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Reframing Power: Unpacking the Interplay of Power and Agency

Peter Busch-Jensen

Department of People and Technology, Roskilde University

Roskilde, Denmark

Abstract

This article proposes a rethinking of power as a foundational concept in human action and agency. It presents a framework that situates power as an emergent property, arising from the interplay of personal agency, social structures, and material realities. Moving beyond traditional notions of power as dominance or force, the article highlights the dimensions of contextuality, and subjective representation in understanding power as related to the possibilities for action. The discussion reveals that power is embedded within dynamic person-world contexts which bridge the dichotomies of individual versus group, the natural versus the societal, and objective reality versus subjective meaning. The article further argues that this reconceptualization has significant implications for understanding the relationship between power, science, and politics, and also advocates for a reorientation of science to include the study of power as the capacity for open-ended action. It warns that failing to distinguish between force (causal productivity) and power (agency and relevance) risks undermining science and psychology's own foundational dimensions and erodes human agency.

Keywords: power, agency, subjectivity, social critique, science critique

Setting the stage: Understanding the landscape of power

> "… the fact that power, as we shall see, refers to the possibilities open before an actor, implies that both teleological and 'de-subjectivized" theories may well be conceptions of something else, but not of power properly so called" (Parietti, 2022, p. 8)

We find a vast body of work about power and countless thoughts and theories that are valuable to know about, if we are interested in how power might be at work in our workplaces, institutions, language, culture, and society (Lukes, 1974; Wartenberg, 1990; Pansardi, 2012; Haugaard, 2013; Parietti, 2022). What I wish to bring attention to in this article, however, is how almost all of these thoughts and theories–including the ones we normally refer to when we talk about power in these varied settings–are operational and functional by nature. That is: they do not define or describe what power *is*, but rather present different theories and examples of how power operates; what it does, is used for, and to what social ends and effects. One could argue, of course, that this is fully sufficient and therefore not a problem, since what is relevant to know about power is precisely its practical and empirical uses and implications, regardless of whether we are engaged in questions of social inequality, domination, or marginalization, or engaged in questions of how to empower ourselves, others, or social communities. If indeed power was simply an empirical operational matter, a definition of its observable functions and qualities would be fully sufficient. However, when it comes to power in *human* affairs, there are also theoretical matters at stake that require clarification, since human power proper does *not* simply relate to practical matters, but also to questions of meaning, agency, and value. Therefore, we also need a *theoretical* definition, in order to know if what we are talking about is in fact power, or rather something else. This is not to contest Wittgenstein's argument, that the meaning of a word is defined by its use, and therefore impossible to fully delimit and delineate. Rather, it is precisely because of this that we need a theoretical definition of power, since, if the usefulness of a concept is exactly to support specific intersubjective distinctions and values, we cannot shield our use of it from becoming increasingly inconsistent without *also* theoretical definition. This, I will argue, is the situation we find ourselves in today regarding the concept of power.

The definition of power I want to get to is neither immensely sophisticated nor difficult to understand. The challenge of my argument is not so much one of complexity, as it is one of familiarity; namely that certain foundational aspects of power constitute such a familiar background of our being, and social life, that important details about what power is tends to escape our attention. Still, given a proper definition and language, the concept might help us understand our world and ourselves in interesting new ways and maybe even in better ways.

Power and the elusiveness of its being: Everything and nothing

Power is often described as something bad pertaining to domination and exploitation (Dahl, 1957; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974) but at other times as something good pertaining to empowerment and community building (Follett; 1951; Arendt; 1958). It is described as a finite resource and therefore described as a zero-sum game of struggle and

warfare (Altemeyer, 1981; Pratto et.al. 2006; Sherif. et al, 1961; Tajfel et.al., 1979; Zimbardo, 2007), but also described as a plus-sum phenomenon, that relates to collaboration and a celebration of plurality (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Rappaport, 1981; Prilleltensky, 1997). We find insightful descriptions of why power is a form of violence (Hook, 2007; Parker; 2007; Billig, 1995; Teo, 2010), but also insightful descriptions of why it is the opposite of violence (Haslam et.al, 2011; Rappaport, 1981). And we find it described as something agentic (Arendt, 1957; Bandura, 1997, Follett, 1951; Haslam et.al. 2011) but also as mainly structural (Bourdieu, 1990; Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1977, Fraser, 1997). Thus, we sometimes discuss power as power-to (e.g., power as empowerment), in a way that gives a "thingness" to power: depicts is as a kind of capacity or resource, we might acquire and expand. Other times we talk of power as power-with, in a way that strips away all such thingness and instead portray power as a purely relational phenomenon, that only exists between us. And finally, we most of the time talk of power as power-over, that is, as a *particular* dyadic relationship between people and groups marked by hierarchy, inequality, and domination.

Many of these different definitions refer to valuable insights into different functional dimensions of power. However, it is clear that the available variety of theories not only presents a risk of confusion but also of incompatibility. Few, if any, of these theories in fact *define* what power *is*, but rather examine and describe different operational qualities and utilities of power and their social implications or consequences. Even the valuable insights of Michel Foucault fall under this category of mainly presenting empirical examples of shifting historical strategies and changing operational qualities of power, situated within specific epochs of governance and productivity.

This does not mean, of course, that we don't have theoretical definitions of power. We have plenty, from antiquity to present day (See Russell, 1938; Lukes, 1974; Haugaard, 2002; Wartenberg, 1990), along with continuous critiques of one definition and then the next, in attempts to introduce new and better ones. My claim that power has not been sufficiently defined admittedly sounds conspicuously familiar; as rather the trademark of scientific argument, as is also implied in today's famous bullet points about power being diffuse rather than concentrated, enacted rather than possessed, productive rather than purely coercive, and constitutive of agency instead of merely being deployed by human agents. Power is clearly something more or other than what it has formerly been understood to be.

