

ENCOMPASSING POWER: A RESPONSE TO BURBULES'S THEORY OF POWER IN EDUCATION

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In his essay "A theory of Power in Education,"¹ Nicholas Burbules identifies power as a social concept which is necessarily embedded in particular purposes, values and interests. He ties this theory to other values which affect its meaning, namely, democracy and equality. He says that the way we think about power makes the pursuit of these values either possible or difficult. While I agree to the importance of the values he upholds, I argue that grounding power in conflicts of interests, as he does, prevents us from picking out all the possibilities that people have to consider in their relations with one another. In particular, Burbules only examines implications for power which stem from considering interests that conflict.

In making his argument, Burbules asks two questions: Are all social relations also power relations?² and, What is the quality of a power relation? To the first question he answers no: to be a power relation, a social relation must be grounded in conflicts of interests. That is, following Steven Lukes, he asserts that in all power relations, "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests" so that in all power relations "B is influenced against his or her interests."³ In other words, power relations are social relations in which something goes wrong. What goes wrong may result from historic or current inequalities in the distribution of rights and resources among people. Since it is a general criterion, in this view of power, that power relations always operate against B's interests, power relations could not effect beneficial outcomes in terms of the promotion of democracy or egalitarianism and cannot work to benefit B. In reducing power relations to conflicts of interests, Burbules acknowledges repeatedly that judgements of this sort are hard to make and that agreement about what constitutes people's interests is difficult to secure.⁴ Two consequences follow from Burbules's assertions about power's connection to conflicting interests. We can never be sure that a social relation is a power relation because disagreement is always possible; and power is only negative, i.e., the power to take away, or the power to threaten. He refers to power "as a kind of social pathology" capable of enticing and addicting us to its effects.⁵ The answer to his second question — What is the quality of power relations? — is driven by his answer to the first.

Burbules rejects the term consent⁶ as a characteristic of power relations; he substitutes compliance, which does not imply the approving attitude that the former does. He also disqualifies domination as a legitimate characteristic of power relations.⁷ If people genuinely consent, Burbules thinks they are not involved in a power relation. But, in my view, he retains an analysis of what B is doing that is contiguous with 'consent' theorists. He asserts that in power relations, because they are fundamentally about conflicts of interests, there is usually a tension between compliance and resistance. Tension can dissipate, leaving relations of domination on one hand and relations of consent on the other. Burbules asserts that when social relations are characterized by domination and consent they are not relations of power. Domination refers to a case of overwhelming physical or psychic force so that compliance does not come up; consent is a "pure form" which is not a power relation because there is not a conflict of interests.⁸ To Burbules, the tension between resistance and compliance is accurately portrayed if we say that A has power over B and that B empowers A. That is, B's role is in some way to assist A in A's getting what A wants.⁹ While I support Burbules in stripping away from power relations any legitimacy for domination, the relation picked out above is

not qualitatively different from Nyberg's idea of B giving A "permission" through consent, thereby making it possible for A to carry out his or her plans. More importantly, it is a misleading use of the term 'empower', since Burbules conceives power relations only in terms of harm to B's interests.

What might we mean when we say that interests conflict? Burbules does not tell us what he means by the terms "interests" and "conflict," but scarcity seems to be at the bottom of Burbules's conception of conflict. If we use the term 'interests' to stand for "material resources plus the various goods that people feel worth having in their lives,"¹⁰ it is easy to see how interests could be in conflict due to scarce material necessities. It is less clear how scarcity could produce conflicts between the "goods" people value unless these also are tied to something material like time, space or property. Burbules implies a connection of this very kind when he says that students are disadvantaged in schools due to unequal access to the teacher's "limited" resource of time.¹¹ John Rawls grounds our understanding of the injustice that asymmetries between our interests produce when he asserts that we are all entitled to an initial fair share of resources by virtue of our human being and includes "the social bases for self-respect" as "perhaps one of the primary goods."¹²

