

# Power—Tool of Social Analysis and Theological Concept: A Case of Confrontation?

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## *The tool of social analysis*

Power has become a central concept in the analysis of political and social institutions. Its newly-found utility in part stems from the growth of Marxist analysis, which so many academics in the social sciences who are not necessarily Marxists have accepted to various degrees.

Until recently, the more common concept was authority—an idea that was once popular particularly amongst political theorists. Authority as an analytical tool has ceased to have pride of place because of its abstract nature and ideological overtones. The tendency today is to speak of power structures, not authority structures. Authority exists but it can be overthrown by another authority. The question is not so much the nature of the authorities but the fact that one is able to vanquish the other. How is the triumph achieved? The answer is simply that one authority has more power than the other and thus overcomes it. The concept of authority is still referred to and continues to be valuable, but the model of power is more useful, since it is that of a conflict in which sheer strength wins the day. Power implies opposition and final triumph. That is what politics is about. Some would see the whole of history as a power struggle. As Lenin has written: 'Great questions in the life of nations are settled only by force.'

The extensive use now made of the concept of power has brought with it the problems of definition, and within the social sciences the issue virtually constitutes a subject in itself. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives something like 18 different meanings of the word 'power'. A definition which is most germane to the sociological analysis of power in the approach adopted here defines power as 'the ability to do or effect something or anything; to act upon a person or thing', or, by extension, 'ability to act or effect something strongly'.

Some sociologists visualise power according to the model of the individual. For Max Weber, 'power (*Macht*) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the bases on which the probability rests' (1947:152). R.N. Adams says that 'social power (is)

the ability to get somebody else to do what you want him to do through your control over energetic processes of interest to him' (1975:121). Whether the basic model is that of the individual who exerts power, or of the group acting like an individual, what is important is that force of some kind is employed in the face of opposition. But is power to be seen exercised in concrete acts or is it contained within a potential ability to perform them? To assert that A exerts power over B so that A can make B do something he would not otherwise do is to some thinkers an inadequate way of visualizing power, for it is purely behavioural. To introduce the notion of potentiality, however, is to widen the concept of power to such a degree that its utility is to be seriously questioned. The issue, in the last analysis, is not so much whether A can exert power but whether A does in fact exert power and is successful in doing it.

As has been suggested, it is impossible to define power without at the same time taking into account closely allied terms, which are nevertheless distinct—words such as coercion and influence, to name but two. Some would define coercion as the exercise of power through the direct threat of sanctions. By contrast, influence occurs in cases where A, without threat or coercion, causes B to change his actions or attitudes. This kind of approach is attractive if one takes into account the power of social institutions. Power, as distinct from influence, implies opposition, resistance, or hostility. By and large power is institutionalized influence, that is, it is located in institutions or in people holding an office within an institution. Negative sanctions are brought into play where disobedience arises and the use of such sanctions indicates the presence of power. By contrast, influence does not immediately give rise to such sanctions.

If one locates power in observable actions carried out in the face of hostility, one is placing all the emphasis on the process of stimulus and response. This supposedly behavioural approach is opposed by those such as Lukes (1974), who would call for an examination of how it is possible to thwart the use of power by the more powerful to prevent initiatives by the less powerful. Here the emphasis is on covert, hidden, or latent factors which allow the powerful to retain their positions of power while not actually embarking on acts of power. Power in this case is exerted through propaganda, through power-centred bodies controlling the media, through people being told they have no power whether in fact they have or not, and, of course, through rituals of many kinds. As Marx wrote:

'Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (1852:103).

Thus, through propaganda which effectively denies them their vision, knowledge, and potential skills, people may be prevented from entering a situation in which they might gain power. They are unable to see any alternatives to accepting the situation—a situation of powerlessness and helplessness—and in this way they are politically blinded. Such an analysis calls for a sociological understanding of the milieu of ideas in which groups are set and helps to explain why few changes take place—changes that could be effected by the exertion of power.

Power is obvious to all parties involved where conflict, war, revolution, persecution, or even ostracism, are its outcome. It is sometimes not so obvious where the person or group that has power does not actively use it in annihilating or negating an opposing body. Quite apart from what has been just said about the use of propaganda, those who have power may not be aware that they are exercising it or even may not want to do so. This is the case where the status quo is being upheld without any great amount of effort. Again, power-holders may be unconscious of how others interpret their actions, thus making them blind to the power they indeed exercise. In another direction, actions taken by power-holders often have unintended consequences and they may be unaware of the nature of such consequences.