Again, the claim of this article is not that current definitions of power are wrong or has not contributed significantly to our understanding of power in everyday life and society. Rather, my argument is that many insightful definitions, in fact do not *define* power, in the sense of defining *what power is*, but rather assume to already know this, when defining power's operational utilities. Our concepts of power therefore rest on an unarticulated foundation, that it is important we excavate. The term "foundation" refers to a "solid base of a structure", usually located below the ground: an unseen structure that helps support the weight of something. Typically, a building, but in this case a fabric of theorizing. Foundations are usually unnoticed in everyday functioning precisely because they are so fundamental that the way they anchor things makes them difficult to see (Clegg & Cunha, 2019). The point I wish to make, is that this apply to our theories of power.

Theories of power explore forms of social influence and constraint, as well as enablement. However, it is often left unspecified what it is, exactly, that can be influenced, constrained, or enabled. This omission seems to stem from an implicit assumption that what's at stake–

what power fundamentally involves –is *of course* our ability to act and take action with some level of freedom or say in the matter, in other words: with some sense of agency. Yet, the nature of this inherent aspect of agency and agentic power, and what it entails and implies, remains largely undefined.

If we aim to understand and examine power in relation to human agency, we must, however, define power in connection to this aspect: If even our most sophisticated theories of power implicitly assume that there is a "something" that can be restricted, enhanced, influenced, or transformed, defining what this "something" is, becomes essential, since without a clarification, it is an open question if critical studies on power merely expose victimless crimes, or if theories of empowerment are ultimately about change with no further criteria of direction.

In his famous work, *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer argued that preconceptions (or "prejudices," in his terminology) are not merely obstacles to understanding but fundamental presuppositions for all understanding and knowledge, qua unavoidable and necessary for interpretation (Gadamer, 1998). Gadamer suggested that we should therefore not think of preconceptions as the lenses through which we see (i.e., "the eyes we look with"), but rather as something placed *behind* our eyes, since preconceptions are not just filters but foundational to our entire perspective and engagement with the world (p. 278-285). What I suggest in this article, is that something similar is at play in our theories of power: beneath our understandings of power lies a foundational, unarticulated concept of human subjectivity and agency that we need to bring into light.

The puzzle of power: Exploring its many faces and intricacies

To understand human reality, it is important to reflect on the ontological qualities of what one is dealing with, in order not to adopt an inappropriate theoretical framework for its description. The difference between a broken bone in a leg we usually stand on, and broken trust in the people we usually rely on, is not simply a matter of different things being broken. It is a foundational difference of how we can understand, examine, and might help someone in radically different situations: one of bodily problems versus one of sense of self and world. This difference is not one of realness, since both problems can surely be real and consequential. Rather, the difference pertains to phenomena's ontological characteristics and what form of knowledge domain it belongs to.. Psychiatry, for example, has been criticized for suffering from the adoption of a theoretical framework, which leaves it almost incapable of theorizing bodily problems and symptoms as sometimes meaningful responses to life circumstances (see Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, for an elaboration). Imported as it is from the natural sciences designed for understanding bodies and not persons, psychiatry is embedded in assumptions, including, but not limited to, the separation of mind from body, and the individual from the social world, which sometimes makes its framework inappropriate. This problem relate to a more common error of "materiality bias": We simply find it easier to grasp visible things and what is tangible, and therefore tend to underestimate the importance of what is less so. We identify glory and achievement with monuments and castles, not so much with ideas about e.g. human rights, gender equality, or democracy, even though the latter are in fact much more impressive human achievements.

A similar problem has been identified in the literature about power, where many a debate have circled around how power cannot be reduced to some tangible observable object, but

must be related also to processual, relational, and structural dimensions. We can sum up this critique by what is sometimes presented as a distinction between the four faces (dimensions) of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974; Haugaard, 2013). The imagery of power's "four faces" provides a helpful framework for understanding both theoretical variation and the complexity of how power might be at play in various contexts in more or less observable, subtle, and structural ways. The first face or dimension is usually exemplified by Robert Dahls famous definition of power: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957: 203). Dahl's definition focuses on the direct, observable use of power where e.g. decisions are made through visible processes. For instance, if we think of a city council deciding on the location of a new public park, we might observe that some immediate measurable factors like the participants job position, social status, or access to financial, cultural, or political capital seem to influence their "decision-making power" on the vote on the park's final location. This emphasis on direct, observable influence is also evident in the "classic" social psychological experiments conducted by researchers such as Asch, Milgram, Sherif, and Zimbardo

The second face of power, often related to the work of Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, critiques Dahl's behaviorist understanding by pointing out how power is rarely defined simply by people's immediately observable decision-making power. In their article, "The two faces of power" (the text that also inspired the imagery), they write: "Power is exercised not just by getting someone to do something they would not otherwise do, but also by preventing them from doing something they would want to do" (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, p. 949). The second face of power invites attention to how power is not only present in what can be documented and observed to take place, but sometimes also at play in what was not there and did not happen: what was *not* said, done, debated, or presented as possible, etc.. If we return to the example of the city council meeting, we might for example contemplate how power could also be present in more subtle ways, e.g., in the formulation of the agenda, in who was invited to attend, in formulations of deadlines, budgets, goals, etc. Was it possible, for example, for the participants to also consider issues of, e.g., affordable housing or issues of impact on climate during the meeting? And if not, why not? By defining a framework for what should take place in specific situations, the possibilities for discussion and action can be effectively limited. Power is therefore also at play in what shapes the scope of our attention in decision-making processes: in the more indirect and less visible influence of framing, priming, and agenda-setting what is highlighted–or omitted–in situations and what we are invited to imagine as acceptable responses.

