to be in positions that give them power. And though it is true that those occupying roles that provide them with resources enabling them to exert power may properly be seen as lucky in that accident of history, the fact that such roles continue to exist is no accident, even though their incumbents may see it as their destiny. When the superordinate claim that their power has been given them whether by God or by chance, and indeed when the subordinate see their lack of it as their fate, are we simply to endorse their respective self-understandings? Nor does the contingency that some are just born lucky or have struck lucky undermine their continued potential for having and exerting power over others. Further, though a one-off correspondence between one's interests and socially generated outcomes may indicate luck (as when winning a lottery), a situation where one's interests systematically correspond with outcomes, even if they are interests shared with others, cannot plausibly be attributed solely to chance. It is the continuing reproduction of unequal power that allows such a correspondence to continue.

Moreover, a comparison of countries with Social Democratic histories, such as Scandinavia, with others in respect of income distribution and welfare provision is enough to show that how power is distributed is a political choice, not an operation of fate. It is, of course, true that all capitalist states face constraints based on the necessity of capital accumulation and international competition, but the amount of power capitalists enjoy is shaped by institutional arrangements in particular settings. This underscores the lack of historicity in accounts such as

Dowding's. To argue baldly that capitalists are systematically lucky is to leave unconsidered the non-random political choices that have given capitalists more or less power in specific historical and geographical contexts. Not only does such an approach cloud these issues; it has the further effect of depoliticizing inequality and political power by taking them out of the realm of human action, laws and institutions.

*Bad Luck: Collective Action Problems*

Luck benefits some; it also disfavours others. Centrally, this is because of "the collective action problem", which is "at the heart of all considerations of the power structure" since it "generates the divergence of power between the different groups according to the differing resources and conditions of groups of people". Groups, Dowding argues, can fail to secure their interests, even if there is no-one trying to stop them, because they have "differential abilities to mobilize, based upon properties of the group, not upon the opposition of other groups". He is certainly not the first to discuss the constraints faced by groups attempting to organize, yet his discussion has the merit of making explicit an array of such problems on "the demand side" that can disable, as well as solutions on "the supply side" that can enable collective action. The goal of his discussion here is to stress, once more, that the presence of the former and the absence of the latter "need not have developed through strategic deliberate manipulation of others" (Dowding 1996, pp. 31, 41).

But here one can ask whether this is not a misplaced goal. Is showing the absence of "strategic deliberate manipulation" enough to show that power is irrelevant to the explanation of the problems individuals face in mobilizing for collective action and of the constraints that prevent their being overcome?

Upon closer examination of concrete situations it becomes clear that problems of collective action may be created, sustained and exacerbated by powerful others who may, but may well not, have engaged in "strategic deliberate manipulation". Consider the following "demand side problems" that may appear to be inherent in "the nature of the production function, the nature of the interest held in common and the characteristics of the group" (Dowding 1996, p. 32). Contesting Dowding's claims to the contrary, we observe that:

1. *Recognition of interests* is in part shaped by powerful actors who — through hegemonic beliefs, pervasive ideologies and media access, to

name only a few resources — can, through a variety of mechanisms, induce and encourage people to have beliefs that serve the interests of the powerful while subverting their own. Consider, for example, the vivid account by Thomas Frank of the politics of his home state of Kansas *circa* 2004. Frank writes of:

sturdy blue-collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off their land; of devoted family men carefully seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in Midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will translate their region into a “rust belt”, will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover.

So, for example, the

Republican push to repeal the estate tax was often presented as a way to help small farmers in a difficult time. But by far the greatest beneficiaries of the tax’s repeal have been the very rich. Only a tiny percentage of the assets taxed each year under the estate tax were farm properties... (Frank 2004, pp. 10, 72)

2. *Relative costs of participating in collective action* may also be affected by powerful actors who, explicitly or implicitly, block actual and potential efforts at collective action. The most obvious example is the difficulty of getting workers to form unions in the United States, where the laws protecting workers from firings and other adverse consequences are weak. Companies have great leeway in what sanctions they can apply to workers, and they face mild penalties when they break the law. They also, by virtue of their greater resources, have the ability to prolong a conflict until the resources for sustaining resistance have worn too thin to continue collective action. The state also can impose costs on (and not simply enable) collective action. President Reagan’s smashing of the air traffic controllers’ strike in the early 1980s evidenced this.

