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Power: A 'family resemblance' concept

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Abstract

While Lukes' view of power as an 'essentially contested concept' is a move in the right direction, it does not go far enough because it falls short of arguing for a plural view of power. Power constitutes a 'family resemblance concept', with family members forming complex relationships within overlapping language games. Members include, among others: *episodic power*, *dispositional power*, *systemic power*, *power to*, *power over*, *empowerment*, *legitimate power* and *domination*. This argument does not entail relativism or that 'anything goes', as all usages have to be justified as 'conceptual tools', whereby pragmatic criteria of usefulness, rather than essence, define better or worse usage. When moving language games, the relationship between signifier and referent changes, which leads to confusion, unless the family resemblance nature of power is understood. In the literature, the most significant confusion has taken place between sociological analytic and normative political theory language games.

Keywords

domination, essentially contested concepts, family resemblance concepts, legitimacy, power

It has frequently been stated that power is best characterized as an 'essentially contested' concept. The best-known statements of this position were made by Connolly (1983[1974]) in *The Terms of Political Discourse* and by Lukes in his influential *Power: A Radical View*, first published in 1974. Lukes forcefully reiterates this in the second edition of *Power* (2005: 63).

In the context of the developing power debates of the 1950s to the 1970s, the perception that power is an 'essentially contested concept' was a move in the right direction, in the sense that it problematized the idea of a single best definition of power. However, this move did not go far enough because it did not take the next step of arguing for a plural view

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of power. 'Essential contestedness' makes it appear natural that there should be continual disagreement concerning the definition of power while, at the same time, not squarely challenging the belief that there is a single best way of conceptualizing power. On the one hand, it is inherently the case that there can never be agreement on the definition of power while, on the other hand, it is implicitly still held that there exists a single concept that captures the essence of power, even if we can never agree upon what this is. Despite arguing that power was essentially contested, Lukes also argued that his definition was better than the rest (2005: 16, 25, 34, 124). However, the singular claim gives rise to incoherence when coupled with the observation of contestedness. It was this contradiction that gave the three-dimensional power debate its momentum while, simultaneously, rendering it irresolvable.

If a singular view of power is held on to, debates tend to be zero-sum. In place of this zero-sum situation, I propose that power consists of a cluster of concepts, each of which qualifies as 'power'. Following Wittgenstein, I argue that power is a family resemblance concept, which entails that there is no single 'best' definition of power. Furthermore, I also make a second related, but independent, claim that these family members can legitimately change their meaning depending upon which *language games* are being played. I maintain that this dual perception of power in academic discourse moves us out of the problematic situation of both claiming that there will always be different definitions of power, while simultaneously maintaining that there is a best one, upon which we will never agree. The consequence is a positive-sum situation whereby different perspectives and perceptions of power are not necessarily in mutually exclusive competition. This approach sensitizes the sociologist or political scientist to the fact that the same signifier, *power*, may refer to different signifieds.

Some theorists may shy away from this perspective for fear that the view that there is no single essence of power entails some kind of relativism whereby anything goes. Against this legitimate fear, I argue that there are ways of distinguishing better and worse usages, both within and between language games.

The objective of this exercise is to end the quest for a single definition of power and, in so doing, to replace a zero-sum debate with a positive-sum situation. Lest I am accused of being exclusionary in my own way, by attempting to exclude the work of all the thinkers who have pursued the elusive goal of a single definition of power, let it be said that if power is a family resemblance concept, all that has changed is that these theorists can no longer claim to have found *the* essence of power, but this does not entail that their work does not tell us something significant about an important 'family' member.

What has led me to these conclusions concerning 'family resemblances' and 'language games' is, above all, the considered view that the majority of the well-known works on power in the social sciences, many of which are perceived to be mutually excluding positions, each in their own way describe a legitimate facet of the workings of power in everyday life. I maintain that the disparate positions of Allen (1999, 2008), Arendt (1970), Clegg (1989), Dahl (1957), Dean (1999), Dowding (1991, 2008), Flyvbjerg (1998), Foucault (1979), Gledhill (2009), Haugaard (1997, 2008), Hearn (2008), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Lukes (2005), Parsons (1963) and Žižek (1989) each describe important aspects of power. The problematic for theory is not to judge which perspective captures the 'essence' of power at the expense of the rest. Rather, we should acknowledge that these perspectives all contain acute observations concerning significant aspects

of power. Of course, it has to be conceded that we cannot simply put these perceptions together in a straightforward way, as each is working within a different theoretical framework. But the opposite position, in which one excludes the other, is a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. For instance, Parsons and Arendt are correct to claim that legitimate consensual power has an inverse relationship to coercive power, as is Lukes in his observation that the social consciousness of social actors directly affects relations of empowerment and disempowerment. This conclusion does not entail that one has to be a structural-functionalist (Parsons), Arendtian civic republican and a Gramsci-inspired liberal-Marxist (Lukes) at one and the same time. However, it does entail recognition of the fact that many of the observations of these authors relate to significant aspects of the power family and this can be done without subscribing to the overall theories of these authors.

Power: an 'essentially contested' concept?

