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Power

Todd May

February 2012

Power is one of the most elusive aspects of political space. People are said to seek, hold, exercise, or lord it over others. On the Right, it is thought to be a reality that has to be seized. The world is a place where power speaks. Better it be ours than theirs. On the Left, power is often considered something dirty. It is something we must rid the world of if we are to achieve peace and equality.

Speaking of power in these ways bars us from reflecting on what it is and how it works. After all, what does it mean to say that “power speaks” or that power is something we can rid the world of? When these phrases are used, do we really know what is meant by the word power? Rather than taking a stand on power itself, or else deciding whether it is good or bad, it would be best to understand it. It turns out that power is more complex than the simple stances toward it would have us believe. It works by repression and also creation. It can be a good thing or a bad one. It is sometimes in the hands of particular people, but frequently it isn’t. Instead, it arises and circulates through social relationships in a way that resists being appropriated by individuals or organizations.

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We might think of power, at least political power, as the *exercise of constraint on people's actions*. We should not confuse the term constraint with the word restraint. To constrain an action is to influence it to be a certain way. It is not necessarily to stop it from happening, although it could be that. It could also be a matter of making an action happen where it otherwise wouldn't, or of influencing an action in one direction or another. And still we must be careful. To influence an action is not necessarily to influence someone to do something that they would not otherwise do or influence them in a way they don't like. Sometimes things happen like that, but not always. When an educational system is set up that influences people to reflect on their social situation and change it when they find it intolerable, that is an example of the operation of power. But it is an operation that many people would approve of.

The idea of power as a constraint rather than as a restraint or repression is a new idea. For most of the history of political thought, power was understood to be a way of restraining people. That is why it is often associated with the state. The state, after all, is the most powerful restraining force in a society. Through the police and judicial system, the state can throw people in jail, taking away their freedom. In our society, it can also kill people. What could be more restraining to people than taking away their freedom or lives?

And indeed, the state has power in this sense. It is not an irrelevant power, as many who have protested against government policy have discovered. When people on the Left criticize power, it is usually this kind of power they are thinking of.

Yet power need not be only repressive. Think of how our parents, schools, employers (when we can get a job), and even peers mold our behavior. This molding doesn't just stop us from doing certain things. It makes or encourages us to do things. And there is more. The power from these people and institutions not only makes us do certain things; it can make us want certain things. Far from being exercised against our

wealth and poverty are earned. Really? Are those who struggle to make ends meet really less deserving than those with power and wealth? Perhaps it is time to constrain the behavior of others through the means at our disposal. Moreover, when we see how political power operates, we can also see that those means are many. As long as we think of power solely as repressive, then struggle can only be a massive act of refusal. At times this is what is called for, and there is certainly much to refuse in the current arrangement of power.

But there is more. We can act in order to call attention to the way power operates. Civil disobedience and protest demonstrate for people who have not seen it yet the way that the forces of the police are aligned with the forces of wealth. They also empower people to think of themselves as actors rather than simply victims. Also, we can educate one another. If we have been taught to be entrepreneurs, we can teach one another to think and live otherwise. This education does not have to be, and should not be, simply among those who resist. It should also be an education of the larger public, so that rather than being constrained to live as they do, they might see other and healthier possibilities.

Political power, as constraint, is diverse, complex, and subtle. That might seem to be a source of despair. It is frequently difficult to see, operating in subterranean ways. Yet it is also a source of hope. If power is diverse and complex, this means that our tactics can be diverse and complex. To confront the current arrangements of power, we can develop alternative practices of power on a variety of levels, from reflection to confrontation to education to direct democracy. The difficulty is in seeing the ways in which power has not only blocked us but also has actually created us. The task is to create ourselves and our world differently.

will, power can operate in such a way as to form our will. Recently, we have seen not just the actions but also the will of both the Democrats and Republicans formed by those in the top 1 percent.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that the exercise of power in forming people's actions and wills is solely a matter of individual decisions. Much of the way power operates is structural. That is to say, it is part of the way a society is structured that people are formed to be the way they are. To see this, we can use a current example. It is been noticed that over the period of neoliberalism (roughly dating from the late 1970s or early 1980s), people have been encouraged to think of themselves as entrepreneurs. This is true not only of our economic activity but also of our lives in general. We are encouraged to see ourselves as having a particular set of resources—our skills, genetic inheritance, or social intelligence—and using those resources to maximize our goals or desires. Through networking, peers are considered to be investments. Clothing is not only adornment but an investment in our social standing as well. Even children can be seen as an investment in one's future security.