The third face of power, often linked to Steve Lukes (1974), extends this idea further. It considers power in relation to our ability to influence people's beliefs and desires by controlling what we might call the ideological landscape of situations. We can think of how dominant groups or institutions can influence what is seen as natural, normal, or inevitable in certain settings and situations. Or how a campaign might manipulate desires and perceptions to subtly shape our attention, perception, and imagination; what we notice, hope for, and expect, in relation to a social problem. For example, fossil fuel companies have long used sophisticated public relations campaigns to influence public perception and opinion on climate change. This influence is subtle but has proved effective in creating doubt about the scientific consensus on climate change (Brulle & Werthman, 2021; US House Natural Resources Committee, 2022; Oreskes et al., 2018). This ideological shaping of meaning is also central to many critical psychological studies of how everyday language and practices–like common-sense appeals to fairness, realism, or cultural difference–can

reproduce racist, marginalizing, or inequality-creating ideas without overt hostility or conscious intent (Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Hook, 2007; Teo, 2010). Power here operates by normalizing ways of acting, speaking, and thinking that legitimize certain identities or claims while excluding others.

Finally, the fourth face of power, often related to the work of Michel Foucault, invites us to explore how power also operates through so-called disciplinary mechanisms and institutions, creating self-regulating individuals. A formulation that is often used to capture this dimension is that power does not simply work on, but also through, our orientation towards self-governance. We internalize rules, norms, and social gazes, and adjust our behavior accordingly, demonstrating an even more pervasive and subtle dimension of power, namely how power also shapes subjectivity itself and how desires are not only manipulated but also produced (See e.g. Butler, 1990; Rose, 1999).

Advancing the argument and building the case for re-subjectivizing power

The four faces of power reflect some of the theoretical range in the literature on power, but also a strong attention to questions of social domination and a fondness for operative concepts of power and social reality. This fondness leads to some problems. First, it invites a situation where we allow ideas and criteria of empirical observation to also define the limits of our knowing, doing, and imagination. Second, it raises normative concerns, since when we focus solely on formal, observable features of concepts, we risk reducing them to mere instruments and opening the door for misuse. For instance, if we define democracy only in terms of operative dimensions and procedures like voting rights and open elections, we may fail to recognize how a majority vote to restrict rights or punish dissenters can be profoundly undemocratic, since only a richer, value-based understanding and theorizing can reveal how such actions may in fact constitute a violation of democratic principles.

The point I will turn to now, is how this last problem may not simply be a problem with naïve empiricist notions of power. As mentioned earlier, and also hinted at in my opening quote by the Philosopher, Guido Parietti, it may in fact be a problem with any theory of power that define power in strictly operational, teleological and/or de-subjectivized terms.

Theories of power explore forms of social influence and constraint, as well as enablement and expansion. However, while theories of power must thus assume a "something" that can be controlled, influenced, or strengthened, it is nevertheless left unspecified what this “something” exactly is. However, in order to assume something can be influenced, we must first justify this assumption by providing a definition of this something.

Given the sheer number of theories about power, this claim must inevitably remain just a claim. However, to provide some support for it, we can look at the ends of the spectrum described above–Robert Dahl’s and Michel Foucault’s contrasting perspectives–and explore whether, in both approaches, we might identify a notion of power that, while not explicitly stated, must nonetheless be assumed.

That such a notion might be hidden and unarticulated in Dahl’s definition–“Power is the ability of A to get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”–is of course not really a surprise. Dahl set out to define power in strictly behaviorist terms, in order to precisely allow power to be examined and measured objectively, that is, without contamination from elements of human subjectivity. Dahl therefore framed power as an observable, decision-

making ability or influence-driven trait. On the one hand, this definition aligns well with how we often experience power in everyday life, and with how power is often intuitively associated with questions of differences in influence, authority, and possibilities. On the other hand, it strips away the weight of institutions, everyday life, and the social world on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Since, after all, if it were not for human beings conveying the significance of such additional factors by interpreting and responding to contextual aspects of social situations, context would indeed not matter. To see why influence and power cannot be synonymous involves attention to agency. Dahl therefore never questioned whether it truly makes sense to equate power with influence if and when a person neither desires that influence nor has any control over it. Again, this problem was predictable since attention to agency was excluded in Dahl's framework. It would certainly be more surprising if a similar hidden "problem" or foundation could be found in Foucault's work.

As is well-known, the agentic dimension of power is also somewhat absent and/or underemphasized in Foucault's work, since subjectivity is mainly understood as a result, not a source, of power. The described absents is thus part of the Foucault's theoretically argued point and position. However, even if we think of power in Foucault's terms, there is still an implicit agentic dimension to his descriptions of power, that cannot be argued away, without the whole thing collapsing.

To argue this point, I will set aside well-known formulations of Foucault´s such as "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, p. 93); or "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (1978, p. 93). Although these formulations are woven into insightful analyses of how "Power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault, 1977, p. 27), they do not illuminate the relationship between power and agency I am interested in here. Thankfully, Foucault himself revisited this relationship in his later works precisely as an unresolved problem.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault defines the "arts of existence" as relating to a cultivated relationship of the self to itself (Foucault, 1985, Introduction). Later, in *The Subject of Power*, he refined his understanding of this 'cultivated relationship of the self to itself' as also entailing a critical sensitivity to the "form of power [that] applies itself to immediate, everyday life, which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" (1982, p. 212). It is also in this text that we find the often-cited definition: "Power is a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action" (p. 220).

