

# Two Definitions Of Power

William Gillis

13th November 2009

In our everyday language we often to use the term “power” in very different ways. This can lead to all manner of confusion. Worse, it can hobble our own understanding of a situation and allow others to twist and distort our capacity to call shit out. The Bolsheviks infamously appropriated and distorted the decentralist, anti-state slogan “*All Power to the Soviets!*” into a rallying cry for centralized state control. Today one can visit a demonstration and simultaneously see “*Power To The People*” sprayed on walls while at the same time “*Fight The Power*” blasts out a stereo. In activist critiques talk of “*empowerment*” runs parallel to struggles to “*abolish all power relations.*” All of these notions are clearly related, but the occasional dissonance between them poses a danger worth addressing.

There are ultimately, I feel, two broad ways we think of and use the term “power”:

1. Power as capacity. The *enhancement* or *expansion* of one’s options.
2. Power as control. The *limitation* or *suppression* of one’s options.

With empowerment, aside from the abstract connotations of self-actualization, what’s really being said is: one has the *capacity* to do something. When one has the ‘power to lift something’ one has the *ability* to lift it.

But with the strict sociological definition of power, we specifically refer to *control* over another; coercion perhaps not conveyed in violence or the threat of violence, but nevertheless a situation where one person loses to some degree their own agency to become an extension of some external will. Or, in the material case, where an object’s behavior is determined more fully by one’s will. On a first glance this appears to follow from the definition as capacity — when you control other people that control can grant you the capacity to undertake vast projects, to build pyramids and pick cotton.

We say that one individual has ‘*power over another*’ when they can determine that individual’s actions/thoughts. However that same phrase can be — and often is — read as having *more* power than another. Thus power might simply be a quantity. A substance, the unequal distribution of which between the two individuals is the source of the determination of the other’s thoughts/actions. This is the classical Marxist position, often directly referring to the distribution of resources. One person “has” more resources and these resources lend them the capacity to take certain actions with a varying degree of force. Between two individuals the one with the most material capacity can win any contention between wills, and thus has control over the other *because* they have more capacity. Further this control, once obtained, can grant the controlling

party the capacity to do even more. Capacity, being the root concept in this model, often appears to be the subject best deserving the recognition of the term “power.”

But is this really so?

We can easily conceive of a situation where, despite equal allocations of capacity, both individuals are capable of coercing one another. Even further, occasions where they do. Two people can assert a high degree of control over one another without either acquiring any additional capacity — with, in fact, such control *limiting both of them*.

This is not just a specific hypothetical, this is the most common case.

One might be intelligent and manipulative while the other might be strong and brutal. Both individual’s wills would be constrained by the other’s conditions. The brute may intimidate the conman while *simultaneously* be in turn manipulated by him. The conman’s agency constrained by the ever-present threat of the brute’s fury on some areas, while the brute may be beguiled into certain forms of behavior. One might object that this only demonstrates the existence of different *kinds* of power. But we can, with a little more thought, replicate the same phenomenon with two conmen or two brutes. While in a contest of wills neither party will triumph in achieving their goal, *both* parties find themselves *constrained*. Even if one party finally triumphs, the extra exertion is limiting.

The contest of wills itself is constraining. And yet neither party would consider the other powerless. In fact both would likely consider the other to be *exerting power over them*. The conmen in particular may find themselves ever more deeply wrapped in a relationship they are unable to escape, their thoughts ever more dominated by reactive calculations.

In short, both parties capacities are reduced while we do not say the same of their power. Power thus seems to operate as “control.” In everyday use we don’t run across situations where one speaks of “having power” in a situation of high capacity and low control. But there *are* situations where one “has power” with high control and low capacity. We’re reminded of the classic image of a king becomes a slave to his own throne. He has power — control — but is controlled himself by the maintenance of it.

Power then — despite some sloppy thinking — is best referenced in the social realm not as a quantity of capacity but rather a relationship of control. Often to some degree *mutual* control.

Power is a psychosis. Our goal as Anarchists is not to equalize power and give everyone the same 5.3 milliHitlers of oppression each. Unlike the Marxists our goal is not to attempt some balancing of the books. It’s to overcome the very premise of our existing social relations.

*“It seems to me that the truly American Revolution would be to **abolish** power.”*

–Karl Hess.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



William Gillis  
Two Definitions Of Power  
13th November 2009

<http://humaniterations.net/2009/11/13/two-definitions-of-power/>

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**