These issues arise in examining the process of socialization. Socialization is the means by which the baby from the time of its birth is taught the ways of mankind, is educated in the life of the group in which it is born, so that through the training of parents, through education, through social pressures and controls it becomes a responsible adult member of society. The process is one by which society's norms are internalized by the individual, though the process is never total. There always exist certain norms and values which are not accepted. These may be countered by overt social controls, by positive and negative sanctions, by law and punishment. The whole process of socialization is one in which force is exerted over the baby, the child, the teenager, and later the non-compliant adult. The individual's earliest experience of domination and being overpowered comes in being trained by parents.

All power-relations are asymmetrical (see, for example, Wrong, 1979:2—3 et seq.). The one who is more powerful dominates the weaker. If the subjects were of equal power, the relationship would be one of balance and not one determined by an excess of power. The asymmetrical situation in all power-relations raises moral issues. Is it right that people should be subdued in the way they are? Should the person or persons accept that they are or have to be subdued? These moral issues may be modified by the fact that asymmetrical relations can be complex in practice. Unless the relation is one of war or civil

strife, there is as a rule some degree of reciprocity; in other words, the subjected person exerts power in another area over the one who wields power. The intricate mutual controls between husband and wife are but an example of this. Nevertheless, on balance the asymmetry remains and is often realized by both parties. Power-relations imply unilateral relations.

The most extensive kind of power in a society is political power, which is often centred on those who exercise leadership roles. The phrase political power implies the importance of such power. Power is also contained in other leadership roles which may be non-political but tend to be more specific and more restricted. The sociologist attempts to establish the loci of power in a given society. In societies which have a recognized hierarchical structure, the distribution of power is the more readily ascertained. At least, in such societies members know where power is to be found. In a more open form of society, where democratic structures may operate, power is less clearly seen. It is said to reside within the people as a whole and is exercised through the ballot box. Because it is amorphous, those who are within democratic structures may become disillusioned. Small political parties, philanthropic groups and even the churches are relatively powerless in relation to society. (Generally speaking, they have limited financial resources, they are often divided into factions, members frequently tend to act for their own good and in any case rarely exercise much power in other social milieux.) Furthermore, even if the governing political party genuinely does reflect majority opinion, the bureaucracy, although subject to power from the executive, may itself exert very considerable power over those who are subject to it. Yet the bureaucracy itself is personless and its power diffused; witness the novels of Kafka, such as *The Trial*, *The Castle*.

Problems of definition of what power is tend to turn on the interest shown by analysts in examining particular societies. Concentration on what might be called 'power *over*' emphasizes coercion, violence, oppression, punishment, torture, which are common in many countries past and present; 'power *to*' would focus on the collective power of a society to achieve a declared or agreed-on end and assumes a strong consensus where power is 'legitimately' employed. The former points to opposition which has to be overcome or liquidated; the second, to the power of a non-violent kind—a resource—which is able to bring about totally acceptable social ends such as national wealth, free education, the welfare society.

That—as this remark alone shows—power is the concept *par excellence* of much sociological thinking in its turn encourages the concept of man as a power-being. He is someone who is able to exert power, and anyone who cannot exercise power, who is absolutely powerless, is scarcely a human being. Creatureliness, thus, means the

ability to exert power over nature and man. A man who is powerless, in Marx's thought, is alienated—alienated from his very being, which is that which exerts power.

The notion of authority, as was initially pointed out, was once popular amongst political thinkers: now power is held to be a prior concept. Authority is the rationalization of achieved power. Formerly it was held that authority was a reality which was bestowed upon political leaders. The word, however, is abstract, and denotes a potentiality for action rather than action itself. What actually happens is more important than what might happen or what could happen—political and social analysis is concerned with real power. Yet the term authority, as Peabody remarks, is still useful, as it denotes a relation of superordination and subordination, one very apparent in family life, and also found in the structure of social organizations, particularly government and the state (Peabody 1968:476). It can be argued that power without authority lacks stability and continuity. This is but another way of saying that power has to be undergirded by some legitimating reference, which is generally accepted in terms of office or authority. Similarly, authority, unless it can and does exercise power, cannot last long, since authority must secure obedience (Beidelman 1971:379). And that is even true of Christian authority.