In these formulations, Foucault clarifies power as both cause and effect, action and result. Power is a form of action upon action, which, in turn, is also a form of power upon power, since it is an action upon action that influences how we can manage ourselves and our lives. Thus, there is an implicit presupposition about power in his argumentation: for power to operate, *different* forms of power must be contrasted and in tension. On the one hand the power that he explicitly discuss: a power: "which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others have to recognize in him". But on the other hand also another power, a power that must be defended and cultivated as "a critical sensitivity to"

being governed. That is: a power that is *implicitly* assumed, since it is crucial to the argument qua being the necessary object of the first.

In a later text, Foucault elaborates on this more implicit part of the equation by connecting it to "what we could call the critical attitude" (Foucault, 1997, p. 44). A critical attitude, that he then relates to a "perpetual question which would be: "how not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them" (p. 44). We could, however, turn this question around and ask: in what name or principle, or rather: on what power, is this perpetual questioning and critical attitude based?

Obviously, if human beings had no possibilities, no power, to begin with, there would be nothing to exercise power over, nor any reason for a "critical sensitivity". Thus, if the power-dynamics that Foucault so vividly describes were not in tension with another "residual" dimension of power, he could not in any meaningful way have described them. This seems to be the stone in the shoe of his earlier work that Foucault himself came to hint at. As he writes: "there is no face-to-face confrontation of power and freedom, which are mutually exclusive (freedom disappears everywhere power is exercised), but a much more complicated interplay. In this game freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power" (1982, p. 790)

Regardless of how we define power, we need to add to it some notion of agentic power; since without it, our analysis of power has no object, purpose, or relevance. However, what this agentic power is, is rarely defined, or, as is the case in Foucault's work, merely hinted at in vague terms. Again, this claim is not intended to diminish the value of the insights that not least Foucault has provided into the workings of power in modern society. It is merely to say that even Foucault's work can be shown to rely on some foundational assumptions that he does not make explicit. Or to paraphrase Gadamer: a notion of power "placed behind the eyes" of current theories of power, that does not simply filter our understanding of power, but is foundational to our entire perspective and engagement.

Power re-theorized

What do we intuitively presuppose, and what do we need to presuppose, when we practice and experience, talk and think about human power proper? What is the unarticulated foundation of theories of power?

The answers I present below to these questions are not solely my own but heavily inspired by reading *The Concept of Power* by philosopher Guido Parietti (2022). Parietti's work is not widely known. That said, it takes on the challenging task of identifying a concept of power that, to my mind, not only probes the less visible implicit aspects of power mentioned above, but also raises new and thought-provoking questions about our understanding of and dealings with power. Parietti's definition does not rest on metaphysical or ontological substance; rather, it is a grammatical definition focused on intersubjective meaning and presupposition. In this respect, Parietti draws considerable inspiration from Hannah Arendt, particularly her argument that intersubjectivity is foundational to the human condition. As a result, Parietti's concept of power is normatively open and, I believe, compatible with numerous theoretical frameworks, since these frameworks are precisely not about what power *is* but more about the ways power can affected, enhanced and/or restricted. I cannot do fully justice to Parietti's work here. His approach is a dense philosophical argumentation, laid out in a 250-page long book aimed at giving the concept of power a referent. What I

present below, is therefore my own attempt to answer–with Parietti's help and insights–how we might understand power. It is also an exploration of some potential implications of this understanding, which I believe point to important methodological limitations of modern science and overlooked dimensions of contemporary social life. My argument is organized into three parts. First I discuss some key points about power in relation to human species-being. In the second part, I present and argue for a definition of power inspired by Parietti's work, though slightly modified for reasons that I hope will become clear along the way. Finally, in the third part, I explore the implications of this definition, examining its scientific and political relevance and the societal issues I believe it highlights.

Power in relation to human species being

At its core, power is tied to the concept of agency, as it represents the capacity for action that forms the foundation of any notion of agency. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, power has been associated with this idea and thus with concepts like *Dynamis* (Plato) or *Energia* (Aristotle)–phenomena that relate to being a causal agent in the world; a force for change and action (see also Wartenberg, 1990; Busch-Jensen, 2024). As also stated by Parietti, a broad definition of power, therefore, is "power-to", whether we focus on power to dominate (power-over) or power to collaborate (power-with). "If what we refer to as power does not involve the ability to do (or to refrain from doing) something, then it is not power at all" (Parietti, 2022, p. 41). This basic meaning of power is also reflected in our everyday language, as we use the term to refer both to "power cables" and to "the power of the presidency". However, while this broad use highlights the concepts in-built connection to having agency in the world, it also obscures an important distinction. Although an earthquake or the energy flowing through power cables can surely cause numerous forms of significant effects –and therefore seem, in a loose sense, to exhibit agentic qualities–we cannot bestow it with *agency* in a human sense; that is: in a more substantial sense of expressing also intention, interest, choice or will. While electricity can be harnessed to drive a machine or light up a city, it does so without any awareness or sense of purpose, unlike a president who is precisely to wield power with deliberate intent and goals in mind. In other words: while natural entities and/or processes can display power *without* displaying agency, this is precisely what cannot be said about *human* power prober, since being a person precisely involves an ability to act in ways, that are distinct from determinism and cause-and-effect relations. A further distinction is therefore required. Not because humans cannot in certain situations be compelled to act out of necessity or without choice, but because, if and when that happens, we precisely understand such circumstances to nullify our power and agency. Thus, if we defend someone's actions by saying they were not to blame, what we mean is not necessarily that they played no part, but that they had no say in relation to what happened; that they were powerless and therefore blameless in relation to the issue.