3. *Opposition* can also be influenced by power. It is an old trick to divide the downtrodden amongst themselves with the effect of precluding potential co-ordination among them. The trick is all the more effective to the extent to which it is played without strategic purpose. Again an example from labour is pertinent: in the American South racist attitudes were effective in keeping striking white workers from joining with black workers against mining companies.

Dowding also addresses what he calls the “supply” side, with the aim of showing “how some groups, largely because of the nature of the group itself, have differing abilities to overcome their particular collective action problems” (Dowding 1996, p. 32). But here too a crucial factor may be the operations of the powerful, sometimes explicit and strategic, often

implicit and indirect, which hamper what would be solutions to such problems by stifling sources of support for mobilization:

1. *The State* may indeed provide resources for groups to lobby for their interests, as Dowding asserts, but even a cursory look at lobbying in the United States shows that business PACs have disproportionate power in comparison with other groups where policies that affect business are at stake. The process of gaining access to members of Congress “becomes a major weapon used to frustrate and sidetrack social movements” (Clawson *et al.* 1992, p. 126). The numerous “special deals” that business is able to secure deprives social movements of balanced access to state decision-makers. Thus the “rights” that Dowding presumes individuals “enjoy” as a source of power are undermined by unequal access to state processes themselves.

2. *Advertising* is a potential source for overcoming collective action problems. Yet the real constraints that powerful actors impose (sometimes strategically and deliberately, often not) are upon access to that resource. Of course it is true that if a group is able to advertise its cause and is able to convince others of their “true” preferences for that cause, it will be easier to mobilize. But failure to advertise effectively may have much more to do with who controls media messages than with lack of an effective media campaign by the group attempting to organize or with underlying interests of the target population. Political agendas are continuously reproduced which both shape and reflect a “media marketplace where commercial values tend to discourage the ‘politicization’ of entertainment and cultural material beyond a fairly narrow and safe range” (McChesney 1997, p. 9). In such a situation, ideas and stories that challenge hegemonic practices are simply ignored. Further, the oligopolistic nature of the corporate media ensures that the news coverage is shaped by the interests of owners and advertisers, and not by the public at large. This is true even for so-called “public” television and radio in the United States, where corporate sponsorship has the effect (but not necessarily the strategic purpose) of undermining the serious coverage of issues that might strike a chord with viewers and listeners, if there were wider and equally ready and inviting access to accurate information and its critical interpretation. The extent of such corporate power, rarely explicit and openly exercised because well understood and widely and fully internalized, can be seen by comparing news coverage and the scope for political criticism and debate in Britain and the United States respectively.

Furthermore, even if collective action problems are *overcome* and subordinate groups “win”, this does not imply that those in opposition

to their doing so did not deploy what power they had to make winning very costly for the victorious.

In general, the inflicting of costs, the shaping of options and the controlling of agendas may all occur prior to the existence of opportunities for collective action which are then themselves shaped by means of power resources and through power relations. Explicit opposition may never appear. The relative powerlessness evident in what are called collective action problems can result from implicit, indirect and ongoing power. There is thus no reason to place the burden of explaining them exclusively or even mainly on the “logic of the situation”, the “resources and conditions” and the “characteristics” of the powerless. Why should the explanation stop there? The powerless may fail to act collectively for many reasons, but that does not justify failing to ask to what extent that failure is in turn to be explained by the power of those who systematically succeed.

*What does luck explain?*

The central thrust of Dowding’s argument is to persuade us that the notion of social power has limited explanatory scope because social and institutional structures favour some and disfavour others, by virtue of the logic of their respective situations, with the result that the former get what they want and the latter are prevented (but not by others) from mobilizing to further their collective interests. It is striking that he declares the idea of “structural power” to be redundant, since it does no explanatory work. But then, we are entitled to ask, how explanatory is the notion of luck and what does it explain?