#### *Power as a theological concept*

The discourse in this article so far must sound incredibly remote from any kind of Christian discourse. But do not be misled. Christian thought, being to a large extent based on Judaic thought, is in fact by no means shy of using the concept of power. Indeed, such a concept (*dunamis*) is very much at the heart of how the Christian and Jew visualize God. God is all-powerful, almighty. Hence the religious person has no fear of using the term, since God employs power in creating and sustaining the cosmos and in his dealings with man. There are thirty different Hebrew words for strength in the Old Testament (Richardson 1950:144). There are for the Jews, as for most other peoples, a plenitude of powers in the cosmos. God, however, as creator is a greater force than any physical forces which he has created and which he is always able to overcome. Quite clearly the concept of power means the ability to achieve something, the strength to vanquish opposing or contrary forces, and it operates in the realm of the physical and spiritual. Further, God's power is consciously directed power: with God there are no unintended consequences.

Faced with the experience of wars perpetrated by many foes, and living in a country that was very much a buffer state, the Jews were deeply conscious of the reality of external and oppressive forces, but at the same time deeply aware of God working through enemies in acts

of judgment on their disobedient acts—acts of his chosen people. Similarly, Jesus was for Christians very much a figure of power whose might, coming from God, was manifest in his ability to exorcise demons, for he had a power greater than theirs. And then there were the powers in God's creation—physical powers like the sun, stars and moon, together with heavenly powers, angels, archangels, even satan and his dominions. There were also other supernatural powers, unknown forces, to be unleashed in an age to come, in the transformation of the world as humans knew it. For Christians a pointer to the advent of the final settlement was seen in the power of miracles performed by Christ, and in his resurrection and ascension.

The truth, then, is that Jew and Christian at the time of Christ saw themselves surrounded by a host of powers of different kinds, all emanating from one absolute power, God himself. Just because Yahweh was a God of power, who created man in his own image, it was logical to postulate that man in his true being was one who exerts power. This doctrine comes out most clearly in the Genesis myth: God created man with power to control and dominate the forces of nature. If man adopted a basically passive role vis-à-vis the world in which he lived, he would clearly fail to carry out God's intention for him. There was nothing passive or pacifist in the dominant strand in Old Testament thought.

Yet there is another strand in Judaic thought which points in the opposite direction, that is, in accepting and operating through the negation of power as generally understood. The teaching in this tradition is that victory is not achieved through the triumphant control of natural forces, not through domination, but through the acceptance of subjugation, through suffering bravely borne, as in the example of the tortured servant of Deutero-Isaiah (ch. 53). In the end, what matters is the passive acceptance of degradation, torture and death. The martyred servant brings salvation, not through the show of power as men would see it but by being martyred and nothing else. Thus there is here, in Judaic thought, a paradox, the solution of which is not unilaterally determined. Each component has to be weighed against the other and a solution resolved by an unstipulated method.

In Christianity the theme that suffering, as the very negation of human power, brings ultimate victory in a world to come, is a dominant theme. There is no alternative consequence of the example of Christ, whose passion and suffering on the cross point only to a victory in a life not of this world. The Christian can thus never make power, in the way defined here, the essence of his life.

The Christus Victor theory of the atonement, which was one of the earliest attempts to account for the death of Christ, was admittedly that of a powerful saviour who defeated and annihilated by 'force' the evil spirits of the cosmos. Here was no denial of power.

Indeed, it is the powerful Christ who defeats the worst of all enemies. The victory, however, is not a victory of this world. The powers of this world are of no consequence in comparison with those of the unseen. In Christ power in this world can be potentially exercised but is never in fact carried out. When he was arrested Christ said: 'Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?' (Mt. 26.53). As he said to Pilate, his kingdom was not of this world and although he could exercise power in the human sense, he would not in fact do so on that account. Here one might recall Christ's temptations. Not surprisingly, therefore, Christian thinkers readily followed that Judaic strain which sees victory in suffering and in powerlessness. Christ was a living manifestation of the denial of power as it is generally conceived.

