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# Relational Theory And The Discourses Of Power

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> If only the ruler and his people would refrain from harming each other, all the benefits of life would accumulate in the kingdom. Lao Tzu Tao Teh Ching.

Although rich in evocative imagery and ripe with pragmatic potential, the concept of power has been a fruit not readily plucked by many social analysts. For example, organizational theorists, social psychologists, systems analysts, therapeutic specialists and educational theorists, all of whom might readily feast on its potential, have displayed an uncommon reticence to developing or applying the concept to ongoing social processes. In part this reluctance may be traced to the historical residues carried by the term. The concept of power is rhetorically hot; it is suffused with the revolutionary energies of countless diatribes against inequality, oppression, and domination. Thus, the social scientist who is reasonably at home with the exiting state of affairs may have little need for the term. To thrust it into the centre of analysis is to raise a red flag, suggesting that existing arrangements are replete with oppression and inequity, and that fundamental change is required. For the organizational theorist to characterize the business firm as a domain in which the powerful enslave the weak is to suggest revolutionary change. For a social psychologist to paint a picture of human relations as a continuous struggle for domination is to threaten the liberal ideology so central to the discipline's history.

There are important exceptions to this general tendency. There are, for one, a substantial number of theorists within the Marxist and critical school tradition (Lukes, 1974; Habermas, 1971) whose analyses are specifically aimed at social critique and change. Further, there are theorists whose analyses of power either redefine it in such a way that it loses much of its evaluative edge (e.g. Parsons, 1969; Giddens, 1984), or who attempt to show how power distribution in western society is more equitable or more pluralist than generally believed (e.g.

Dahl, 1961). However, in spite of their potential, the language of power continues to remain in the penumbra of social analysis.

In recent times even the classic theories of power have come under critical scrutinity (see for example, Clegg, 1989; Wartenberg, 1990). As social analysts have become increasingly aware of the textual or constructionist turn within the academy more generally, of the extent to which theoretical categories engender the putative objects of analysis, they have turned reflexively on their own conceptual implements. Under this kind of scrutiny, it has become increasingly difficult to take power seriously. Thus, Marxist critics may inveigh against the current distribution of power in contemporary culture, pointing out the hegemonic and oppressive character of the capitalist ideology. But, it is now asked, to what extent are such critiques to be trusted; are they accurate assessments of social life, as the analysts claim? For if the accounts of the critical analyst, no less than the bourgeois liberalist, are dominated by class interests, rhetorical tropes, and the negotiated agreements of a particular sub-culture (in this case Marxist), then on what grounds are such accusations justified? Are they not mystifying in their effects? Or, in terms central to our present colloquy, is the concept of power not a social construction, used by theorists in this case as a rhetorical hammer for inducing social change? And if power is not a fact in the world, but an artifact of discourse, then in what sense should we take power relations in contemporary society as a topic about which serious discussion is demanded?

Although I am quite compelled by this line of reflexive critique, I find myself simultaneously unsettled. There are two primary sources of my concern. The first is a general dismay over the future of social analysis. For, if this kind of deconstruction becomes the dominant intellectual posture, social analysis itself is slowly debilitated. If all that we have previously taken to be objects of study become, through such de-entification, nothing more than locutions in discursive space, then we are left, in the Derridian sense, with nothing of text. Social analysis ceases to inform us about the world, for the object of discourse is none other than discourse itself. If the object of theoretical discourse is thus deconstructed, the function of social analysis is simultaneously impugned.

My second concern is more specific to the concept of power. Many within the constructionist fold are exploring possibilities for reconstituting the character of scientific inquiry. In particular, as the empiricist program begins to wane, and with it the belief in an ideologically neutral science, the door is open to legitimating social analyses of a distinctly valuational nature. That is, social constructionism invites the scientist to view professional actions in their full personal and political consequences. In this context, societal critique and reconstruction become central challenges for the human sciences. Thus, for example, feminist critics have condemned various institutional hierarchies for

their androcentric biases, and have attempted to coalesce around the attempt to alter the existing structure of power (see for example, Smith, 1987; Lipman-Bluman, 1984). Similar critiques have been mounted by various ethnic minorities, children's rights advocates, and women against sexual and physical aggression. In each case the concept of differential power has been pivotal. Thus, to reduce the concept of power to that of mere construction is simultaneously to undermine the constructionist legitimation of social critique and reconstruction.