We sometimes differentiate between the word *force* (as in "natural forces") and the word *power*, in order to differentiate between these radical different modalities; a modality of necessity and cause-and-effect relations, and a human modality of open-ended action, agency, and power properly so called. While the former modality of force is always to some extent predictable and controllable qua emerged in causal relations that make it explainable with reference to prior events, human power is precisely *not* since power is emerged also in hermeneutic relations that allow us to be motivated by ideas of possible futures that do not have to materialize to still provide some motifs for our actions.

This difference between force and power is crucial. It clarifies that power denotes a modality of possibility, that is not only different from, but precisely annulled by necessity. In other words: power is absent in cause-and-effect relations, to the extent that any analyses that seek to explain human power by reducing it to cause-and-effect relations can only do so by ignoring the very dimensions of agency and proper that it claims to describe. To quote Parietti: "we need the modality of possibility to make sense of power, and therefore if we see necessity, and necessity only, we are thereby unable to see power. This is more concretely comprehensible if we reflect on how any purely causal explanation makes it meaningless to attribute power to actors" (Parietti, 2022, p. 111).

When I presented this claim at a conference, a good colleague asked me whether it might not lead me to ignore the power of laws, technologies, and institutional structures. I understood his concern. Social structures undeniably shape human action, so why think of them as forces rather than as power itself? Certainly not because their influence is negligible–far from it–but because we should precisely focus our attention on their influence in terms of how they relate to power, that is, to our concrete possibilities for meaningful action.

A discussion of a Danish political theorist Søren Mau's recent contribution to Marxist theory might help clarify the point. His key concept, *mute compulsion* (In Danish, *Stum tvang*) is articulated in his book with the same title (2020). Mute compulsion refers to pressures exerted by capitalist systems that shape human behavior without overt coercion. For example, the necessity of selling one's labor to survive is a powerful, silent force in capitalist societies. And while this force may not shout commands, it certainly structures much of social life nonetheless.

Mau's concept aptly captures how invisible yet forceful societal structures can shape action. But while these forces clearly affect our agency, they operate through a modality of causality. That is crucial, since to properly understand and challenge such "mute compulsions," we must precisely resist the temptation to anthropomorphize. These structures are impersonal. Certainly, they might be means for someone else's ends, but *as* means, they don't insist on any particular use or outcome, and can therefore be used in other ways as well. Take the corporation: a key institution of capitalism, built to maximize profit through surplus labor, hierarchy, and shareholder value. Yet, in the form of worker cooperatives, some have repurposed this structure toward democratic ownership and worker empowerment, demonstrating the impersonal nature of this capitalist key feature. These cooperatives subvert the capitalist logic–not by escaping structural force, but by redirecting it.

This doesn't, of course, resolve the complex relation between agency and structure. It does, however, explain why grounding power in human agency need not mean ignoring structural influence. On the contrary, mistaking structural forces for power may make it harder to imagine alternative uses–and thus harder to imagine change.

Presenting the first part of a three-part framework: Power and possibility

In *The Concepts of Power*, Guido Parietti defines power as "a person's conditions of having possibilities for effective action, and representing these possibilities as such" (Parietti, 2022, p. 56). Building on his work, I here wish to theorize power in an almost identical, yet slightly adjusted, way, namely as: "a person's conditions of having possibilities for effective and relevant action, and representing these possibilities as such".

At first glance, Parietti's definition may seem unremarkable; however, its significance becomes clearer when we examine its three core elements. First, the notion that power pertains to a person's *conditions of having possibilities*–the underlying presupposition that enable human power and agency. Second, the emphasis that these possibilities must be both effective and relevant, in the sense that they must not only do the job (be effective), but also carry meaning for the acting person, so that understanding power require methodological attention to subjectivity (hence my modification). Finally, the third notion that a person must not only have these possibilities but must also be able to *represent* them as such–meaning that he/she/they must understand and recognize them, in order to be able to pursue them. I will start with the first part.

If a person acts out of necessity, that is, without possibility to act differently or not to act, that person cannot be said to have power. Human power proper thus requires, constitutes and resides within a modality of possibility for open-ended action. To explain human action in causal-logical terms (that is, as a necessary effect of some external cause) is therefore to place human action outside a domain of having power. Hannah Arendt's distinction between violence and power spring from this observation. Social life, she argued, is a life lived as, with and among *subjects*, not objects (Arendt, 1958). Violence and coercion are therefore not examples of human power properly so called, since brute force and coercion precisely abolish the world of intersubjectivity and replace it with causality: subject-object relations. The frustrated mother who forces her protesting child into the car seat operates in the same way as a falling piano. She acts not with power, but as a force, and thus, for a moment, introduces her child to a radically different modality, which dissolves their shared intersubjective reality, when, momentarily, she turns her child into an object with no room for agency and power. This doesn't mean, of course, that force and causality have no place in human power relations. We apply all sort of causal relations to pursue possibilities and express power, since to apply power is usually also to set causal relations in the world into motion. For this reason, the lines between force and power can sometimes seem obscure. Even to the extent that human actions can present themselves as naturel forces with no reference to human intentionality.

Consider phrases like "the market crashed," or "financial tsunami" and how they turn human decisions–such as those made by financial actors, corporations, or policymakers–into almost natural uncontrollable phenomena, that seem to resemble earthquakes. The framing obscures the phenomenon's ties to specific human choices and actions, and by doing so sidesteps human power and agency (as well as accountability).

