

THE LOCUS OF ATTENTION IN LOOKING FOR POWER

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Joyce Bellous opens discussion of a range of topics in this paper. A fundamental issue, I believe, concerns the locus of our attention when we set out to analyze and teach about power in social life. A remark in the paper puts the point as follows. Commenting upon the way theories can blind us to certain aspects of lived experience, Bellous suggests that in his approach to power, Burbules “falls into a trap identified by Foucault,” and therefore fails to see beyond hierarchy and domination to the full possibilities of partnership. As she puts it,

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.

The exploration of such realities, what we might call the subjectivity of power relations — i.e., all social relations — becomes for Bellous a central goal. This is set in contrast to Burbules’s efforts to focus on power delimited to cases in which some conflict of interests exists, and to identify as fully as possible the objective reality of what transpires as a result.

The paper presents both a critique of Burbules’s more sharply delimited, objectivist approach, and numerous intimations of what might replace it. Considering first the critique, a number of claims are made concerning how theories of power tend to diminish us when they are focused upon domination, hierarchy, and conflicting interests, to the exclusion of other dimensions of the complex realities of social experience. One result of such a view is a narrowing of perceived options: “Burbules’s theory of power amounts to a reciprocity of harm: I will hurt you in the same way that you hurt me.” Furthermore, such a theory may lead to a kind of fatalism, where one comes to “accept acts of domination as inevitable, or accept as a norm power as a ‘social pathology.’” And what is worse, those who care about the plight of persons who are dominated or victimized by others may inadvertently come to sell them short. She writes that, for Burbules, those subject to power are “always disadvantaged, always less than A [those wielding power].” In effect, then, the theory is politically paralyzing. “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.” This means that “B’s condition is characterized by perpetual loss.” Finally, such a state is made more hopeless in view of the fact that, since individuals who might help the battered-down Bs are already scarce, theorists of power must be careful lest they make matters worse: the scarcity of empowering persons “is all the more likely if we take relentless pessimism as our model for the world in which we engage in power relations.”

This is a wide-ranging and sharp rebuke, and calls therefore for close scrutiny, regarding both fine points of interpretation of the theory in question and the implications that are taken to flow from its presence in our social life. But allow me to set such questions to one side, and turn instead to the hints offered as to what an opening of inquiry into the subjectivity of empowerment might hold.

Bellous puts the educational goal as follows: “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.” This

possibility is enhanced by the presence of ways of thinking about social life that encourage exploration of the experience of power:

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 or want to do in a given situation. This project is educative because it enhances our human capacity for 'self'-understanding and 'self'-determination.

It therefore matters very much that individuals engaged in diverse social relations view what is taking place in terms of their sense of self-identity and affirmation. Furthermore, their doing so will influence what then transpires. "A positive view of power allows us to see how power can enhance and change the opportunities that B [the more dependent one] has in the relation, and limits power to activities which are enabling and have hope in them."

It should be clear from this that Bellous would urge us to adopt the approach to power she sketches here in part for the good it might bring about in the world: her discussion hinges on the hope she holds for a wider distribution of "personal power." This is no small thing at a time when the sense of powerlessness, and countless ugly reactions springing from such feelings, are widespread. The empowerment wish, if I may call it that, holds great intuitive appeal. But the matter does not rest here. I am reminded of a notion explored as the theme of a recent Jane Smiley story, *Good Will*. She writes that, "the moral of all wish tales is that, though wishes express power or desire, their purpose is to reveal ignorance: the more fulfilled wishes, the more realized ignorance."¹ What might the empowerment wish reveal if fulfilled? Vivid possibilities come to mind. Consider, for example, Lois Gibbs, the Love Canal housewife turned environmental activist who, when confronted with evidence of the toxic abuse inflicted upon her community by local chemical manufacturers, rose to lead the fight for an inquiry and the redress of grievances. On the face of it, Lois Gibbs seems to embody the kind of self-development, voice, sense of partnership, and so on that we readily associate with empowerment as sketched in Bellous's work: Gibbs is an exemplar of the empowerment wish fulfilled, a paradigm of the possible if we get our thinking straight about power.

Or is she? If we are true to the theory as it is presented, we would need to know more about Gibbs to say so. Does she really do/say that which is congruent with her self-conception? Perhaps she never really felt at home in the role she came to play. In that case, empowerment might require renunciation of the responsibilities she had thrust upon her. Genuine power might rather have come from a quick house-sale to an unsuspecting stranger, or more concerted efforts to tend her beloved garden. At the very least, her conversion to the role of activist was unnecessary insofar as power is concerned, for many others in her neighborhood held closer, in fact, to pre-existing conceptions of themselves as essentially private, uninvolved individuals and could, on Bellous's terms, experience power in staying true to that self-understanding despite the ravages inflicted on the community. A Lois Gibbs caught up in a role experienced as somehow theatrical and false might indeed serve as a shameful model of powerlessness for her children.

And are we compelled to sense some admiration for the empowered Chemical Company bosses? Once dependent children, they do now, after all, with every fresh dump, deception, and skillful dodge, embody precisely the characteristics that have been commended as an educational goal. They exemplify, in the face of a hostile public, "a strength of character that enables them to sense and satisfy their own plans for themselves."

The point is, if our wish is to encourage the widest distribution of power on Bellous's terms, there's no reason to believe that success in doing so would lead to some particular kinds of results in the world. Untrammled, Bellous's empowerment wish would as likely lead to more confident pillaging by some and renunciation of the affairs of the world by others, as to any other, more hopeful or democratic result. The subjective experience of empowerment is bound up in the particular kinds of communities, institutions, and practices that exist at any point in time to give meaning to various conceptions of self that might be affirmed, and hence be empowering.²

In short, given the range of existing communities, institutions, and practices, the ideas we advance for attending to questions of power can scarcely ignore the simple truth that it is often right for some to speak out, even if it is incongruous with the way they have come to see themselves, and for others to be leashed, no matter how true they are to themselves in their rapaciousness.

The dichotomy that has been presented between the theories of power in question seems to me therefore to break down. We cannot fully imagine what any of our theoretical wishes and desires might come to if somehow realized in the world. In the meantime, while we explore the subtle issues that surround the subjective experience of empowerment, we had best keep an eye on those places in the world where different visions of self are rooted and the wishes of some do in fact cause others harm.

¹ Jane Smiley, *Ordinary Love & Good Will* (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), 216.

² On this point, consider the recent work of Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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