How is this dilemma to be resolved? How, on the one hand, can we recognize the concept of power as cultural construction, and at the same time objectify the term within a program of societal critique? What place are we to give the concept of power in future social analysis? It seems to me that there are two primary options to be considered here. First, we may agree that the concept of power is simply one among many symbolic implements for analyzing and criticizing existing states of affairs, and that it, like any other concept used for such purposes, is subject to various forms of deconstruction. Regardless of such de-entifying maneuvers, it may be said, the term will probably retain a good deal of its rhetorical or illocutionary capacity, and we can continue to use it for the foreseeable future. To put it otherwise, we can scarcely abandon concepts because they fail to be accurate descriptors; this would be to jettison virtually all propositional language. At the same time, one can scarcely speak without presuming some sort of world independent of language, to which the language is, by convention, referentially related. And, should sources of anguish be located within the space of existing conventions, then terms within the existing vernacular may be serviceable as pragmatic means of inducing change. There is nothing about constructionism that denies cultural participation.

There is much to be said for this option, and for extending the range of rhetorical resources available for moral and political purposes. However, it is to a second possibility that I am drawn in the present paper. In important respects, social constructionist theory operates as a scientific metatheory. That is, like logical empiricism and critical rationalism, for example, it attempts to offer an account of the scientific process, a theory of scientific theories. At the same time, constructionism as a metatheory is neutral with respect to what form scientific theories should take. Unlike its competitors, it does not require that the theories of human action spawned within the sciences support or vindicate its suppositional network.[1]

In this sense, we can thus discriminate between two forms of theoretical (and practical) work, that which opposes constructionist metatheory as contrasted with that which lends support. It is the second of these alternatives I wish to explore in what follows. This is first because there are many respects in which constructionism seems superior to existing alternatives. To hammer out conceptual tools by which the metatheory is vivified, is to augment its potentials.

In addition, as I shall hope to show, the major treatments of power currently extant are uncongenial to constructionist metatheory. Thus, to explore possibilities for a constructionist theory of power may enable new conceptions of power to emerge, and new conceptual resources to enter the cultural lists.

Invited, then, is a formulation of power that is consistent with, or which lends rhetorical legitimacy to, a constructionist orientation to theory and social life. In the remainder of this paper, I shall thus open discussion on what may be termed a relational theory of power, and finally treat several implications of this particular option for issues in organizational and social life more generally.

## Discourses of power

> In loving your people and governing your state are you able to dispense with cleverness? Lao Tzu Tao Teh Ching

One of the most intuitively compelling ways of conceptualizing power is in terms of the macro social order. One speaks easily of the power of such institutions as the church, government, military force, industry and so on. Marxist theory of class conflict and Parsonian functionalism represent formal articulations of the intuition. However, as debates on power have proceeded during the past 20 years, the macro-social orientation has met with significant difficulty. For one, it is difficult to comprehend social life without recourse to the individuals who make up the broad structures. Yet, once individuals are recognized, the theorist falls into a problematic dualism, with individuals on the one side and institutions on the other. Yet, the phenomenal sets are fully conflated; remove all the individuals and there is nothing left over to be called an institution, and vice versa. Such theories also favour a problematic determinism. We are forced, as it is said, by the power of institutions to behave as we do. Yet, if the theory is to be emancipatory, it must simultaneously plump for voluntary resistance against the institution. (Thus, the Marxist incitement, 'workers of the world unite.') In the inducement to resist, the presumption of institutional determinism is undone.

For these and other reasons many theorists have relocated the cite of power at the individual level. Even for theorists such as Lukes (1977) and Giddens (1984) who attempt to integrate concepts of both social structure and the individual into the same theory, the strong emphasis is placed on the latter as opposed to the former (see Barbalet, 1982; Layder, 1987). Most pervasive are definitions of power in terms of personal characteristics. Consider, for example the definitions of Dahl, 'A has power to the extent that he can get B to do something B would not otherwise do.' (1957, p.203); Lukes, 'power ...

presupposes human agency ... although agents operate within individually determined limits, they none the less have a relative autonomy and could have acted differently (1977, p.6-7); and Giddens 'to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others' (1984, p.14). To these definitions analysts typically add a range of additional processes, capacities, or characteristics at the psychological level. Thus theorists variously explain processes of domination in terms of individual wants, needs, choices, real interests, and the unconscious.

While I see no compelling reason for returning to the macro social level of analysis, I am not wholly sanguine either with the further elaboration of the individual accounts, or with the integration of such accounts into a constructionist metatheory. There are, in my view, a number of serious problems inherent in the psycho-centered analysis of power, and at least three of these deserve attention in the present context. At the outset, post-empiricist and post-structuralist critiques of recent years make it increasingly difficult to sustain the assumption of individual minds, capable of registering events in the world, contemplating these events on a rational basis, and acting on the basis of rational decisions. As it is argued, there are no viable accounts of either the means by which real world events could be converted to abstract ideas (in the head), nor the means by which abstract ideas (or rational process) could be converted into concrete action (see my 1989 discussion). Further, should individuals possess independent minds, there would be no means by which others (including scientists) could determine their meaning or intent (see Fish, 1980), that is by which they could decipher the public code in such a way that intentions could be revealed. As Rorty (1979) concludes in his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, the presumption of individual minds, reflecting and reflecting on an independent nature, creates a host of unnecessary and principally insoluble riddles. There is good reason for abandoning the obfuscating dualisms of mind and nature, subject and object, inner and outer.

