

Power Transformers

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With regard to careful philosophical arguments on the nature of social power, I feel it important take a step back and ask, “Why *power*?” Why is power such a charged concept that we feel obliged to argue, define, extend its analysis? What is special about power that makes it a more significant concept to discuss than, say, *coercion* or *benevolence*? I am convinced that there is something special about power. This something special needs to be highlighted in order to supplement Clifton Tanabe’s tightly argued paper on “Social Power.” In this response to Tanabe’s essay, I will call this something special by the name of “power transformed.”

I begin by presenting a bird’s-eye view of Tanabe’s argument. From high above, one can discern two camps in which the armies of power hunker down. In one camp reside the soldiers of the power of coercion. The power of coercion works against the interests of those people who are subjected to power. The people subjected to power may recognize that their interests are being undermined, or it may be happening unbeknownst to them. Also, the people may be subjected to power that is a direct intervention, or, power may be a structural feature, a day-to-day happening within the camp of coercion. Tanabe correctly points out that the camp of coercion is not the only camp in which power resides.

One can also discern another camp of power. Therein, the soldiers of benevolence reside. In this camp power is used to the *best* interests of the people. Whether they know it or not, the people are benefiting by power’s presence. And like the power of coercion, the power of benevolence may take the form of a sudden intervention or it may be an ongoing structural feature. The power of benevolence may be paternalistic, or it may serve to liberate those over whom it is exercised from needing power any longer. Tanabe’s point is that we must not ignore this second camp, that not even the allies are inoculated against power.

Tanabe calls his claim — that power can be both coercive and benevolent — “counterintuitive.” I would call it Nietzschean. Nietzsche reminds us that truth is “a mobile army of metaphors.”¹ The “truth” about “power” is that it is also a word; that is, it is also a metaphor. As such, “power” is an army that is suitable for mobilization. And Tanabe has mobilized the word “power” into the benign territory of benevolence.

Once again, my question is: Why power? What is so important about power that we should insist that it is not always a negative thing? Why would we want to go *there* with power? One obvious reason is as follows. We are educators who are involved in a power-laden endeavor. (Tanabe reminds us that power is a necessary, though not sufficient, attribute of education.) Further, we believe that we do good things for students even though we are involved in a power dynamic. We do not want go around

wringing our hands about the power that has implicated us. Solution? Let us admit that power can also be *good*. That way, educators can keep to their power-laden endeavor without feeling guilty.

I do not think this is a good reason. It smacks of another concept which Nietzsche has brought to our attention in his *Genealogy of Morals*, namely, master-morality.² Master-morality is the act of making ourselves feel better about something we know to be immoral. A master-morality type of reason goes like this: If we have to *admit* that we have power over students, let us at least call *our* power the power of good, as opposed to the power of evil.

I think there is a *more* suitable reason for expanding the concept of power into the camp of benevolence. This reason has been highlighted by Michel Foucault when he writes, “there are no relations of power *without resistances*.”³ If there is a reason to expand the concept of power, it is precisely because power is a dynamic concept which is always susceptible to *resistances*. Power can be subverted, undercut, and transformed. Thus, to expand the territories of power ultimately means that a larger region is susceptible to insurrection. The reason for expanding the concept of power into the camp of benevolence is to make sure that even the camp of benevolence is amenable to resistance.

I will try to put this in educational terms. Education needs to be able to critique itself. As Socrates reminds us, educators need to be able to admit what they do *not* know. What is more, education needs to be able to critique itself *even in instances where it seems beyond dispute* that we are working with the best interests of students in mind. If there is value in labeling educational benevolence as a matter of power, it is precisely because educational benevolence may need to be subjected to reversal sometime in the future. Sometime in the future, that power may need to be *transformed*. We might call this insurrection of power by the name “power transformed.”