Let us begin by observing that to argue that a concept is 'contested' is different from arguing that it is '*essentially* contested'. The former could simply be construed as an empirical contingent statement of fact about the nature of *certain* debates – it happens to be the case that specific political philosophers (or whoever) cannot agree upon the definition of some concept. This is different from claiming that the *essence* of that concept is somehow inherently contested (see Waldron, 2002). Why should power have this essential characteristic? Possibly the best statement of the reason is found in the following extract from the second edition of *Power: A Radical View*:

When we try to understand power, how we think about it relates in a number of ways to what we are trying to understand. Our aim is to represent it in a way that is suited for description and explanation. But our conception of it may result from and be shaped by what we are trying to describe and explain. It may also affect and shape it: how we think of power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them. It may contribute to their continued functioning, or it may unmask their principle of operation, whose effectiveness is increased by being hidden from view. To the extent that this is so, conceptual and methodological questions are 'essentially contested', in the sense that reasonable people, who disagree morally and politically, may agree about the facts but disagree about where power lies. (Lukes, 2005: 62–3)

There are two issues to be distinguished here. The first is the claim that power should be characterized as essentially contested because the meanings that we use to make sense of the world affect the way in which we see the world. This is suggested by the sentence, 'But our conception of it may result from and be shaped by what we are trying to describe and explain'. If this is all that Lukes intended to mean, this is too minimal to make the description of power as 'essentially contested' a significant distinguishing claim. At this level, all concepts influence what we see. A person socialized into indigenous Australian 'walkabout time' (in which time is linked to geographical place) will obviously interpret 'time' differently from someone socialized into western 'linear clock time'. This would

apply to all concepts according to perspectives of hermeneutics, including Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms* (1995; first published in 1913), Kuhn's characterization of paradigms (1977), Geertz's account of culture (1973), virtually any post-positivist interpretive sociology, and so on. If power is essentially contested in this sense, it is hard to disagree, but it is not a terribly informative observation, as all concepts would qualify (see Gray, 1978, for similar point). In fact, this is not Lukes' intended meaning, which can be inferred from the words 'reasonable people, who disagree morally and politically, may agree about the facts but disagree about where power lies'. In other words, the 'essential contestedness' of power does not stem from observations of empirical reality, where the 'reasonable people' agree, but their disagreement comes from their 'moral and political perspectives'. Thus, what is at issue is a normative debate concerning moral right and wrong.

In the original article on essentially contested concepts, Gallie (1956a) analyzes the way in which concepts like 'democracy', 'Christian doctrine' and 'work of art' can be observed to be continually contested. What he has in mind is the kind of situation in which people are arguing over whether or not a given set of complex practices is 'democratic', 'Christian' or 'real art'. To a devout Calvinist, the practices of Catholics are not really Christian; to a committed Marxist, the social democrat is not a 'real democrat'; and, to the lover of representational art, a blue dot on a canvas is not 'real art'.

As an empirical fact, the parallel between these debates and the three-dimensional power debate holds. Dahl argued that pluralist democracy was 'real democracy', while, moving to the left politically, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Lukes argued that what Dahl termed democracy was not 'real democracy'. Hence, the evaluative definitions of power and democracy were central to this affirmation and critique of the democratic nature of American democracy. However, while I accept that within the three-dimensional power debate, power was contested, I would not accept the conclusion that this empirical observation necessarily justifies asserting that this constitutes part of the essence of power.

Let us take the parallel concerning Christianity. Imagine a devout, somewhat fundamentalist Calvinist and Catholic, each of whom is convinced that there is 'the righteous path' for Christians to follow. Each will insist that the other is not 'Christian', as they are following the 'wrong' path to salvation. However, this does not justify the conclusion that Christianity itself is 'essentially' contested; it is contested *for them*. In our thought experiment, let us for a moment replace our two fundamentalists of different Christian denominations with two anthropologists, neither of whom is Christian, and both of whom are setting out to study the diverse religious practices of Christians. I do not think it inherently the case that the hypothetical anthropologists would have to disagree on their definition of what constitutes a Christian. What is at issue for both the Calvinist and the Catholic is the fact that being a Christian is a term of commendation, an 'appraisive term' (Gallie, 1956a: 171), defining the 'righteous' way of being. Consequently, they have a vested interest in describing their particular Calvinist or Catholic practices as Christian. The contrast between the two perspectives suggests that what makes 'Christian' contested is a highly specific normative standpoint. Thus, I do not disagree with Gallie that the term Christian is *frequently* contested because it is *used* as a term of commendation. However, this is not the same as arguing that it is *essentially* contested, as in *always* or

inherently contested. Furthermore, for the purposes of social science, the non-evaluative usage of our hypothetical anthropologists is more appropriate.

Like the term 'Christian' among Christians in the West, the term 'democracy' has become a general term of commendation. Consequently, it has become a virtual 'hurray word' with little substantive meaning. It is an empty signifier in a hegemonic language game to which we all have to defer. Imagine for a moment trying to argue within *popular discourse* that certain undemocratic political practices are more normatively desirable than democratic ones. It would be rhetorically impossible, which is why those who attempt to argue against lowering the voting age or extending the franchise usually construct complex counterintuitive arguments to the effect that restricting the franchise is somehow more (or, at the very least, not less) democratic. The intellectually honest and logically obvious path – arguing that less democracy can be better than more democracy – is closed because of the taken-for-granted nature of democracy as a term of commendation (Hyland, 1995). However, this is not inherent to the concept. If we go back to the ancient classical period when, for instance, Aristotle was collecting his constitutions, or to the mediaeval period of Thomas Aquinas, the term 'democracy' was not nearly as contested and emptied of positive content because it was not a general term of commendation.

What can be said concerning Christianity and 'democracy' can also be said of 'art'. The elevation of the term 'art' as a general term of commendation is particular to western modernity, as is acknowledged by Gallie (1956b: 110). Hence, the decision whether or not to describe a particular object as *craft* or *art* is not simply an empirical act of classification, but a normative one of commendation. However, this contingent fact does not justify the conclusion that *art* is essentially contested. It is contested under specific circumstances, which we would not recommend a social scientist reproduce.