What would we mean by suggesting that the bases of self-respect can be threatened by scarcity? Tied to this question is another that Burbules asks twice but does not answer. In reference to Luke's view — that power always operates against B's interests — Burbules poses the problem of how power might benefit B.¹³ I think he drops the question because his view of power as only negative prevents him from answering it. Power which is negative and focused on taking away or making threats provides us with no model for thinking about how to improve B's position. One of the features that can be assumed to inhere in B's experience is a failure of self-respect because B's condition is characterized by perpetual loss. B is "predisposed" to be in the losing position in the power relation.¹⁴ In opposition to a negative view of power, empowerment assumes that power is both enabling and plentiful and is directed towards benefitting both B and A; therefore, self-respect would not be something material scarcity could threaten for those who are in the presence of an empowering person. Of course, empowering people may be scarce. And this scarcity is all the more likely if we take relentless pessimism as our model for the world in which we engage in power relations.¹⁵

I say this because of the centrality Burbules gives to conflicts of interests. At the core of his argument is the following statement and its corollary: "Against all this background of conflicting interests, all social relations take on power significance because power relations suppress, disguise, preserve or deny conflicts of interests"; therefore, the typical problem power has is obtaining compliance despite such conflicts. Its corollary states that: "Where we do not judge there to be a conflict of interest, we do not label a social relation a power relation."¹⁶ In any view of power a great deal hangs on interpretations of our moral world; interpretations of the nature of and extent to which our interests conflict, shape the possibilities for benefitting B as well as A in a power relation. If we take Burbules's view in isolation, it follows that in order for democracy and equality to flourish, we must get rid of our tendency to engage in power relations. The implication is that we cannot be good and be powerful at the same time, a sentiment that is rooted in the belief that power is a scarce resource and those who have it have disempowered others in order to privilege themselves.

There are really only two ways to organize relations of power: either we dominate (some win and some lose) or we work in partnership with others.¹⁷ The idea that power's exercise always diminishes B's position identifies it under a 'dominator' paradigm. If "traditional theories of power have assumed that power is a property of individual persons, wielded instrumentally as a means to particular intended outcomes," i.e., power is individual, instrumental and intentional,¹⁸ then this theory easily falls within the criteria of individuality, instrumentality and intentionality, because the individual A exercises power over B by using B against B's interests in order to secure A's own interests. A partnership paradigm for power relations would account for and ameliorate the diminished position of B and would propose some way for B to secure intrinsic rather than purely instrumental worth. Empowering practices are grounded by a partnership paradigm. Empowerment

is not an individual possession, it is relationally constituted, although it has positive personal effects in us. It is based on the feeling/belief that we are people who can say and do the things that are consistent with the conceptions we have of ourselves¹⁹ — that is, empowerment has passivity as its opposite. Empowerment comes most easily to us if we are in the presence of an empowering person who does not use us instrumentally but assigns intrinsic worth to us expressed in outcomes that are enabling and reciprocally beneficial. When empowering relations occur between adults and children, full reciprocity is achieved only eventually. Under these conditions, the empowering person is willing to make some sacrifices that benefit the dependent person, but the relationship is conceived as mutually rewarding overall.

In order to show how non-traditional ideas about power open up this positive possibility, we need to look more closely at what Burbules tells us about conflicts of interests. He asserts that “a conflict of interests exists where there is a zero-sum game in which gaining or maintaining an advantage for one person or group necessarily entails disadvantaging others.”²⁰ To say that all power relations are grounded in inevitable zero-sum games, and therefore to imply that power is only negative is not to point to a pedagogically satisfying way out of the web of relations that forms our social life. Burbules’s theory of power amounts to a reciprocity of harm: I will hurt you in the same way that you hurt me. He also believes that “degeneracy inexorable”; in our attempts to use power, power uses us.²¹ The negative effects of power that constitute a loss for someone may be expressed in making threats, causing harm or simply persistently giving preference to only one set of personal life plans in a relationship. If we would be educative with B, we must be able to identify whether or not A’s interacting with B constitutes a conflict of interests, *before* we can decide whether they are in a power relation. Burbules makes it abundantly clear that it is extremely difficult to agree about when a conflict is a conflict of interests: “What you call ‘power,’ I may call benign.”²² Given that B is “predisposed” to lose and that conflicts are hard to identify, requiring a high level of sophistication, and further, that power is malignant and that we can predict who the B’s are,²³ how are we to educate B to struggle to win a power game with equal strength and conviction? That is, using a theory of power as an evaluation of conflicts of interest, in practical terms, how are we to “educate” B to be a full participant in power relations?