In the section entitled “A Method for Studying Power” he promises to show how we can view power by looking at the various resources of groups “modelled in the context of their luck and given sets of imputed preferences”, but nothing further is said to reveal what role “luck” plays in the proposed analysis, or to show why luck rather than power is in play. So, for example, in describing the resource of reputation, he indicates that he borrowed it from economics, seeing it as “an important power resource” but also as sometimes “gained through luck” (Dowding 1996, pp. 58. 68). But does this make sense? People do not stumble upon reputations, nor do they maintain them by accident or mere good fortune. They develop reputations through actions (demonstrations of power), interactions with other powerful people

(networks of power) and access to media (based on power). Even when it is true that actors unintentionally enhance their power — for example through symbolic behaviour of which they are wholly or partly unaware (see below) —, it hardly follows from this that those with reputations for being powerful are merely lucky.

“Luck”, according to the dictionary, means either “chance” or “fortune, good or ill”. It is hard to see how it can play a useful explanatory role in accounting for differential outcome power (or social inequality), and, as Dowding admits, to speak of “systematic luck” seems “odd”. To call luck “systematic” stretches the notion to breaking-point. Chance suggests mere accidents and fortune suggests destiny or fate or an act of God. But we are, supposedly, trying to explain (among other things) the mechanisms that create and sustain inequality in positions or access to resources. Chance, Destiny, Fate and God constitute various different ways of declining to provide such explanation.

Dowding correctly asserts that power cannot be imputed to elites simply because they benefit, but he does not hesitate repeatedly to ascribe luck to them. Though he offers many suggestions for empirical research, he criticises both “elitists” and “pluralists” for something of which he can himself be accused, namely, engaging in a debate that is “largely a normative one covering in empirical disguise” (Dowding 1996, p. 88). The reason for this, one might surmise, is that choosing “systematic luck” as his framework itself presupposes and conveys a political standpoint, placing collective action problems and luck, not power, at the root of powerlessness, and relegating “blame” and, more widely, the attribution of responsibility to the category of a fallacy.

It seems clear that Dowding’s over-extension of the concept of luck has two main sources. First, it abstracts from time and the importance of history (of which more below). The structural factors that place people in different roles and distinguish people in terms of societal advantages and disadvantages can be perceived as arbitrary (and thus as a matter of luck) from the vantage point of the immediate present. When we shift the perspective to one that treats of events over time, viewing them dynamically, these structural roles no longer appear arbitrary and the factors that created and reproduce them may be both causally and morally attributed to past actions and interactions that are appropriately analyzable in power terms. Second, Dowding assumes that such analysis must be confined to determining whether the allegedly powerful are able to overcome opposition: to have power they must “try” and then succeed in getting what they “want” by “acting”, that is, through positive, deliberate, strategic intervention. Where the limits to social actors’ effective

options — to what they can do and think — are not imposed by the use or prospect of such intervention, luck, not power, is assumed to be in play.

*The Complexities of Power*

Which leads us back to the issue of how we should conceptualize and study power. Dowding, like many others before him, is motivated by the entirely healthy and creditable thought that we must avoid what one might call “the paranoid fallacy” (together with its defence that “the paranoid is the one who knows what is really going on”). In other words, he rightly castigates the *assumption* that states of affairs held to be undesirable (and in particular what he calls lack of outcome power) are always and everywhere the result of the machinations of the powerful. It always needs to be shown, not assumed, that power is present and that its presence has a bearing on what is to be explained.