It may be the case that Gallie thought, for some reason, that the concepts he was thinking of *always* existed in this kind of evaluative context, but this is not really plausible. There are many concepts that in current general usage are not contested, but become so when they are embedded in a particular (analytically unfortunate) evaluative context. Take the concept of 'American'. It is not contested in most contexts. For instance, at passport control in an airport American is a sortal concept like apples and oranges – American, British, and so on. However, among American nationalists, being a 'real American' is a term of commendation linked to specific complex social practices. American nationalists frequently argue that their chosen way of life constitutes the essence of 'Americanness'. However, as there are many ways of living, they will never agree on what qualifies as 'American'; to a minority, it is possible to be an American and a Marxist, while this was not the case for Senator McCarthy. Similarly, the use of the term 'modern' among sociologists is not essentially contested, but is so in the everyday social context in which social actors are using *modern* as a general term of commendation to denote 'up to date' (i.e. *modern* versus *backward*). Obviously, we would not wish for sociologists to use the everyday evaluative usage.

Virtually any terms can become contested in the specific context of being both a general term of commendation and denoting complex practices, which is why the number of concepts that have been claimed to be essentially contested is truly extraordinary:

alienation, autonomy, author, bankruptcy, boycott, citizenship, civil rights, coherence, community, competition, the Constitution, corruption, culture, discrimination, diversity, equality, equal protection, freedom, harm, justification, liberalism, merit, motherhood, the national interest, nature, popular sovereignty, pornography, power, privacy, property, proportionality, prosperity, prostitution, public interest, punishment, reasonable expectations, religion, republicanism, rights, sovereignty, speech, sustainable development, and textuality. (compiled by Waldron, 2002: 149)

This long list is a testament to the fact that most concepts have the potential to *appear* essentially contested. However, this appearance is a consequence of local evaluative contexts in which these signifiers have lost substantive content and become general terms of commendation or censure.

Power as a 'family resemblance' concept

I would like to suggest that the power debates will advance more fruitfully if we treat power as a *family resemblance concept*, whereby meaning varies depending upon *language game*. The *family resemblance* and the *language game* claim are two separate propositions that interrelate. It is argued both that, within single language games, power is a family resemblance concept, and, furthermore, that these family members are not identical and vary in their meaning from one language game to the other. According to the first proposition, social scientists working within the same paradigm will generate a whole set of family resemblance usages. According to the second proposition, social scientists working with different objectives or traditions will, of necessity, generate specific local usages that pertain to their language game only. I shall deal with each claim in turn.

Wittgenstein developed the concept of family resemblance concepts to denote concepts that overlap in usage while there is no single essence that unites all these usages. The actual example of family resemblance concepts that Wittgenstein used was the word 'game'. One might, for instance, select winning and losing as the essence of the word 'game'. However, if one were to observe a solitary child bouncing a ball against a wall, that could constitute a valid use of the word 'game', which involves neither winning nor losing (Wittgenstein, 1967: 32). The word 'game' is like the members of a family in which there are many overlapping characteristics without a single one being common to all: John has his father's hair and his mother's nose, while his sister has her father's long hands, and so on.

Conceiving of power as a family resemblance concept puts an end to a number of the definitional debates around power. Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz conceived of power in terms of its exercise. In the first edition of *Power*, Lukes follows suit. However, this definition is problematic for his theorization of the third dimension of power. The third dimension constitutes a critique of the behaviourism of the first two dimensions of power, whereby power is linked to 'overt, "actual behaviour", of which "concrete decisions" in situations of conflict are seen as paradigmatic' (1974: 25), whereas the third dimension of power concerns the biases of a system that are 'recreated and reinforced in

ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices' (1974: 25). '[T]he bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals' inaction' (2005: 26 [1974: 21]). Thus described, the third dimension of power does not lend itself to a conceptualization of power in terms of its exercise. In the second edition of *Power* (2005: 64), Lukes realizes that the third dimension of power does not sit well with an exercise view of power. Therefore, in place of the exercise definition of power, he opts for a dispositional definition, whereby power is defined by capacity and abilities (2005: 65–74). Thus, he sees himself avoiding the 'exercise' fallacy (see Dowding, 2008, for a critique of this supposed fallacy). However, in a later debate with Clarissa Hayward, Lukes again emphasizes that he holds the view that power entails attribution of responsibility to those whom we judge powerful. Thus: 'I continue to suggest that the concept of power should remain attached to the agency that operates within and upon structures' (Lukes, 2008: 11). In short, it would appear that there is a contradiction at the heart of the three-dimensional view of power, whereby the third dimension of power directs our attention to the systemic aspects of power while, at the same time, holding onto the view that power entails responsible agency.

If we follow the family resemblance model, we dispense with the idea that there is a singular correct usage, thus we avoid the either/or choice. Accepting that the exercise view of power does not provide conceptual space for three-dimensional power does not entail rejecting it in favour of the dispositional view. Instead, we can accept that there are two members of the power family: *episodic* and *dispositional power*. In fact, the systemic aspect suggests that there are three family members. Using Clegg's terminology (1989), we have 'episodic power', 'dispositional power' and 'systemic power'. *Episodic power* refers to the exercise of power that is linked to agency. *Dispositional power* signifies the inherent capacities of an agent that the agent may have, irrespective of whether or not they exercise this capacity. *Systemic power* refers to the ways in which given social systems confer differentials of dispositional power on agents, thus structuring possibilities for action. So, for instance, to take Dahl's (1957) example of power, in which a traffic police officer directs a car right or left, the act of directing the car right or left constitutes an exercise of *episodic power*. However, what enables the police officer to exercise this power is a capacity that is conferred upon them by the state, which gives him/her certain *dispositions*, qua police officer, that define his/her power. This dispositional power exists outside of action, even when the officer is asleep, thus he/she has them outside of the exercise of power. Because the police officer may have these dispositions when asleep, in everyday speech we may refer to him/her as powerful. However, these dispositions are not actually inherent to him/her. They are a reflection of a particular *system of power* in which such things as 'police officers' exist, which, in macrohistorical and anthropological terms, is relatively unique.