Of course, accidents happen: actions are not always intentional, nor do they always produce the outcomes we intend. However, this does not make force and power the same. On the contrary, this distinction is crucial, because without it, we risk blaming the wrong people for the wrongs of the world. For instance, if a customer service representative refuses to give a refund due to company policy, we might mistakenly assume they are personally blocking our request. Even though the representative could in fact be strictly bound by protocols, with little or no discretion to deviate. Or, to give a more controversial example, we might criticize middle-aged white men for enjoying culturally bestowed privileges and possibilities in relation to job applications or advancements. However, since no middle-aged white man can by himself undo his age, gender, or ethnicity, and might not even know if and how his association with biased cultural preferences may have affected his possibilities, he can in fact both feel and be just as powerless in relation to said biases, as others. If the social domination effected by some social configuration is not at the disposal of the

dominant power, we need to direct the problem in other directions. Therefore, if a constructed privilege is attached to a modality of causality, not possibility, it cannot be said to *necessarily* empower the privileged party. This might seem a trivial point to make, if it wasn't so often ignored, precisely because we cannot express it without a theoretical distinction between privileges and power (As also discussed by Parietti, 2022, p. 82-90).

We tend to analyze society from a notion that we know who the powerful is, since we believe that we can equate power with operational resources. We therefore take the powerful to be the people with privileges; politicians, the rich and famous, the CEOs and well connected, etc.. To the extent that some certainly enjoy possibilities that not all enjoy, this is appropriate, except we should not ignore the question, if the same people, for the very same reasons, can have less possibilities as well?

As most parents will recognize, having more resources than one's child for certain kinds of action is not necessarily the same as having more power and possibilities in social situations. In fact, the opposite can sometimes be the case, since being the only one who can do something, can also mean being the one with lesser choice in relation to doing it or not. In other words: there is an "hermeneutic" agentic dimension to power, that we should take care not to ignore, since if we do, we automatically equate privilege with power, and thus might wrongfully mistake one for the other.

Paradoxically, even the most forceful actions done by a so-called "powerful" individual may express powerlessness, since power proper is not only about the magnitude of causal effects one can produce or set in motion, but about the availability of relevant effective possibilities for a social actor. Of course, this does not mean that causality, or cause-and-effect relations, are incompatible with power. Neither does it imply that power and causality cannot be present together in the same situation, or analysis thereof, nor that the magnitude of causal effects one can produce cannot–all else being equal–correspond to some level of power. It merely means that when we *only* look for causal relations, we are not looking to see or conceptualize power.

Power cannot be equated with resources and privileges, nor can a political ambition of human empowerment simply be equated with an expansion of human causal functioning or force. Power is not necessarily linked, either, to possessing or promoting specific potentials, gifts or talents, since potentials, talents and gifts are always tied to ideas of particular outcomes or achievements (Parietti, 2022). Labeling someone as "talented" or "having potential" is therefore rather to place them within a modality of necessity than possibility, as it implies that one enters into a certain path that must be pursued to validate the talent. Possessing a talent or potential–for piano, mathematics, or modeling, for example–therefore, does not merely indicate open possibilities; it might also compel an individual toward pre-defined actions to fulfill the talent's promise. Therefore, as is also thoroughly argued by Parietti, just as we must differentiate between resources and power, we should not equate "possibility with "potential" or "talent", since the latter concepts carries a teleological logic of predetermined outcomes and causalities, which may in fact contradict power; since it contradicts having open-ended possibilities for action, unconstrained by predetermined goals and trajectories (p. 80-98).

Part 2 and 3 of the framework: Power, effectiveness, relevance, and representation

The second part of the definition might also initially appear trivial: "Power refers to a person's conditions of having possibilities *for relevant action*". Yet, unpacking it reveals

another foundational aspect of power, namely that power is both an emergent property and a worldly phenomenon, intricately connecting subjective preparedness with external possibilities and reality.

When we talk about power as related to having possibilities, the key aspect is not simply about quantity, but quality. We are not talking about having *many* or *forceful* possibilities for action. What matters is, that we have possibilities that are not only real, but also *relevant* to us in relation to our engagements. Power, therefore, is an interweaving of objective-factual and subjective representational reality and experience. To understand power in any context, we must therefore consider both the "worldliness" of the examined action and the first-person perspectives of those involved (Parietti, 2022, p. 132-144).

The necessities of factual reality–what is–and the possibilities of what could be, are always interrelated. Indeed, the very constitution of human power makes separating the two problematic, since what we can do and what we can conceive as possible are intrinsically woven together. A certain possibility for action is no possibility at all, unless we are also able to conceive and/or imagine it as such. Power, qua related to possibilities for action, are therefore shaped not only by what is objectively possible, but also by what is subjectively made possible by our perceptions of the circumstances of the situation. In other words: What happens to be the case cannot be isolated from a human context of subjective meaning and relevance, nor vice versa.

Conditioned, as all human action to some extend is by the objectivity of the world, power is never detached from necessities. Nevertheless, power still concerns what goes *beyond* said necessity: the possibilities for open-ended action *within* objective reality. In relation to human power, the objectivity of the world therefore includes the equally *objective* fact of subjectivity, so that the study of power "require contextual assumptions and hermeneutical means that are incompatible with mathematical formalization" (Parietti, 2022, p. 122).

Power must be understood as an emergent property; a world-person phenomena, since no possibility is real if it is not *both* actual, relevant and subjectively represented; that is: if it is not made real by *both* objective and subjective representational reality. A right to education is no right at all, if one cannot afford education or has been taught to believe, that education is not "for me". Similarly, no imagined possibility for action–say of a public health campaign promoting lifestyle changes – are *actual* possibilities, if its audience face socioeconomic challenges (like poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, or long working hours), that leave them little possibilities to actually adopt its recommendations.

A possibility might be objectively present. However, if it is not conceived as such or understood as relevant or achievable by a person, it is not objectively a possibility for that person. Advising a single parent working multiple jobs to cook healthy meals from scratch every day is pointless, if it ignores the constraints that render the advice irrelevant and/or unachievable.