But there are two possible responses to this thought. One is to propose and hone a precise, narrowly defined conception of power that enables empirical observation of its presence and operation and even, ideally, measurement of its incidence. The other is to accept that power can produce its effects in a remarkable variety of ways, some of them indirect and some hidden, and that, indeed, it is at its most effective when least accessible to observation, thereby presenting empirically-minded social scientists with a neat paradox. Moreover, a further complexity is that assessing its extent is inseparable from normative judgments. For I will have more (overall) power than you if I can bring about outcomes that are more “significant” than those you can bring about. The most natural way of assessing such significance is to assess the effects on the interests of the agents affected, but such assessment is inherently controversial and cannot avoid value judgments (see Lukes 2004, p. 80 *sqq.*). Acknowledging these complexities, the second response to the problem of how to conceptualize power must face the challenge of finding ways to track the operations of power in its manifold, and in particular its less and least observable forms, but always with careful argument which evidence can support or refute.

The trouble with the first response is that it closes off what we argue are relevant questions. Using a narrowly defined notion of what counts as power, one can quite easily show it to be absent in some context, but this still leaves a whole series of questions which using a wider notion of

power would have opened up. Thus Dowding can doubtless show that “deliberate strategic manipulation” is not at work in preventing some group from mobilizing in its collective interests, but has he thereby shown that power is irrelevant in accounting for the failure in question? Moreover, his dichotomizing of the explanatory space into the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive alternatives of “power” and “luck” and the non-explanatory character of the latter, discussed above, only aggravates the problem.

Dowding follows many other writers about power in 1) defining what he calls “social power” as tied to intentionality, and 2) taking an exercise of power to consist in a positive action or actions (what Barry calls an “intervention”). He also mostly uses it to suggest 3) that the power of an agent is only power if it serves that agent’s *wants*. He further asserts 4) that it operates by changing “the incentive structure of another actor or actors” (Dowding 1996, p. 5). These are all narrowing assumptions and there is a case for relaxing all of them in order to arrive at a conception of power that is more realistic and opens up questions that the narrower conception closes off.

1) Consider, first, intentionality. Why should we assume that power (let us stick with “social power”, which involves a social relation between at least two actors) must always be intentional or deliberate? Many writers on power, since Max Weber and Bertrand Russell, have made this assumption, but is it persuasive? Relations of social power typically involve dependency (and may or may not involve domination): does maintaining such social relations always require conscious monitoring and deliberate reinforcement? Cannot power be exercised in routine and unconsidered ways, as when officials make decisions, following some acknowledged procedure, with consequences they do not foresee? Are investors not exercising power when they make investment decisions that deprive unknown people of work, or provide them with it? Ignorance of the effects of one’s actions means that one cannot have intended them, but are they therefore beyond one’s power? Is one’s power confined to the range of one’s knowledge and foresight? And what of relations of *symbolic* power between agents which serve, via linguistic and body language, to reinforce and sometimes transform social relations, groups and institutions, in ways of which those agents may be partially or wholly unaware?

There is much to say about this last topic. For illustrative purposes, we here simply refer to the treatment of symbolic power in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, much of which focused on the ways in which “schemes of perception, thought and action which are constitutive of what I call

habitus” are reproduced and themselves reproduce social positions and on “cases where the visible, that which is immediately given, hides the invisible which determines it”. Individuals in subordinate positions internalize dispositions that perpetuate their subordination, or else, when socially mobile, their efforts to move up the social scale merely validate the status hierarchies. The “dispositions of agents”, their “habitus, that is, the mental structures through which they apprehend the social world, are essentially the product of the internalization of the structures of that world” conveyed to them through symbolic power, in which what is conventional and class-based appears to the actors as natural and objective. Since “perceptive dispositions tend to be adjusted to position, agents, even the most disadvantaged ones, tend to perceive the world as natural and to accept it much more readily than one might imagine” (Bourdieu 1989, pp. 16, 18). But this is not achieved through intentional actions. Bourdieu’s study, *Distinction* explores the ways in which status distinctions in the sphere of tastes and life-styles express people’s “sense of one’s place”, maintaining social distances by pursuing strategies that “may be perfectly unconscious” (Bourdieu 1989, p. 14). Thus “agents classify themselves, expose themselves to classification, by choosing, in conformity with their taste, different attributes (clothes, types of food, drinks, sports, friends) that go well together and that go well with them, or, more exactly, suit their position”. All this “happens outside any intention of distinction, of any conscious search for ‘conspicuous consumption’”, so that “distinction as I construe it, from the point of view of indigenous criteria, excludes the deliberate search for distinction” (Bourdieu 1989, pp. 19, 20). And when discussing symbolic domination (for instance, of women by men) he writes that its effect

(whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic, etc.) is exerted not in the pure logic of knowing consciousness, but through schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus and which, below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself. (Bourdieu 2001, p. 37)

We cannot enter further into a discussion of Bourdieu’s work here (for an extended discussion, see Lukes 2004, pp. 139-144). It is not clear to us that his dispositional notion of habitus and his suggestion that symbolic power “works only on the basis of dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body” offer the basis for an adequate account of the mechanisms involved. But his empirically-based work certainly illustrates both the pervasiveness and the significance of symbolic power relations sustained through the transmission and internali-

zation of tacit knowledge, in ways that the actors may neither know nor intend.

2) Must the exercise of power involve a positive intervention in the world in the form of a “positive” action or actions? At first blush, the distinction between a positive and a negative action is merely verbal: a vote is a failure to abstain; an abstention is a failure to vote. More deeply, whether we count an absence of action as an action depends on a judgment as to whether such an absence has significant causal consequences and on whether we are disposed to regard the actor who fails to act as responsible, in one or another sense, for so failing. But this is precisely what is at issue in deciding the question of whether negative actions can instantiate power. We can see no good reason for excluding failures positively to act from the scope of power on principle. Of course, there must be some criterion for selecting the relevant non-events as actions, or failures positively to “intervene”: a baseline of expectation against which, counterfactually, the putative intervention in question can be seen as both feasible and one for which the agent could be held responsible. Of course, the power exemplified by not acting thus implies the ability to act (and vice versa). But in the analysis of power, therefore, positive actions have no special significance. To act can be a sign of weakness and the index of an actor’s power can be his ability to avoid or resist taking positive action. So the US under the Bush Administration shows its power by not ratifying the Kyoto protocols on climate change and not participating in the International Criminal Court.

Positive actions can express weakness. Conformity to the demands of a repressive regime whose power relies on complicity and consent may be the default position of a population and failing to conform an assertion of power. Foucault repeatedly makes this case in relation to what he calls the “disciplinary society” and it was the argument of Vaclav Havel’s famous essay “The Power of the Powerless”, in which he called on his fellow citizens to cease acting “normally”. To break the rules could make a difference, however small, and expressed the civic duty to “live in truth”. Why does the Czech greengrocer in Havel’s essay exhibit a sign that reads “Workers of the World, Unite!”, a sign which nobody reads or notices, among the onions and carrots in his window? He does it

not in the hope that someone might read it or be persuaded by it, but to contribute, along with thousands of other slogans, to the panorama that everyone is very much aware of. This panorama, of course, has a subliminal meaning as well: it reminds people where they are living and what is expected of them. It tells them what everyone else is doing, and indicates to them what they must do as well, if they don’t want to be excluded, fall into isolation, alienate themselves from society, break the rules of the game, and risk the loss of their peace and tranquility and security. (Havel 1985, pp. 35-36)

3) Must power, when held or used, go to satisfying the wants or desires (or, in the language of economists and rational choice, *preferences*) of those who hold or exert it? This is, once more, too restrictive and simplistic a stipulation, for several reasons. Let us say that power is being deployed when its outcomes are significant (when the outcomes are trivial there is no point in talking of power): when, that is, they have significance by favouring those whose power it is or by either favouring or disfavouring those over whom it is exerted, or by doing both. In both cases the individuals or groups in question who are in relations of power can be significantly affected independently of their wants or preferences at the time (thus it would be odd to speak of power as being to the overall disadvantage of the powerful: I am hardly powerful if I invariably lose. But those over whom it is held or exercised may be either advantaged or disadvantaged). Thus my power may enhance my status, through the deference or plaudits of others, or it may increase my financial security or prosperity, by virtue of others' choices induced by my market position. But in neither case need this involve the satisfaction of my anterior wants or preferences, even though I will come to value the benefits thus accrued. Both my status and my market position will exhibit my power, which I and others reproduce, but neither may be deliberately and consciously sought or maintained. The more fundamental notion here is that of "interests": power usually (though not always) serves the interests of the powerful and may either advance or harm the interests of those over whom they have or wield power. The point is that such interests may or may not be "subjective", that is, coincident with wants or preferences (for elaboration of this point, see Lukes 2004, pp. 81-82).