Is it necessary to conclude that our interests conflict, and that power relations are only a category of social relations? The first assertion pictures people in a particular way — as having interests that conflict. If we take interests to include material necessities plus various “goods” that people value, underlying the assertion that interests conflict is a liberal tradition which, as Will Kymlicka says, is informed by J.S. Mill’s assertions that “each one has a unique personality and a unique good; experiences of others provide no ground for overriding my judgement” and that our good “lies in something that we share with no one else.” In contrast, Marx asserts that “each of our goods lie in a capacity we share with other human beings.” I agree with Kymlicka that “[b]oth extremes are not right; our good is neither universal nor unique, but is tied in important ways to our cultural practices” and to our “shared community.” Following Mill, the liberal tradition has constructed a public world characterized by competent (usually male) adults who believe their interests necessarily conflict. This is the only world where dominator power makes sense, though even here it perpetuates harm. It is incapable of generating an ‘educative’ view, because we educate those who are dependent and vulnerable. And this is not the only way to depict the moral world. Feminist scholars affirm power relations in which interests do not necessarily conflict; or if they do, the conflict is only on the surface of the relationship, and underneath, common ties and interests ground the possibility of agreement or compromise. That is, relationships may also be conceived as negotiable partnerships.²⁴

I would answer yes to the question: Are all social relations power relations? But I would add that power is not only negative; it also has positive *effects*. I agree with Burbules that power is a relation that we do not choose, that it is unavoidable in the situations under which people come together, and that circumstances work together to constitute a “template” or “pattern” for the way people think about themselves which tends to “predisposition” them. This is really the same point that Stanley

Benn makes when he says that the powerful have a “generalized potentiality” for getting their own way.²⁵ I also agree that there is usually a tension between compliance and resistance in social relations. Given these last two tendencies, it is hard to understand why Burbules would argue that some social relations are not power relations. If people carry these predispositions with them as excess baggage, whenever there are two people, power is exercised between them *because power resides in people and not in the conflicts between their interests*. People are “invested” either with relative powerlessness or powerfulness in relation to the “investment” of those they are with. Our relative power may shift depending upon who we are with, but in a culture driven by a dominator paradigm these shifts occur up and down a hierarchical ranking of persons which is established on the basis of gender, race and wealth. Yet other responses to asymmetry are possible. Relations can be constrained by love or care that presupposes partnership, at least eventually.

Burbules fails to take seriously the power possible in partnership relations because he falls into a trap identified by Foucault.²⁶ In trying to design a theory which identifies power in one fundamental characteristic, it is impossible to analyze power relations as they are fully lived out in life. To walk into a situation with a ready-made singular concept makes it difficult for us to identify what we are seeing and to sort out the specific ‘realities’ that confront us. On the other hand, we cannot assess our experience unless we have a concept to focus our perspective. If we begin with power as the feeling/belief that I am someone who can say and do that which is congruent with my self-conception, a positive assertion, then we can be taught to pick out instances in which we sense either freedom or restriction on what it is we can and want to say or do in a given situation. This project is educative because it enhances our human capacity for ‘self’-understanding and ‘self’-determination. It also directs educational practices towards enhancing the substantive liberty of students. When we ask whose ‘reality’ we are assessing in analyzing power relations, conceiving power as the power to take away allows us to see how power operates from above (from the position of A so to speak) and accepts acts of domination as inevitable, or accepts as a norm power as a “social pathology.” A positive view of power allows us to see how power can enhance and change the opportunities that B has in the relation, and limits power to activities which are enabling and have hope in them.