EXAMPLES OF “POWER TRANSFORMED”

Various instances of educational “power transformed” come to mind. One poignant example happened in Soweto, South Africa in June of 1976. Here is how one South African journalist relates the story:

On the morning of Wednesday, June 16, 1976, twenty thousand Soweto schoolchildren marched in protest against a decree by the South African government’s Department of Bantu Education that Afrikaans had to be used as one of the languages of instruction in secondary schools...Newspaper photographs and several eye-witness accounts suggest that the marching students were good-humored, high-spirited, and excited. Some were giving the clenched-fist “Black Power” salute. Others were carrying placards bearing slogans like “Down with Afrikaans!” “We are not Boers!” “Viva Azania!” and “If we must do Afrikaans, [Prime Minister] Vorster must do Zulu!”⁴

The reason that Black students of Soweto revolted was that fifty percent of their instruction was taking place in a language which was foreign to them, Afrikaans. It was a legal mandate called the “50-50” policy. Afrikaans is the language of a small number of people in South Africa, a language spoken in the businesses and homes of white people.⁵ The “50-50” policy had been in place for eighteen years, since 1958.

One might say that teaching Afrikaans was an example of benevolence. After all, out in the “real” world these young students would be faced with a society in which Afrikaans was spoken by many people who would, potentially, be the future employers of these students. It would be hard to argue that this language would not be monetarily beneficial for the students once they left school. Yet, because of an increasingly politicized student body, a general boycott of schools was mobilized in protest of the “50-50” policy because it *represented* the oppressive system of Apartheid. In itself, the act of teaching Afrikaans was benevolent, an act of paternalism, but it *stood for* a different social problem.

I have provided a reductively sketchy outline of the Soweto uprisings, but this example illustrates the critique available when even benevolence is considered to be an effect of power.⁶ Even though the Afrikaans language instruction was “good” for the students, it was taken by the students to be a point at which they might launch a critique of life under the racist Apartheid regime. By means of what began as a modest boycott, students created a strategic reversal in the form of educational “power transformed.” Their actions, and the general unrest that followed, opened up a chink in the mail of South Africa’s racist society.

Closer to home, bell hooks, in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, has described the ambivalent consequences of mandatory integration in the South. She describes her experiences as follows:

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge... was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was expected of us.⁷

By all accounts, mandatory integration of schools must be seen as a benevolent example of power.⁸ Quite simply, it is in the best interests of students to allow all races equal access to educational facilities. Nevertheless, hooks identifies the possibilities of resistance, of “transgression” as she puts it, because she continues to look even benevolence in the eye. Integration-as-benevolence is a matter of power no less than segregation is. As such, there is always the possibility that it, too, needs to become “power transformed.”

I have tried to extend Tanabe’s argument by asking, “What is so unique about power that we might want to widen the range of its application?” One tentative answer is that power is a unique concept precisely because its territory can be contested. Power leaves room for protest, transgression, and transformation. As long as there is power, there is the possibility that there will be *power transformers*.

1. This is a lapidary statement of Nietzsche’s epistemology of rhetoric. See *Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, ed. Sander Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250. It seems especially appropriate for arguments such as the one presented here by Tanabe. I think it is important to notice that what is being argued is not so much the “truth” of what power is, but rather the territory that the word will occupy.

2. Master-morality is the quality of making a virtue of necessity. See *The Genealogy of Morals*, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 180.

3. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings: 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 142.

4. John Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978), 1.

5. Strictly speaking, members of cultural groups other than the Afrikaners do speak Afrikaans. As a first language, though, it is mostly spoken by white Afrikaners.

6. I say that this is an example of “power-over” even though it may not seem like there is one particular agent who has the “power.” (Please recall that Tanabe has defined power-over as follows: “Where A and B are *social agents*, A has *power over* B to the extent that A *controls* B’s social situation.”) Perhaps we can say, for the sake of being consistent with Tanabe’s definition, that the Minister of Education was the social agent who had power over each student by virtue of his decision to implement the “50-50” policy.

Figuring out who “has” power highlights a larger problem with regard to utilizing Foucaultian notions in arguments which define social agents as “having” power. As I understand it, Foucault’s conception of power is much less agent-specific. Power is “out there,” but no one really “has it” in Foucault’s view. I have used a Foucaultian perspective because Tanabe indicated that he is trying to work along Foucaultian lines. (See p. 5 in Tanabe’s argument.) Using a Foucaultian conception together with the notion of agentive power requires some convolutions in argumentation in order to chase down who might actually “have” power. Foucault’s conception is difficult to assimilate to other models.

7. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

8. See note 6 for the question of who “has” power. In this case, it might be the teacher in hooks’s integrated classroom, the one who does *not* practice anti-racist pedagogy *because* he deems integration sufficient.