Secondly, and more deeply, my wants may themselves be influenced or shaped by power, in various different ways. They may result from my adjusting my aspirations to what I believe to be feasible — so-called "adaptive preferences", as for example in the fable of the fox and the sour grapes (see Elster 1983 (2)). Furthermore, what I believe may itself be shaped by the power of others, of which the simplest case is deception through censorship. Or my wants may be more or less "heteronomous" — resulting from influences that subvert, trick, dominate or, in the extreme case, control my conscious will. Which of course raises the intriguing question of how we are to know when my wants are genuinely, autonomously mine and how we might go about measuring degrees of

(2) Though Elster denies that this can be the result of power.

heteronomy — a question neatly side-stepped by treating all wants as “preferences” (3).

Thirdly, and more deeply still, the wants and the interests of social actors can be of different kinds, and, in particular, they may or may not be, so to speak, internal to social practices and institutions. Applying a distinction developed by the philosopher John Searle (Searle 1995; 1998), we may distinguish between what we might call “institutional” and “brute” facts. Searle’s distinction is that between constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules make possible actions and relationships that could not occur without the rules that define them as the actions and relationships they are. You can only play chess or vote by following the rules that define what it is to play chess or vote; and you can only be the commander of a regiment or a teacher of students by conforming to the rules that define these roles. Institutional facts are those that can only be identified in terms of the rules that constitute the institutional reality; brute facts can be identified without any reference to constitutive rules. So, we could say that constitutive rules create “institutional power”, that is, the power that agents have or exercise by virtue of their compliance with constitutive rules: to move a bishop is made possible and defined by the rules of chess. “Brute power” by contrast, is power that an agent has or exercises independently of institutional rules and roles: for example, the power of his personality, or his physical power to induce fear or love, or his bargaining power to gain or his skill to win. And Searle maintains that “the whole point, or at least much of the point, of having institutional facts is to gain social control of brute facts” (Searle 1998, p. 131).

If power, as we are assuming, either favours or does not disfavour the interests of the powerful and either favours or disfavors the interests of those subject to their power, then the power of the powerful may be either institutional or brute power, or a mixture of the two. In the former case, to speak of their power as consisting in their being able to get what they want or desire (as both Dowding and Barry do) or even to advance or satisfy their interests (in the sense of brute interests) is, at the best, misleading. For they prevail over or secure the compliance of others by virtue of the latter’s internalized acceptance of the rules that constitute their power (or “powers”) irrespective of their own personal wants and brute interests. So, for instance, when a judge exercises his judicial power to sentence a defendant or declare a company bankrupt or decide who has won an election, his wants and brute interests are, or are sup-

(3) For a critique of the notion of “preferences references”, see Sunstein (1997) and the discussion in Lukes (2004).

posed to be, entirely irrelevant (though he may also exert brute power and he will, typically, have a brute desire for there to be compliance with his orders so that his institutional interests are served). It is, incidentally, an interesting and perhaps distinctive feature of political life that political power can itself be used to suspend constitutive rules, impose a novel interpretation of what the constitutive rules are, and sometimes create new constitutive rules (see Sanchez-Cuenca 2003).