In order to illustrate this point, let us examine Burbules’s assertion that a theory of power requires a way of identifying where personal interests reside. He states that where there is no conflict of interests — for example, in a parent’s command that a child not run into the street in front of an oncoming car — the command does not constitute an exercise of power.²⁷ Yet surely the parent is expressing power over the child. The parent could literally use force to stop the child, or could exert the emotional force of a relationship which may be grounded in trust or the desire to please a beloved parent. As Rawls points out, our sense of justice is developed out of just these kinds of relationships of love and trust. Rawls says that the “love of parents for their children, coming to be reciprocated in turn by the child” is important to the development of “a sense of self worth.”²⁸ This is precisely the act of empowerment that characterizes parental love. It is only if we think of power as subtraction that we claim this instance does not constitute a relation of power. Susan Moller Okin describes parental love in an argument she is making about Rawls’s view of justice and its unfortunate use of language that relies on Kant’s view of love. Parental love, which Kant leaves out but she believes Rawls’s view depends on, under favourable circumstances at least, is usually made up of elements of affective love and of benevolence, but it involves far more. The benevolence in it does not spring from the recognition of duty, and the affection in it is usually far from being ‘mere inclination’, with the fickleness suggested by those terms. It is a kind of love that develops over time and that has its origins in attachment so close that, for the young infant, it constitutes complete psychological identification. It is fed by attachment, continued intimacy, and interdependence. On the other hand, it is a kind of love that has disastrous consequences if there is no willingness on the part of the parent to recognize and to appreciate differences between the child and her-or himself. This kind of love is fundamental to human life and relationship since it is the first kind of love we experience (if our circumstances are fortunate) regardless of our sex, and it has, of course, constituted throughout history a much larger part of women’s than of men’s experience.²⁹

While it is true that some child/parent relationships constitute relations of domination, not all of them do; the significance of sensing the differences between oneself and one's child cannot be overestimated for this reason. A fundamental quality of an empowering relationship is not only that parents take their children's interests into account, and willingly sacrifice their own interests for the interests of the child — often at great personal cost — but that the relationship also shapes a child's interests and redirects parental interests. Parents have power over children and they do not assume that their interests conflict. Parent/child relations are asymmetrical because children are dependent upon their parents for a period of time, but these relations do not have to be relations of domination or be grounded in conflicts of interests. Because each child goes through this period of dependence, we must look much more holistically at their relationship to see power's positive and negative effects.

Suppose we take the case of a parent preventing a child from running out in front of an oncoming car where the 'interests' of the parent to preserve the life of the child so clearly outweigh the effects of the parent's exercise of power or control over the child. Autonomy, the child's 'interest' that potentially conflicts with the parent's 'interest' to keep the child safe, does not do a dead child much good. The clear harm to the child in the situation keeps the conflict of interests from being a serious consideration, as Burbules would agree, but it is not accurate to say that since a conflict between these interests does not occur that this instance does not constitute a power relation.

Three other possibilities exist which would take power away from the child. First, the command could be an expression of *sovereign power*³⁰ in that the parent's purpose is merely to demonstrate through the child's body that he or she can make the child obey in an instant, in the absence of any concern for the well-being or future good of the child. Children treated in this way come to feel that they have no value. Second, the command may be an expression of *pastoral power* in that the parent is moved to tell the child not to run out into the street because the parent "knows" better than the child does what the child will do: the parent "knows" that the child will not look at the oncoming car and that even if the child does look, he or she will not respond appropriately. In this case the parent has no interest in developing independent thinking in the child, even eventually; the parent sees his or her command as always necessary to the child's safety, a belief which implies that children are never to be trusted when they stand at the curb of busy streets. The effect of this lack of trust is that children treated in this way come to not trust themselves. The third possibility is to see the command as part of an intention to keep the child docile and useful for the parent's purposes, as is the case in *disciplinary power*. In this demonstration of power over the child, perpetual dependence is the aim of any and all strategies that the parent uses. This command would be no exception. In order to accomplish the aim of engendering docility and utility in the child, parents would have to manipulate the truth about the dangers of being next to a busy street in order to have the desired effects on the child. They would have to keep children frightened of an inherently unsafe and unpredictably malevolent world. To simply identify the 'conflicts of interests' between the parent and child would never reveal the full range of ways that the power to take away can be exercised over children.