All of this is in keeping with the neoliberal arrangement of power. We are encouraged, and we encourage ourselves and one another, to act like entrepreneurs. And in acting like entrepreneurs, we diminish the possibility of solidarity with one another.

How does this entrepreneurial orientation diminish solidarity? Entrepreneurs, in our neoliberal period, are taken to be individual investors, each on their own, alone and without support. It is no accident that social services are reduced or abandoned by neoliberal economics. Social services, like environmental regulation or infrastructure development, are collective projects. Entrepreneurs are individuals acting alone, investing their resources to develop their own vision.

All of this is convenient for those at the top of society. When we think of ourselves as individuals rather than as collectives, we fail to consider the importance of solidarity and collective resistance. We are more likely to treat others as competitors as opposed to comrades.

We should recognize, however, that this way of thinking and being does not arise because someone or some group decided that it should be this way. The elites did not get together at some secret meeting and say to themselves, “Hey, if we make people think of themselves as entrepreneurs, then we can keep them divided among themselves and hold all the wealth without being challenged.” Thinking of ourselves as individual entrepreneurs—indeed, making ourselves into entrepreneurs—is not the product of a conspiracy. It is structural.

The idea that power is often structural rather than conspiratorial is an old one. It can be found in the writings of Marxists, anarchists, and more recently with such thinkers as Michel Foucault. The rough idea is that power—whether it represses or creates us to be certain ways—arises from the particular historical practices of a society. To be sure, it tends to benefit those at the top. But there is a difference between saying that power arrangements benefit those at the top and saying that the top few created those power arrangements for their own benefit. Entrepreneurship as a way of living benefits those at the top; they did not introduce it. It arose as the product of a number of elements that came together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as the oil crisis and consequent theoretical crisis for Keynesian economics, rise of neoliberal theory, and increasing ability to communicate and thus invest across larger geographic areas.

Political power, then, can be either repressive or creative, and either individual or structural. It can also be either good or bad. As we saw earlier, educating people to be reflective about and engaged with their social situation is a creative form

of power that is good rather than bad. Among people who think of themselves as progressive, there is a tendency to think of power solely as a bad thing, something that must be overcome. This is largely because we confront power arrangements that are deleterious or even intolerable. When we look at how power works in the world, we are likely to think of it as something to be struggled against or overcome.

There are two mistakes here. First, we cannot rid the world of power. If power not only represses us but also makes us into what and who we are, then there is no outside to power. The task is not to eliminate power but instead to see how it operates in a society. That way, we can assess it, assess its effects, and challenge the specific arrangements of power that are oppressive to people’s lives.

Second, power can be used positively. Power, let’s recall, is the exercise of constraints on people’s action. We are not only the object of constraint; we can also be its subject. We can be the agents of constraint, constraining the actions of others and “unconstraining” particular actions of ours.

We unconstrain our own actions when we come to understand how we have been molded to be otherwise than we would like to be (or more precisely, otherwise than we would like to be when we reflect on ourselves—since, as already noted, our desires can also be created). When we recognize the ways in which we have been molded into entrepreneurs, for instance, we can begin to resist that molding. We can open ourselves up in order to consider other ways of being, ways that involve solidarity with others. We stop thinking of ourselves in the ways we’re told to, and start asking ourselves who else we might be and how else we might be together. This, in turn, may lead to new constraints. But if we have a positive vision, those constraints will replace the bad ones we are currently under with better ones.

In addition to unconstraining ourselves, we can constrain the actions of others. We have been taught to think that both