Dowding's analysis, and perhaps rational choice-type theorising in general, lends support to what we might label "brute reductionism" in which brute interests as preferences are taken to underlie and explain the world of institutional facts. The position of rational choice theory is that institutions are just the clothing of naked brute power: that the pursuit of brute interests is what is basic and that economic, political and social life generally is to be analysed as consisting in structured and frequently recurring interactions, involving bargaining, co-ordination games and the like where binding agreements are not generally possible among strategically motivated actors whose preferences reveal their brute interests. But to this it may be replied that it is precisely institutions that make such binding agreements possible, through relations of trust, based on previous experience, legal factors and contract relations, which are much more predictive of business relations than are rational considerations of efficiency or gain (see Granovetter 1985).

4) This supposition is reinforced by Dowding's definitional stipulation that power operates by changing "the incentive structure of another actor or actors". Incentive structures are changed relative to actors' given preference schedules by acting to bring about changes in the values of the options within the feasible sets of the choices they face. So the operations of power are confined to the powerful acting in pursuit of their brute interests to influence the choices of others who are viewed as likewise in pursuit of their given brute interests. Unsurprisingly, this represents a further narrowing of the scope of power: by thus focussing on strategic manipulation and in effect excluding institutional power from analysis, it has the effect of rendering power even more implausible as an explanation for outcomes (such as "the acquiescence of the majority of the local population" to business-oriented patterns of local development), thereby leaving the field free for the non-explanatory concept of "luck".

But there is more to say about why such a narrow or thin conception of power — as the ability to change incentive structures — offers inadequate access to the complexities of power. As suggested above, it lends itself to "snapshot" explanations of actors' impact upon other actors while lea-

ving unaddressed the mechanisms of reproduction that generate institutional continuity over time. Self-reinforcing, path-dependent processes involving positive feedback are attracting increasing attention among social scientists, not least from economists. Thus Douglas North writes:

Once a developmental path is set on a particular course, the network externalities, the learning processes of organizations and the historically derived subjective modelling of the issues reinforce the course. (North 1990, p. 59)

The analysis of such social processes requires the identification of mechanisms that generate path-dependent or positive-feedback effects. In his study of patterns of technological development, Brian Arthur indicates four such mechanisms: large set-up or fixed costs providing an incentive to stick with a single option; learning effects leading to higher returns from continuing use; co-ordination effects that make a technology more attractive as more people use it; and adaptive expectations where people act to make their expectations come true (Arthur 1994). But such feedback mechanisms can also operate in political life. North himself argues that people's "mental maps" and "subjective modelling" of the political world, both general, basic outlooks and specific orientations to policies and political actors, are tenacious and path-dependent. The feedback mechanisms can involve the use and further reinforcement of power, especially in political contexts. As Paul Pierson has argued,

the employment of power often generates positive feedback. Actors can utilize political power to generate changes in the rules of the game (both formal institutions and various public policies) designed to enhance their power. (Pierson 2000, p. 77)

Thus open, visible conflict between actors (one-dimensional power) can lead to asymmetric power relations in which those who prevail control the agenda (two-dimensional power) and are eventually able to count on the compliance of others in the absence of observable conflict of interests (three-dimensional power). John Gaventa's study of the struggles between mine-owners and miners and the eventual acquiescence of the latter in the Appalachians illustrates the point: power can be used across time by changing the context of choice (Gaventa 1980). The result (not necessarily and always "designed") is not then to change other actors' incentive structures, relative to given preference schedules, but rather to modify the desires and beliefs that underlie those very preferences, so that the subjectively perceived interests of those others, to a lesser or greater extent, come to conform to the interests of the powerful (4).

(4) But for a skeptical view about such "hidden transcripts", see Scott (1990) and for "hegemony", suggesting that there is always an extended critique of Scott, see Lukes resistance, however disguised, in the form of (2004).