In an ethnographically sensitive account of the modes of teaching and curricula at two schools in the USA, Clarissa Hayward compares the education of a middle- and a working-class school (Hayward, 2000). She found that the schools gave very different educations that shaped the attitudes and dispositions of the students in a manner that made them different kinds of agents. The middle-class children were taught to critically question

received opinion and authority, while the working-class children were given a substantially less critically reflective education. She argued that while it might appear superficially to be the case that the latter were receiving 'inferior' education to the former, when context was taken into account, each was being socialized into a set of dispositions pertinent to their career expectations. Being independent and critically reflective is appropriate to a high social position, while being able to follow instructions properly is a skill useful to a life of manual labour. Hayward used these findings to argue, contrary to Lukes, that one can only adequately understand the third dimension of power if one takes account of the systemic nature of power. Hayward does not explicitly take a family resemblance view, but such an analysis would be entirely consistent with her work. Her study of everyday schoolroom interactions included many obvious instances of episodic power – a teacher telling children what to do. However, these instances of episodic power made sense relative to shaping the *dispositions* of the school children, which in turn were only meaningful relative to the *systemic context* of the USA as a whole, which includes capitalist relations of production, and so on.

Language games and relativism

Social scientists may wish to reject the idea of family resemblance concepts because they feel that they imply that anything goes, as is suggested by Gellner (1968). However, this is not the case. In language games, the better definition is the one that accomplishes the task the theorists set for themselves. The assertion that the episodic view of power fits poorly with Lukes' characterization of the third dimension of power is one which tells us that this particular conceptual tool was inadequate to its task. It was inadequate because it was inappropriate to the phenomenon analyzed, thus not the right tool for the objective at hand, which was theorizing the three dimensions of power. One-dimensional power, where A prevails over B in decision making, can be characterized as episodic power. Consequently, it can be argued that the conceptualization of power in terms of its exercise suited this aspect of power relations. However, the second dimension of power is both episodic (active non-decision making) and dispositional in the sense that, in practice, dispositionally powerful actors do not necessarily have to act. It is also systemic in the sense that organizations and systems inherently organize some issues into politics and others out, to paraphrase the quotation from Schattschneider in the 'Two Faces of Power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: 949). The episodic view of power becomes even more inadequate in the case of three-dimensional power. The latter does include some episodic power (deliberate misinformation and brainwashing), but, more significantly, contains large measures of dispositional power inherited from relations of empowerment and disempowerment, as defined by the structures or rules of the game which, in turn, are systemic:

the bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals' inaction. (Lukes, 2005: 26 [1974: 21])

The fact that the exercise view of power can only theorize part of two-dimensional and three-dimensional power makes it meaningful to say that the additional concepts of dispositional and systemic power are conceptually useful tools. In this case, usefulness is our criterion of evaluation, not some essence lying at the heart of singular entity.

Family resemblances and language games

The idea that power is a *family resemblance* concept entails that there can be no single best definition of power. Rather, any theorist who is interested in power is interested in a cluster of concepts. This claim is different from the second claim that these concepts are part of *language games*. The latter entails the view that there may not be an exact equivalence between family members taken from one language game to the next. There are two reasons for differences in language games: the first concerns the *objective* of the language game; and the second has to do with the *paradigm* being used. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Viewing concepts as a set of *conceptual tools* entails that one moves away from any kind of reified views of essences, which usually entail evaluative judgements concerning correct and incorrect usages. If a certain usage enables the social scientist to explain complex ideas well, then that is all that matters. These uses are constructed relative to a task at hand. This allows for a certain freedom in constructing *stipulative* definitions, although it is not a licence to define things however you wish. If a given usage is at variance with common usage, readers will find the argument difficult to follow. Thus, the definition will perform its task poorly and can therefore be judged as an inadequate conceptual tool. Everyday usage is a real constraint, not because common speech is somehow privileged, but due to the fact that such concepts constitute poor conceptual tools. At the extreme end of the spectrum, they become *private* languages, which are inherently meaningless.

When social scientists construct language games, it is incumbent upon them to be conscious of the objective of their language game. One of the greatest sources of confusion in the power debates arises from the all-too-prevalent tendency for social scientists to be unaware when they move concepts from one language game to the next. In the power debate, the most frequent confusion in this regard is between normative and analytical usages. In the normative language game, the theorist is interested in *ought*, while, in the analytical language game, the objective is to understand *is*. Unfortunately, two of the most influential writers on power, Steven Lukes and Michel Foucault, weave in and out from the normative to the analytic language game, which creates massive confusion. It also contributes to the unfortunate use of the term ‘power’ as an evaluative notion, which renders it misleading for sociological analysis and diminishes the clarity of normative analysis by making it a value-loaded term that you are either for or against. According to Lukes, power is equated with domination, thus it is negatively evaluative. Power is therefore something from which we must escape. This is despite the fact that power can be *emancipatory* or lead to domination, a point Lukes acknowledges in the second edition of *Power* (2005: 64–5). As will be argued further, the real question for normative theorists is not ‘how do we escape from power?’, but, rather, ‘how do we

distinguish legitimate from illegitimate power?’ This is particularly problematic as agents themselves sometimes consider forms of power legitimate that actually contribute to their own domination. In Lukes’ work, those who suffer from ‘false consciousness’ consider certain forms of power legitimate because of their consciousness and, similarly, in Foucault, social actors legitimate relations of domination because they are reified by truth claims.