One can go further and say that in certain strands of Christian thought evident in the primitive Church, there was the conviction that the followers of Christ should exercise as little power as possible over other people. This position, which contains elements of pacifism, sees the exercise of power by humans, in controlling others, as being totally opposed to the power of God and being inherently sinful or readily leading to sin. So the assuming of power is seen as containing great spiritual dangers and any deliberate attempt to gain power is seen to be contrary to the pattern of Christ. Along with this rejection there is a similar hostility to wealth, to property, and the holding of any kind of civic office. A notable 16th-century example of this position is that of the Anabaptists (see Pickering 1984). Yet the problem remains, for in such rejections there is also rejected the power contained within political and social bodies that can directly affect for good the welfare of others. St. Paul did not hesitate to refer to magistrates and all civil leaders as powers for correction created by God (Romans 13.1). This benign approach to rulers was modified later when persecutions against Christians were enacted by Roman leaders. Nevertheless, later, with the coming of the Constantine settlement of the fourth century, Christians, far from being subjects, embraced positions of power themselves. So the Church finally embarked on a new course, and it could be none other than a 'worldly' church, acting as it thought for the good of society and employing all the paraphernalia of the state to bring about desired ends.

Perhaps because of early Christian notions of the incipient sinfulness of power, theologians have tended to refer to "authority" rather than "power"; it was "authority" that was to be approved of. First and foremost, a leader exercised not power but authority. Authority (*auctoritas*; nearest Greek word *exousia*) implies a capability and right to exercise what is willed. In an authority resides a potential, spiritual or physical, by which a person who holds such a mandate may bring about a desired end. It implies a right by virtue of

an office conferred or inherited—a right to demand obedience. The centurion mentioned in the gospels was a man used to being obedient, i.e. one under authority, although he himself had authority over others.

In referring to social and political situations—to situations relating to government—Christians all down the ages have preferred to use the concept of authority. Of course, authority implies power, power to influence or control others, to make them act in ways they might not want to. Authority, however, carries with it a certain moral dimension that is absent in the idea of power. This is not only true of Christian thinkers but of western writers who, without a religious base, point to the abuse and corruption that comes with the exercise of power. Christians have always held that power, ultimate power, belongs to God alone. Protestants, perhaps more than Catholics, have been firm in the declaration of this (see Pickering 1984). Man, therefore, should assume power only with fear and trembling and, to circumnavigate the sinfulness inherent in power, it is better to use the concept which is more gentle, more given to moral overtones, namely authority, although in many concrete cases “the actual distinction between authority and power may only be a fine one” (Richardson 1950:26).

It would seem that, at the level of human relations, the first Christians saw their fellow Christians not primarily as those who possessed authority and still less as those who had power, but as people who had a calling or vocation. Each person has bestowed on him or her gifts (Ephesians 4.12) and therefore each has a responsibility for using them properly. Given this basic fact, a problem which emerges is: how do the gifts interrelate? What priority does one gift have over another? It is the perennial issue of parts which contribute to the whole. A physical body can be clearly defined and the parts are well established for they are given: their order or relationship cannot be changed, i.e. new, additional parts cannot be acquired. But how does one add parts to a complete body—Christ’s body, the Church—where its structure is not empirically determined as it is in the case of the human body? How does one allocate power or position to the elements or parts of bodies that are not empirically given? Should the gifts of prophecy be above those of interpretation? Or those of preaching? The issue is decided by church order, by the decisions of leaders, apostles, bishops, elders. But according to what principles? Gifts imply power. So some people have power and others do not. It is evident that in the Church the distribution of power is not democratic, at least, not overall.

Conflicts existed in the primitive Church—something abundantly clear in the writings of St. Paul. Conflicts imply tension, tension force, force power. However, down the ages and even today,



theologians seldom perceive such ecclesiastical tensions as essentially power-struggles. Their presuppositions are very different from the presuppositions of the social analyst. The theologian believes that what is at stake is truth and that truth has nothing to do with power. Truth will always be victorious irrespective of any power that may accompany it. Therefore, whether truth is accompanied by social power or social powerlessness is quite irrelevant. The theologian is hardly likely to accept the Marxist notion that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. Nor perhaps what is implied in Marx, and categorically stated by others: that knowledge, recognized as such, is in itself power; that he who has knowledge has power.