In fact, Dowding does pay close attention to “the different ways in which people form preferences and gain interests”. (Indeed in his earlier book, *Rational Choice and Political Power* he devotes a whole chapter to “Preferences and Objective Interests”.) Thus he writes that “preferences and interests develop in us as we play the game of life”. He even observes that preferences are in part path-dependent and that interests “depend on factors other than one’s preferences”, such as needs, of which agents may not be aware, since they “may not realise what is necessary to bring about their desire”. Furthermore, he clearly sees that a purely subjective conception of interests would fail to capture the familiar idea of something being in people’s “best interests”. This cannot be understood through their preference orderings in game theoretic models, because preference orderings are shaped by the very structural constraints in which people find themselves. It is not in one’s best interest to be in a situation in which one is constrained from choosing one’s most preferred option. One’s best interests are “unbounded by the actual constraints”. Provided they are “naturally” attainable, realising one’s best interests will require satisfying conditions removing these constraints, and this may involve “the collective actions of the individuals whose preference orderings we are considering” (Dowding 1996, pp. 19, 22-24). For “in so far as the choice situations in which individuals find themselves restrict the feasible set, they may be said to work against their wider interests”. In this way, Dowding claims to be “able to sustain the heart of Lukes’ radical definition of interests within a behaviouralist framework in political analysis’ (Dowding 1991, p. 43) (5).

The point of that “radical” definition was to seek to suggest a range of interests people have, of which they may not be aware, which may be adversely affected by the powerful (6). Dowding certainly captures some part of this range by identifying two kinds of case where what he is prepared to call “objective” interests are in question, each of which he illustrates with an example. The first concerns factors that are necessary to realise actual desires but agents may be ignorant or misinformed that they are necessary. In such a case what we have is a failure of belief. For example,

if I believe that nuclear power is dangerous because the scientists tell me so and expensive because the economists tell me so, then I may well calculate that it is in my interests for Britain to have coal- or oil-fired power stations rather than nuclear ones.

(5) The reference is to the first edition of Lukes (2004).

(6) In the original formulation of the idea

only adverse affecting of interests was considered, which was, self-evidently an unwarranted restriction of focus.

But if the scientists and economists are wrong and nuclear power is safe and inexpensive in the long run, then I may well make a different calculation. (Dowding 1991, p. 35)

A second kind of case where the possibility of objective interests arises is where there are undesired but removable restrictions of the feasible sets of choices facing agents. In such a case what we have is a lack of opportunity. For example, the citizens of Gary, Indiana, a one-company town where US Steel was polluting the atmosphere, “may well have felt that pursuing clean air policies would lower their employment prospects” (see Crenson 1971). Their best interest was doubtless to render these compatible, through wider pollution controls, to be made possible through collective action:

what are needed are pollution controls throughout the United States, so that no community is relatively disadvantaged by them. If the United States steel industry then suffers from competition abroad, world-wide ordinances are required. These are just larger and larger collective action problems. Interest claims must always be made within the widest context. (Dowding 1991, pp. 42-43)

What we seek to stress here is the need greatly to widen and deepen the scope of objective interests thus understood: failures of belief and lack of opportunities can take many and various forms and they can be the consequences of power, broadly conceived. People’s beliefs can fail in many different ways, which range from the simplest errors in reasoning through factual misinformation to the subtlest forms of ideological bias. Moreover — and here the “radical” view of power goes considerably beyond Dowding’s interpretation — their beliefs may extinguish desires (as in fatalism) or preclude their being born. And people can lack opportunities to expand their feasible choices for a myriad of different reasons, among them collective action problems which, as Dowding himself shows, can in turn have multiple sources and solutions which can, however, in turn be explained by relations of power, broadly conceived.

If power is conceived broadly and realistically in its complexity, in the ways we have suggested, it can be hypothesized to be at work where narrower views of power will see none. Not only can the powerful hold and exert their power without intending to, without positively intervening in the world and irrespective of their actual “brute” wants; their power consists in being capable of and responsible for affecting (negatively or positively) the subjective and/or objective interests of others. In such instances it will be more or less indirect, ongoing and inaccessible to direct observation, and only very partially and superficially captured by “snapshot” accounts of structured interaction among strategic actors. A

more adequate approach requires widening the focus to include mechanisms of reproduction that generate institutional continuity over time. Obviously, people will often fail to secure or advance their interests for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the power of others. Adherents of the broader conception of power can certainly allow for this but will strenuously deny that those they see as powerful are merely lucky and will need convincing that those they see as powerless are merely luckless.

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