As I have argued in greater detail elsewhere (Haugaard, 2008a), the second edition of *Power* entails a complex interweaving of the two Steven Lukeses: ‘moral normative language game Lukes’ and ‘normative political theory Lukes’. Lukes’ early work is largely sociological (his study on Durkheim [Lukes, 1973] is still a key text), while many of his later works concern normative political theory (for instance, *Liberals and Cannibals* [2003] and *Moral Relativism* [2009]). In *Power*, there is a clear tension between these two language games. To take the *sociological analytic language game*, the three dimensions of power are simply a move from *agency* to *system* and *social consciousness*. Sociologically, in the first dimension, the actor is an agent making things happen: agency. However, this action takes place within certain social constraints which shape what is possible and what is not, which constitutes the second dimension of power. The structures do not exist singly, but are part of a systemic form, which is the third dimension of power: ‘[T]he bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts’ (Lukes, 2005: 26). The third dimension of power also has a second aspect: the social actor, who acts as an agent and is structurally constrained, also has internalized knowledge of these constraints, which shape their perceptions, through their social consciousness, or habitus: ‘is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?’ (2005: 27). From a sociological point of view, this is a relatively straightforward description of social agency. However, at variance with this in the last chapter of the first edition, entitled ‘Difficulties’, he argues that it is a mistake to link power to structural determination because power implies *responsibility* (Lukes, 1974: 58). As was argued by Jessop (1985), this view of power is essentially a *moral* view of power. In the second edition, this is opposed to the concept of freedom, whereby power is a form of domination. Those who are subject to it ‘are rendered less free’ (Lukes, 2005: 114). As observed by Morriss (2006), this is a view of power as *domination*, thus as normatively reprehensible. In the debate with Hayward, Lukes states that his insistence upon the link between power and responsibility is important because ‘it enables us to keep in focus the very question of the difference that agents can make to outcomes and to cast a critical eye on the attempts by the powerful agents to escape their own responsibilities by “blaming the system”’ (Lukes, 2008: 12). Consistent with this, he distinguishes between power and structure as follows: ‘The natural way to distinguish between power and structure is to say that we attribute power to agents when it is in their power to act or not to act’ (2008: 12). There is nothing *natural* about this. It is only natural within a normative and evaluative language game. The use of ‘escaping responsibilities’ and ‘blaming the system’ conjures up images of a judge sitting on a bench. This usage is at total variance with Lukes’ critique of the behaviouralism of Bachrach and Baratz (Lukes, 2005: 25) and the description of three-dimensional power as systemic, coupled with the reference to Marx’s famous phrase about men not making history as they please,

'but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (cited in Lukes, 2005: 26). The inconsistency between the two views of the concept of power comes from the fact that Lukes is playing both sociological and moral/normative language games, which are becoming entangled.

The same conflation of a sociological versus a normative language game is to be found in the work of Michel Foucault. When Foucault writes that, 'We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth' (1979: 194), he is actually encouraging his reader to move away from a normative evaluative concept of power to an analytic concept of power, in which we analyze how social order is constituted by relations of power. However, when Foucault argues that power is opposed to freedom, encouraging us, his readers, to resist power, or to refuse its workings (Foucault, 1982: 216), this constitutes a normative language game.

There are theorists who have stayed largely within one or other of these language games because their academic interest is squarely within one or other language game, for instance: Parsons (1963) and Giddens (1984) – sociological; Morriss (1987, 2002) – normative. Barnes is the only theorist I am aware of who is conscious of the distinction and began by explicitly stating that his analysis was sociological rather than normative (Barnes, 1988: 6).

By being conscious of language games, a social scientist avoids confusion by avoiding mixing language games without noticing it. Thus, they are conscious of the fact that when moving from one language game to the next, the signifier can remain the same while the signified, or referent, has shifted. Let us consider a different example, that of *legitimate power*. In the language game of sociological theory, legitimate power constitutes a statement of *fact* concerning the beliefs of a given set of *social actors* whom the social scientist is analyzing. Thus, for instance, we can argue that such and such a tribe considers patriarchy legitimate without having ourselves to defend patriarchy. In contrast, in the normative language game, discussion of legitimate power constitutes a statement that derives its meaning relative to the norms of the *observing political theorist*. Thus, in that context, any assertion to the effect that patriarchy is legitimate has to be defended normatively.

Being conscious of language games means that social scientists have the possibility of shaping their conceptual tools to a specific task. Thus, they can say, for instance (as Parsons or Arendt should have), that, for the sake of analysis, I am interested in theorizing the empirical process whereby social systems create 'power to' as a capacity for action. Alternatively, they might wish to analyze how systems of thought empower and reproduce domination by reifying truth (Foucault) or some other formulation. This allows the social scientist to acknowledge that they are not writing about power in general. Rather, they are writing about a particular family member that is associated with a particular problematic that interests them. This avoids a kind of beside-the-point rejection of their ideas because they are deemed not to be discussing what someone else considers to be *power* (for instance, Morriss' emphatic claim that Foucault does not have anything to say about power [2002: xvii]), which is actually just another family member particularly pertinent to specific academic interests.

On a pragmatic level, just as carpenters and plumbers each have separate toolboxes for carrying out specific tasks, similarly it is entirely legitimate for a sociologist to have a different set of conceptual tools from a political theorist. This makes it entirely legitimate for someone to stipulate that they are using a specific concept in a particular way in order to enable them to construct a particular theory or examine a particular phenomenon.