The "measure" of how much power someone has in a situation is a highly complicated matter of both qualitative and quantitative substance. Or, in Parietti's words: "it is not a measure at all, but a judgement based on the assessment and comparison of narrative, hermeneutical, contingently contextual, descriptions" (p. 136). Rather than trying to comprehend human power in terms of isolated "items" (opportunities, capacities, talents, privileges, rights, resources, etc.) separated out of the context of the world, the presented definition invites us to think about human power in relation to the person-world context, that power per definition belongs to, transform, and reproduce.

Summary and discussion of key points and arguments

Above, I have argued for a specific understanding of what power fundamentally is. It is important to emphasize that the proposed definition in no way discard the relevance of existing theories of power. Instead, the argument presented should be seen as an exploration of the foundational assumptions that any theory of power must rest on, in order to analyze power relations. I therefore consider the presented definition compatible with much existing theory on power, given that many of these theories are in fact not about what power *is*, but rather about how power in numerous ways might be enhanced, restricted, developed, and/or transformed. Nonetheless, I still believe the definition raises important questions of its own. Of course, this also imply questions *to* the definition: whether it holds up or has significant blind spots and weaknesses. But it also includes questions raised *by* the definition: if it prompts new critical perspectives on, for example, the relationship between power and social science and psychology, power and politics, and power and human practice?

In this final chapter, I will address these questions. First, I will consider a question that seem important to ask and clarify *about* the definition, namely if we should regard the notion of agency as simply individual or also group based? After that, I will conclude by discussing some questions raised *by* the definition, namely how such theorizing of power relates to modern science and politics.

Who acts? Rethinking agency in individual and collective terms

In this article I have discussed power as: *a person's conditions of having possibilities for relevant action and representing these possibilities as such.* The definition relates power to individual agency and understandably, this might raise alarm. The current political order precisely benefits when distress or dysfunction, that may result from policies, is relocated from socio-politics to dimensions of people's individual choices in everyday life. It is therefore and important question, if the presented definition invites us to move social problems from the public space as collective problems, to a more subjective "mental" space, as mainly individual problems? Furthermore, considering how groups also seem to have agency, it is important to ask, if–to avoid ending in individualism–we do not need to include groups in the definition; so that power is not only related to individuals' possibilities for action, but also to groups possibilities for action?

Organized groups often display a form of collective intentionality, where members' actions converge toward shared goals and possibilities for action that no single individual alone could achieve. Social movements for civil rights, environmental justice, or labor reform, for instance, embody a more collective will that tend to not only surpass the sum of individual possibilities but also to expand and develop them. This suggests a kind of group agency that operates on a societal inter-subjective level, where collective actions forge new human possibilities, to the extent that groups possess a form of power and agency that also enables and amplifies individual power, simply because groups can command possibilities for action inaccessible to individuals alone. Furthermore, recognizing the agency of groups also has ethical implications. Since, when groups act in ways that influence others, attributing moral responsibility to the collective not only becomes possible but sometimes also necessary. We can think of today's large tech companies, corporations, institutions, or governments. The operations of these entities often have wide-reaching effects that individual actors alone could neither achieve nor fully direct. Finally, group membership also empowers individuals by providing, for example, identity, solidarity, and a sense of purpose. Being

part of social groups, communities, movements, and organizations is therefore clearly an interwoven dimension of the theorizing of power presented here.

That said, since power is still ultimately related to individual actions, choices, and engagements, something can still be said for delimiting our notion of agency to the level of the individual. A focus on individual agency maintains a clearer basis for moral and legal responsibility. If we assign agency to groups, accountability risks becoming diffuse. Furthermore, while both groups and individuals can be linked to a capacity for open-ended action, the ability to represent these possibilities as such still resides within individuals. To some extent, this also applies to questions of relevance. Therefore, when questions are decided upon collectively, they are often conflictual, since the consensus of a collective always confronts an individual "residual." In fact, this is one reason why power is not simply about influence: some within the group wielding that influence might prefer that they didn't.

If we approach the presented understanding of power from an oppositional view of person and group, we seem to face an unsolvable dilemma. Either we ignore the significance of group agency and thereby weaken our concept of power, or we include group agency and risk blurring our understanding of agency itself. However, this apparent Gordian knot is precisely untied by the definition's key concept: "possibilities for action." This notion transcends and dissolves the binary between individual and group. To say that questions of power in a given situation cannot be determined without attending to subjective experience and context does not deny the more collective–worldly, historical, and intersubjective–dimensions of those experiences. Rather, it offers a way of tying them together and overcoming their separation. The world is not simply a realm of objects; it is at the same time a landscape of meaning and possibility. A chair, for instance, presents itself both as a physical object and as a possibility–something one might sit in, or not. But it is not the chair that does the sitting. It is a person who realizes and responds to the world as offering possibilities for action.What the definition calls "possibilities" are thus emergent properties of person–world contexts. They do not belong solely to the individual who acts or to the world in which action unfolds, but to the reciprocity between them. The world becomes intelligible to us as a field of affordances–a structure of meaning and potential ways of being. The word possibility, then, must not be misunderstood deterministically. It precisely points to something real that includes both subjective experience and objective conditions.

This is also why the tension between individual and collective agency is not, in the end, a Gordian knot at all. While collective decisions are often experienced as conflictual at the level of the individual, this is not an argument against collective agency, because the same is true of individual decision-making. The pursuit of one possibility always entails the non-pursuit of others, and with it, the risk of loss or regret. Conflict, in other words, is not exclusive to the collective; it does not emerge from some abyss between individual and group, but is intrinsic to the very nature of possibility and choice.