Just as significantly, the command does not automatically produce power's negative effects if the child also gets good reasons along with the command not to run out in front of oncoming cars. The parent's interjection into the child's rushing headlong into trouble is an act of power which has the potential to enhance the child's power eventually. The command to stop operates to create a "pause" in the child's activity. In that pause the child has a choice made for him or her. If choices are gradually transferred over to the child, children may learn for themselves to "pause" before acting, giving them time to think. In this way, they learn to give themselves time to consider why they should do one thing rather than another: they have time to get and give themselves good reasons for the actions they take. The parent's command can operate to provide the child with a model for habits that are necessary to rationally 'autonomous' people who must think before they act. In this way parental power can lead to the empowerment of the child, with the overall effect of producing self- and other-valuing, self-trust, trust in others and the development of a capacity for interdependence.

So it is not in looking at the isolated command itself and identifying conflicts of interests that we are able to decide whether this is a power relation; rather we must say that the parent-child relationship has power embedded in it because of the child's unavoidable dependence and that only by observing the 'subjectivity' constituted in the child can we decide whether the sum total of effects is enabling or disabling to the child.

What we want to develop in dependent people is a strength of character that enables them to sense and satisfy their own plans for themselves. It is the cumulative effect of being in the presence of particular parents, as well as the effects of a multiplicity of other encounters that children have, in addition to the power they have to respond to all these occasions, that results in children either becoming autonomous or continuing to be dependent. Rather than positioning the power of the parent and child as adversarial, if the power as subtraction is applied to this case, we must add their "powers" together to see the development of power in the child arising out of the parental relation.

In all power relations, B must learn to sense and respond to the possibilities inherent in being with A and to learn strategies that develop in B the ability to engage A with vigour and skill. This is why B must view all social relations as power relations and why both A and B need to acknowledge the positive, potentially liberating and egalitarian elements that are also possible. Egalitarian values can only receive support from a view of power relations which attributes equal value to the people engaged in the struggle; that is, B cannot be categorically disprivileged and engage in democratic relationships. In Burbules's view, B is always disadvantaged, always less than A. In his view, equality would only be realizable if we were all equally empty of power. As educators, we want our students to be full of relationally constituted "personal" power.

¹ Nicholas Burbules, "A Theory of Power in Education," *Educational Theory* 36, no. 2, (Spring 1986): 95-114.

² Burbules, 99.

³ Burbules, 96.

⁴ Burbules, 99.

⁵ Burbules, 105.

⁶ David Nyberg, *Power over Power* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1981).

⁷ Burbules, 99.

⁸ Burbules, 99.

⁹ Burbules, 97.

¹⁰ Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 184.

¹¹ Burbules, 110.

¹² Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, esp. 41, 104.

¹³ Burbules, 96, 98.

¹⁴ Burbules, 97.

¹⁵ In particular, see Burbules's comments about power on pp. 97, 109.

¹⁶ Burbules, 96.

¹⁷ See Raine Eisler's, *The Chalice and the Blade* (New York: Harper, 1987).

¹⁸ Burbules, 97-98.

¹⁹ Empowerment implies moral self-interest rather than self-interestedness. See Susan Moller Okin, "Reason and Feeling," *Ethics* 99 (1988-1989): 245.

²⁰ Burbules, 97-98.

²¹ Burbules, 109.

²² Burbules, 99.

²³ Burbules, 109ff.

²⁴ See for example, Kymlicka's 1990, his chapter on feminism; Will Kymlicka, "Rethinking the Family," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 77-97; Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York, Basic Books, 1989); Raine Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (New York: Harper, 1988); Judith F. Vogt and Kenneth L. Murrell, *Empowerment in Organizations* (San Diego: University Associates, Inc., 1990); and Carole Pateman, "Sex and Power," *Ethics* 100 (January 1990): 398-407.

²⁵ Stanley Benn. *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* vol. 6, 424-426.

²⁶ See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 209, 211; Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 47-48. In a way, Jerrold Siegel applies this theoretical posture to Foucault himself in "Avoiding the Subject," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51, no. 2 (June 1990): 273-299.

²⁷ Burbules, 96, 98.

²⁸ Okin, *Reason and Feeling*, 236.

²⁹ Okin, *Reason and Feeling*, 233.

³⁰ Michel Foucault posits and works out the implications for the following three terms that I apply to this situation, in *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

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