Against this, of course, it could be argued that while it is, in principle, possible to distinguish language games, in practice this can be hard. This applies particularly to the conflation of the sociological and normative language games. Once the normative usage is allowed to interfere with the sociological one, we may find ourselves back to a situation of 'essential contestedness'. There is some truth in this criticism in the sense that these language games constitute ideal types, which rarely exist in their pure form. However, I am not sure that this problem is unique to this debate. Part of the development of science in general is linked to the ability of scientists generally to distinguish between approaches. In the 17th century, alchemy and chemistry were practised together, as were astrology and physics. Part of the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment centred upon the separation of disciplines. In this context, I think *discipline* is a highly appropriate word because what the initiate into a new subject learned was to discipline themselves to methodologically bracket inappropriate, yet possibly attractive, ways of thinking. So they learned that metaphors and essences, which are entirely appropriate to astrology and much of everyday life, cannot be used in physics and astronomy. This was not necessarily an easy task: Newton wrestled with whether or not the concept of *gravity* implied an essence and should therefore be excluded from physics, and, more recently, Einstein was concerned that quantum mechanics represented the return of inappropriate metaphors and ways of thinking to the physical sciences. I am not claiming that learning to play different language games of power is identical to this disciplinary division in the natural sciences, but there is a parallel in the sense that the advancement of disciplines takes place through continual refinement of conceptual tools that entail precluding ways of thinking that may previously have been considered acceptable, which constitutes a process of continual approximation to newly created ideal types.

Language games and paradigms

So far I have examined differences in language games brought about by differences in objective. There is also another, less fortuitous, reason why language games diverge, brought about by differences in paradigms. What exactly constitutes a paradigm is, of course, subject to debate. I interpret paradigms as elucidated by Kuhn in his essay 'Second Thoughts on Paradigms' in *The Essential Tension* (1977: 293–320). Paradigms are essentially microsystems of thought, whereby a local interpretative horizon is formed in which relations between concepts are mutually constituted. What divides Lukes from Dahl is largely a question of focus upon different family members. What separate (normative) Lukes from Giddens are language games shaped by different purposes. In contrast, what distinguishes Lukes from Parsons or Foucault is that they are working within different paradigms, which generate alternative language games. The meanings of words are relationally constituted within paradigms. Foucault is a poststructuralist meaning-holist and

within this framework concepts such as *episteme* and *conditions of possibility* have specific meanings, which in turn impact upon his use of the word *power*. Parsons was a structural functionalist to whom system goals, latency and so on had meanings that in turn affected how he used the concept of power. Indeed, particular interpretative frames generate alternative problems and focuses of interest. Foucault's perception of social order generates the problem of understanding how social subjects resist their constitution of objects within a system of thought. Parsons' structural functionalism generates a research agenda in which it is important to understand how social systems realize systems goals by appointing individuals to positions of authority. Thus, the problem of understanding legitimate power comes to the fore. In contrast to both these theorists, Lukes' understanding of social order is shaped by an agent-centred, neo-Marxist idealist tradition of social thought influenced by Gramsci and Bourdieu. Within that tradition of thought, issues of power involve understanding how actors are shaped by and use ideology to perpetuate relations of domination. Thus, the concept of false consciousness becomes central. When comparing family members from radically different frameworks like this, there is a clear problem of incommensurability. That said, however, all these theories are attempts to make sense of a reality that is external to us. These theorists are *not* speaking *private languages* that enable theorists to inhabit entirely separate universes.¹

Aside from the issue of the usefulness of a conceptual tool, the defensibility of one usage over another is also inextricably tied to the validity of the paradigm itself. The fact that structural functionalism is clearly theoretically problematic *does* impact upon the validity of the concepts that Parsons uses. The fact that radical structuralist views of power (Althusser) have an implausible concept of agency entails that the family member that they focus upon may, at the extreme end of the spectrum, not actually have any kind of empirically existing referent. However, such cases are relatively rare.

While the relationship between concept and referent changes from language game to language game, it is important not to exaggerate these differences. While perfect translation may be impossible, the fact that these are not private languages means that it is possible to move from language game to language game with some consistency of referent. For instance, what Parsons or Arendt refers to as *power* in general would be what sociologists following in a broadly neo-Weberian interpretation would term *legitimate* power. In a comparison of uses from different paradigms, it has to be acknowledged that with these two family members, exact isomorphism of meaning will be impossible. However, understanding is never impossible, as none of them is speaking a private language. While we may reject the paradigm that a given theorist uses, their work may still contain important insights into the working of certain family members. While Parsons' perception of social order was deeply problematic, he made an important contribution to the power debate by pointing out that legitimate power is not zero-sum and that a proper understanding of power entails moving beyond the view of power as coercion. Arendt and Barnes draw our attention to the relationship between *power over* and *empowerment*. From my own perspective as a social theorist, I consider Foucault's understanding of social order as too determinist and structuralist, yet his analysis of *disciplinary power* and the relationship between (what I would call) *dispositional power* and truth is highly significant. It is important to emphasize that, in the majority of cases, differences in language games are not generated by differences in paradigms. Rather, the most common

difference is a difference of purpose. Of course, these differences are not absolute; every social actor has a slightly different interpretative horizon from the next, and the same applies to social scientists. However, we only speak of differences in paradigm when the differences are so great that signifiers frequently have different referents.

Some family members

I would briefly like to discuss some of the most common family members. In particular, I will focus upon the differences between a sociological analytic political science and a normative language game. Working through the implications of treating power as a family resemblance concept is complex and the analysis below is intended purely as an illustrative sketch of who the family members might be and how they relate. For reasons of brevity, I will make many quick moves, which in a different context would be given more substance. There are also other possible language games. Therefore, I do not ask that everyone agrees with the specifics of this delineation, just the method. My reason for choosing the sociological and normative language games is that they constitute the most significant reasons why we are interested in studying power: understanding how relations of empowerment and domination *are* recreated as a *fact* (sociological analytic) and how power *should be* (normative political theory). If we mix the two up as we go along, we will answer neither adequately.