Worship is an activity which is basic to all religion, not least Christianity. Its techniques inculcate a spirit of powerlessness in the face of an all-powerful God. The idea of offering up to the deity the best that man can offer, even though nothing is worthy of the deity, is at the heart of worship. The individual realizes his powerlessness in the face of the total power of God. However, if incorporated in a certain theology this can also lead to the believer being conscious of a sense of powerlessness in his personal relations to other people, or, if he is so bold as to believe that he has power, that the power is not properly his but only power to exercise as “an unworthy steward”, as all power comes from God and is therefore ultimately God’s right, not his.

This has been and still is the predominant Christian view. The Christian admits that God in his powerfulness is at work in the world influencing others and leading them in ways he would have them proceed. Yet, at the same time, he believes that if one is called to exercise power oneself one should do so only with a sense of unworthiness, knowing that it is really better for the Christian not to have to exercise power in the human sense. There are, of course, exceptions to this way of thinking. The notable one today is, almost certainly, liberation or political theology, which has one of its roots in realization of the powerlessness of Christians—or, more correctly, realization of their failure to use power, individually or collectively as Christians, to change society, especially in order to ameliorate the lot of the poor. Here we see reintroduction in a Christian context of basic Judaic strands of thought about the exercise of power, re-echoing the cries of the eight-century prophets. However, as—for example—the current hostility of Vatican officials to this type of theology emphasises, the basic thrust in Christian thinking about power is very different.

### *The confrontation*

Behind the assertions that have been made here there is the implication that the theologian needs to examine the church and the assumptions

made by Christians with the aid of the concept of power. It has been very cursorily argued here that Christians in the past, and indeed still today, are involved in power situations, and that power exists where *prima facie* it was thought to be absent. In this respect the churches can at best be seen to be blind to the reality of the situation, or at worst accused of double-think.

But why? The answer is that in Christianity there is a strong moral element which to a large measure condemns the use of force or coercion in the achievement of a given end. Christ's teaching in so many instances sides with the poor, the underdog, the 'powerless'. Identification with such groups in society is easily extended to a fear of taking up power, for man is always under the judgment of God; he is therefore in danger of receiving the same treatment that he metes to others. When, however, the Church becomes powerful there arises a dilemma. St. Augustine was aware of the dilemma (witness his just-war theory) and it would be ridiculous to claim that theologians since then have been unaware of it. Nevertheless, the tendency has been to play it down. The implications of the dilemma are deliberately muffled, it can be argued, because Christ's teaching does not seem to encourage his 'powerless' disciples to assume social positions where they would have to exercise power. There is a silence about the possibility that his followers would rise in the ranks of the civil hierarchy. What one reads about in the New Testament is not the problem of using power but of coming to terms with persecution.

In a confrontation between the sociologist and the theologian over the question of power, much turns on a doctrine of man. For the theologian, man has an honoured place in God's creation, and yet, down the ages, all the emphasis has nearly always been on man's helplessness and powerlessness, because, compared with God, he is helpless and powerless. For the sociologist, the comparison is not between man and God but between man and man. Some men have immense power: others very little indeed. Power in society is very unequally distributed and its distribution upheld by a number of subtle techniques. It can be maintained, therefore, that the theologian and the sociologist are talking about different things and because of that there is little that they have in common. For the theologian, what power man has comes from God and the power that he boasts of is the 'power of the cross'. But there can be no escape, and it is precisely here that many theologians must—certainly today—come out into the open. As the sociologist stresses, men—some men—have power by reason of their office, their status, their wealth, their knowledge. Here I am not posing the question of social justice, but the question: is such a sociological fact of no consequence to the theologian? Does he automatically exclude human or social power from his theologizing? As we have suggested, the theologian cannot really escape because,

amongst other things, he is always held by St. Paul's notion of gifts, which automatically imply differentials in power.

To go further, how far is a self-conscious realization of personal power necessary for a man or woman to be a 'true human being'? Such a question is surely within the theologian's province. Traditionally he has always seen danger in such a doctrine and would tend to counteract it with the notion of the powerlessness of man, compared with God. To assume power, to wield power, is a hazardous occupation in the minds of many Christian thinkers. Yet, despite the uneven distribution of power, most people in some way or other exert some power over others. Surely the theologian has to come to terms with this characteristic of human nature in taking up a doctrinal position?

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