A collective restraint on individual action might, of course, restrict a person's power, but the opposite can also be true and may, in fact, expand individual possibilities. As a child, I gradually and painstakingly learned that there were rules to games with others. Rules I needed to learn, accept, and sometimes negotiate, in order to participate. This is not unlike how one might come to appreciate the benefits of the rule of law and, therefore, willingly adhere to societal norms and regulations. If I value my ability to vote and participate in democratic life–and perhaps even to run for office, I may also come to understand why conceding defeat in an election is not simply a restriction of my power. It is also an

expression of appreciation for a collective form of action that grants me a possibility and power, I would not otherwise have: to participate again, and perhaps win next time (as also argued by Haugaard, 2013).

Most of the possibilities for action we enjoy arise from coordinated social efforts, rendering the distinction between individual and group agency largely theoretical. We cannot be uniquely talented speakers without also acknowledging the possibilities made available through the emergent property of the individual–group–world relationship we call *language*. This principle applies to virtually every distinctively human action: we are, through and through, social and societal beings.

What this means is that we cannot understand power without attention to individual agency *as it always relates* to groups and the world. To define power in terms of possibilities for action–and thus as an emergent property of relationships between people and world–is also to challenge several entrenched dichotomies: between the natural world and the social world; between individual and group; between experience and materiality.

Beyond the definition: Implications for psychology, social science and politics

Power, on a foundational level, is related to agency, in that power represents a capacity for action that is constitutive of any notion of agency. And even if for some strange cosmic reason this agency should turn out to be an illusion, and all our actions turned out to be predetermined, this would still apply: a meaningful *concept* of power would still require a notion of some entity having possibilities for open-ended actions, that transcend causal relations of necessity and determinism. No meaningful study of power can dispense with the notion of human agency without thereby erasing its own raison d'être. Furthermore, no study of power can take point of departure in a world of causal relations, or ideas of some already known *Telos*, without turning into a study of something else, but not of power. This opens for some interesting questions. One of them concerns the relationship between social science and power.

On a foundational level, power is constitutive of science in the sense that power forms the basis that anchors its relevance. Science can be understood as an institutionalized practice of open-ended inquiry into our possibilities for action and for life and humanity itself. Thus, the study of power is not, as we tend to assume, reserved solely for political scientists and sociologists. Rather, all science – not least psychology–is, to some extent, obligated to address issues of power: specifically, the consequences of its practices for people's conditions of having possibilities for relevant action and recognizing those possibilities. It is therefore significant–and not merely theoretical food for thought–if attention to human power proper is inadvertently excluded by the the very ideals of scientific inquiry from which it draws its authority. Nevertheless, this exclusion is currently the case, as much science, including mainstream psychology, primarily aligns itself with causal logic and the study of how to identify and expand causal relations that grant us greater functional force and control. As important and relevant as this enterprise may be, it does not provide insight into the status of human power and agency. Understanding this would require ideals and methodologies that do not sever questions of what is objectively possible from questions of what is perceived as possible and relevant. However, contemporary ideals of objectivity and generalizability aim precisely for this separation: a strict division between causality and meaning; knowledge and experience, fact and value. True scientific inquiry, we are told, should transcend questions of interest and interpretation. As such, science in general does not study *with* people but produces studies *about* people, since to identify causal relations,

a subject-object division is required in order to separate stimulus from response, input from output, and cause from effect. Consequently, much social science and psychology predominantly treats people as objects of analysis rather than as collaborators in the quest for understanding.

This approach systematically overlooks the question of which possibilities for action people outside of science themselves find relevant. Methods such as experiments, surveys, statistics, and questionnaires are not designed to reflect interest in what people themselves deem significant to study or explore. By design, ideas of relevance–and the very possibilities under consideration–are predetermined by the scientist (and often by those who fund the research). As a result, little insight is gained into how people, in general and in everyday life, interpret and reshape their world in ways that may extend beyond predefined goals and causal relations. And how could it be otherwise, when the scope of inquiry and causality is always defined in advance by the scientist?

Modern science excels at exploring, discovering, developing, and manipulating causal forces to enhance functional applications–a capability that has undoubtedly proven useful. However, we cannot separate what is objectively functionally possible from what subjectively appears relevant and conceivable, any more than we can claim to know an object–such as a smartphone–without invoking some notion of the possibilities for action it affords. Attempting to separate these dimensions renders science ill-suited to strengthen human power, since a science that conflates causal force with human power cannot consider its own relevance–whether its activities empower or diminish human agency. Applying methods designed solely to study causal relations to fields like psychology, politics, meaning, and agency is therefore a deeply problematic misapplication, as it undermines science's own foundation: its power and capacity for open-ended inquiry into human action and species-being.

Without a clear distinction between force and power, science risks becoming bound to a telos of productivity, grounded in the naive belief that force equals power. In such a framework, the means justify the ends because they are effectively seen as the same. This telos aligns all too well with capitalism and its ceaseless pursuit of material growth and productivity for its own sake. It also legitimates a specific form of politics: a "politics of necessity," justified by claims to know what is good for people–while equating "good" with what is causally productive and efficient. Here, the reversal of means and ends appears as a direct result of theoretical confusion about human power. The risk of such confusion is the continual expansion of human force–paid for in the currency of human agency and power.

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About the author

Peter Busch-Jensen is an associate professor at Roskilde University, specializing in areas related to work and organizational psychology, critical psychology, sociology of science, and the historical understanding of power. His interests extend to the history and development of work and labor-market politics, particularly the interplay between paid and unpaid labor, and how work intersects with people's everyday conduct of life. At Roskilde University, Peter engages in both teaching and research, and, as a union representative, also participates in university politics. His work combines theoretical engagement with a practical approach. For further correspondence, you can reach Peter at the email address included below.

Contact: Department of People and Technology, University of Roskilde, Email: peterbj@ruc.dk