In the sociological analytical language game, power is *not* inherently negative; *power to* denotes an actor's *capacity for action*. *Power over* entails getting others to do things that they would not otherwise do (i.e. A has power over B to the extent to which A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do). It is important to emphasize that *power over* is not inherently equivalent to *domination*, although in normative language games this equivalence is frequently made. Sociologically, *power over* does not necessarily have negative consequences. Legitimate power can manifest itself as either *power to* or *power over*. The latter will be perceived to be legitimate in the eyes of the subaltern actor if it exists for the purposes of greater *power to*. In ideal type circumstances, with full information, it only makes sense for an actor to consent to *power over* because they believe that, in the longer term, they will gain *power to* from the unequal relationship. However, that said, social life is rarely so transparent.

In the normative language game, power is seen in evaluative terms. Thus, for instance, it can be argued that in opposing power to structure, the former entails responsibility, while the latter does not. In many normative language games, structure entails an inability to do otherwise. At trial, a Nazi may wish to plead that they had no power to do otherwise, that the *structures* of the situation made any other action impossible and, thus, they were *powerless*. Hence, *power* and *structure* are opposites divided from each other based on responsibility. However, this would not hold in most sociological language games. As argued by Giddens (1984), structures are frequently resources that facilitate action. The structures of the English language enable me to write this article. In this case, structures refer to regularities of action, which confer meaning upon those actions. Similarly, putting a cross upon a ballot paper is an act of structuration, or structural reproduction, which empowers actors. Sociologically, the whole democratic system is an

assembled set of social structures that facilitate the creation of *power to* and *power over*, which is an entirely different way of describing the relationship between power and structure from the normative one concerning responsibility.

Closely related to this difference in usage is the contrast between sociological and normative uses of *legitimate power*. The normative language game refers to the judgement of the *observer*, while the sociological use refers to the views of the *social subject*. Therefore, it is quite possible for the two to be out of step, which is precisely what is at issue with three-dimensional power. When a political theorist deems that certain actors are suffering from 'false consciousness' (Lukes) or that they should be resisting truth, but are not (Foucault), the theorist is, in effect, making a judgement that what certain *social actors* consider to be legitimate should not actually be considered so, relative to some normative criteria that the *observer* holds. This is not always elitist, as many forms of social critique involve precisely this kind of judgement. In contrast, the sociological observation that a given society considers a given social order legitimate refers only to the beliefs of the social actors involved. Interference from the observer's viewpoint in such a case would be considered a failure to be objective, thus rendering the sociologist open to charges of ethnocentrism. The two language games collide in the case of false consciousness, which is what makes the concept so problematic. It is a sociological observation that certain actors consider certain forms of *power over* legitimate, coupled with a follow-on judgement that these actors *should not* consider this power legitimate. However, by distinguishing these two aspects of false consciousness into two language games, the theorist in question can actually make sense of false consciousness without falling into any kind of ethnocentric trap. First, they explain the sociological fact that the observed actors consider such and such authority legitimate for certain reasons. Then the theorist can enter a normative language game and demonstrate how these beliefs are at variance with certain normative principles, which the theorist endeavours to defend. Obviously, defending these principles will have all the difficulties associated with political theory in general, but they do not derive from the concept of false consciousness itself. In contrast, if the false-consciousness argument is not divided into sociological and normative language games, it seems impossible not to fall into the trap of ethnocentrism (i.e. that the claim of *false consciousness of others* is judged relative to the *privileged true consciousness, or culture, of the observer*).

In Lukes' normative view, power is largely seen as domination (see Morriss, 2006), which is essentially negatively evaluative. However, once domination is perceived as a power family member among others, the normative language game changes logic. As argued by Allen (1999, 2008), *power to* and *power with* are equally important aspects of power. Thus, power also entails *emancipation*. The straight equation of power with domination entails that power is something that we wish to *escape* from. Basically, a *just society is one without power*. Thus, for instance, what Habermas (1984) refers to as ideal 'speech situations' or Rawls (1971) as the 'original position' appear to constitute situations in which power is absent. Once the emancipatory family members enter the equation (*power to, power with* and *legitimate power over*), these hypothetical normative ideals of interaction become sources of power. The problem for normative political theory therefore shifts from one of *combating* power in general, or *escaping* it, to one of delineating the criteria for distinguishing these family members. To put it in social

contract terms, for the sake of argument, actors enter a social contract in order to realize *power to* and *power with*. However, power in concert entails authority, which entails *power over*. Undertaking a contract entails being bound by that contract, which entails *consenting to others in authority exercising power over oneself in the case of default*. Thus, the contract contains two fundamental tasks, identifying shared *power to* and *with*, and, following this, setting out the criteria for *legitimate power over* and distinct from *power over as domination*. When coupled with a social critique of existing power relations, the latter entails formulating a robust set of criteria for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate *power over*. Thus, the task of normative theory is no longer simply one of identifying and condemning *power over*. Rather, it is the subtle task of distinguishing normatively legitimate from illegitimate power.

In the usual power as domination language game, *power* and *freedom* are seen as opposed. However, once *power to* is acknowledged as a family member, power actually appears as a precondition of freedom, as is argued by Morris (2009) because freedom without *power to* would be the equivalent of impotence. To be more precise, *freedom* is only the opposite of the family member *normatively illegitimate power over*. As argued above, legitimate *power over*, although curtailing short-term freedom, may augment long-term freedom, which is why it is rational for free agents in a state of nature to enter into a contract for the sake of greater long-term freedom.

In the literature, there is an ongoing debate on the relationship between *power* and *violence* (for example, Fraser and Hutchings, 2008), which follows from Arendt's argument that they are opposites (Arendt, 1958, 1970). From a *sociological perspective*, violence is a *source* of power among many. A different source, among others, is *legitimacy*. When Arendt was referring to political power in general, I would argue, she was referring to the family member in which power has its source in *legitimate authority*. Sociologically, the two sources of power entail a complex contrasting interrelationship. While it is the case that most actors with legitimate authoritative power have recourse to violence, it only makes sense for them to use it when legitimacy fails. Complex, largely democratic political systems are underpinned by both sources of power. However, violence is necessary as a source only when legitimacy is absent in the eyes of the actor. The greater the level of legitimacy, the lower the level of violence necessary for regularized compliance to take place. Legitimacy works through the *mind and logic* of the compliant subject, while violence is directed at the *physical body*. Because legitimacy is premised upon the complex logic of the social agent, it can be quite complex in its direction. In contrast, while violence functions only through injury or fear of injury to the body, it is a relatively blunt instrument of power. Because legitimate power, in the act of structural reproduction through compliance, leads to the reproduction of the logical habitus of the compliant social agent, it has the potential to be self-reinforcing. The more frequently actors comply with, or participate in, democratic elections, the more likely they are to be compliant in the future. Thus, they become agents with certain *dispositions* that are functional to the democratic process; *dispositional power* feeds into *systemic power*. Over time, the consonance between political institutions and compliant actors makes the political order appear part of the 'natural order of things' in the mind of the actor. In contrast, violence bypasses this aspect of the habitus of the social actor. When violence is used against social agents, its logic is external to them, and, therefore, while they may comply,

there is no reinforcement in terms of habitus except perhaps through the habituation of fear. The use of violence indicates an *ipso facto* admission by the dominant actor that the compliance in question would not be forthcoming without threats to the body.

In a sense, therefore, violence entails the admission of the absence of legitimacy in the eyes of the dominated, as a sociological fact. This does *not necessarily* entail illegitimacy *normatively*. Normatively, a political theorist can argue that the lack of perceived legitimacy by the subject of power may represent some kind of failure by the subaltern. Their dispositions may be claimed to be faulty; they are really ‘a terrorist’, ‘religious fundamentalist’, ‘sexually deviant’, ‘irrational’ or ‘criminal’. Sociologically, as an empirical fact, such a normative judgement will be effective if there is a large target audience that accepts this normative evaluation. The problem comes if these *descriptions* do not resonate with the habitus of large numbers of other social actors. In that case, the use of violence begets a greater and greater number of social agents who will cease to consider the political structures legitimate. Thus, violence undermines legitimacy.

Fraser and Hutchings (2008) criticize Hannah Arendt for apparent inconsistency in arguing that, on the one hand, power and violence are opposed and, on the other hand, that there are instances when violence can be used to build power. Continuing the above, while it is the case that the use of violence undermines legitimacy, if a particular regime is sustained by violence, due to having low levels of legitimacy among its subjects, the successful use of violence against violence may actually contribute to legitimacy if, after the revolution, the new political structures are consonant with the habitus of the majority of the social actors reproducing the new political system. Alternatively, if the violence is accompanied by appropriate socialization, a mass collective consciousness may be created that reinforces the legitimacy of political structures. It is not an entirely contingent fact that modern states do not only claim a monopoly on violence (Weber), but also mass education, which is, in essence, mass socialization (Gellner, 1988).

Normatively, the contrast between power and violence follows a slightly different, though not unrelated, trajectory to the above. One possible path is to argue that legitimate power treats the other as a social agent because it presupposes the voluntary structuration practices of the compliant other. In terms of the Kantian dictum of treating others as an end in themselves, rather than as a means to an end, power that has its source in the habitus of the other, rather than their physical body, has a lower potentiality to treat the other as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. Violence has the potential to disregard the other as a social agent, focusing upon them as a body. One of the reasons that rape, as opposed to voluntary sex, is abhorrent is that, in the former, the agency of the victim is ignored, thus they are purely a means to an end. This is, of course, not to say that violence is always wrong, but then the argument has to follow either the path of arguing that the other is not worthy of social agency (for instance, criminals or terrorists) or that they are incapable of knowing their own interest (for instance, minors).

Conclusion

I began this article by arguing that power is not an ‘essentially contested’ concept. Significantly, the idea of ‘essential contestedness’ throws up an inherent contradiction

between, on the one hand, observing that there are several uses of the concept and, on the other, of maintaining that there is a single 'best' one. In its place, I have argued that the most logical implication of the multiplicity of usage is that power is a 'family resemblance' concept. I can only hope that, in my modest way, I have put an end to the quest for the holy grail of the essence of power, while simultaneously showing that the alternative is not nihilistic relativism. Family resemblance concepts give the theorist or scientist freedom to create their own conceptual tools best suited to the task at hand, thus to create sophisticated nuanced theory. Yet, it is not a freedom without structural constraint, but that constraint is not some elusive essence, but rather constituted by pragmatic criteria concerning usefulness. The result is a complex interrelationship of family members that converge and contrast within different language games. As I have emphasized throughout, two of the most significant language games are the sociological analytic and the normative political theory game. Hopefully, by separating the two, I have indicated the way towards a clearer understanding of how power *is* and, following that, how we might wish to approach theorizing how it *should be*.

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Note

1. I would like to thank Kira Petersen for this observation.

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