Second, by placing mental characteristics in a pivotal explanatory position, theorists place themselves in a problematic position vis a vis the culture more generally. For as we find, the analyst's assertions about people's intentions, wants, needs, and unconscious are without compelling grounds for justification. Not only is it impossible for the analyst standing external to the individual, to fathom the true nature of the individual's mental states, but there are no respectable reasons for assuming that individuals can turn introspectively on themselves to accurately perceive their own mental condition (see Lyons, 1986; Gergen, 1994b). Given the shaky character of the analyst's assertions, then any statements about who does or does not possess power loses its substantive base. Assessments of current imbalances in power, oppressive conditions, and

injustices based on such mentalist attributions lose their warrant. The analyst claiming dispassionate grasp of the realities of social life thus appears either to be acting in bad faith or out of naive conventionalism.

Finally, I am compelled by the arguments of Sampson (1978), Bellah et al. (1985), Schwartz (1986) and others concerning the inimical consequences of individualistic orientations for cultural life. The rhetoric of individualism, including the presumption of individual minds, rationality, intentionality, and the like, lends itself to forms of social life that, in my view, ultimately endanger the species (if not all life on the planet). For as this perspective suggests, each of us in essentially independent of the other, operating on the basis of our own powers of reason and volition, fundamentally opaque to others, and fundamentally bent on enhancing one's own being. Unless individuals are curbed from seeking their own private ends, life is a war of all against all. And, because individuals are fundamentally alone, relationships are products of artifice, unnatural and usually temporary. Such a view of social life lends itself to alienation and divisiveness. Individualist theories of power additionally invite the public to see their social world in terms of domination and submission. We must, then, be attentive to the possibility of alternative formulations.

## Toward a relational theory of power

As we find, there are important shortcomings inherent in both the macro-social and individual approaches to power. If we abandon the traditional accounts, what alternatives are available? Most important in the present context, how may we articulate a theory of power congruent with a constructionist metatheory? One moves with trepidation at this point. For, on the one hand, there is no univocal agreement concerning the nature of the constructionist standpoint. No one can properly claim to speak for the range of interlocutors more generally. Rather, we must envision a range of constructionist accounts with no single entry privileged in its position. In addition, the term power is widely used both within the social sciences and without. Its meanings and uses are many and varied. As one moves toward a reformulation, many of the previous meanings are discredited, altered or destroyed. In this sense, any new minting of the term threatens a range of social patternings sustained and supported by the previous meanings. As outlined, I do believe the previous conceptualizations of the term have inimical consequences for society. At the same time, there are many contexts in which I would heartily endorse the critical manner in which the term is used; I would favour the kinds of patterns sustained or advocated by the term in its traditional form. Thus, while I believe a constructionist refiguration of the concept could open new and potentially significant modes of action, I do not

thereby wish to favour yet another totalizing discourse.

With these caveats at hand, there is at least one critical site at which the articulation of a constructionist theory of power can commence. It is the site of the privileged ontology. Unlike individual theories of power (in which the individual mind serves as the originary source), and in contrast to macro social theories (in which large-scale collective structures are presumed), most constructionist accounts begin with the presumption of human relatedness. Both the focus of concern and the explanatory fulcrum within a constructionist frame are episodes, processes or patterns achieved by ongoing processes of human interchange (Gergen, 1994a). It is the conversation which is perhaps most emblematic of the constructionist orientation, for the conversation is the product of neither an individual nor an institution, but of face-to-face, mutually contingent relationships. Further, it is from this nexus of joint-action (Shotter, 1980) that language ensues, and from language the vast array of ontological assumptions, including such assertions as individuals exist, and institutions control our lives.

Beginning with relatedness as the central ingredient, I am also drawn by certain aspects of Foucault's (1979; 1980) discussions of power. Foucault also shares a discontent with the traditional macro social view. As he argues, this essentially feudal form of power (juridico-discursive in his terms) has largely been replaced by what he terms disciplinary power. In the juridico-discursive case, specific rule systems, backed by the equivalent of a police force, demanded obedience. However, in the disciplinary context of the Panopticon, techniques were developed which led to the incorporation of belief systems within subject populations. Suppression was replaced by internalization. Central for present purposes, among the most important sources of disciplinary power are discursive or disciplinary regimes, roughly organized bodies of discourse and associated practices that serve both to engender beliefs and to rationalize their own existence. As the system of discourse, often taken to be truth or knowledge by its advocates, becomes the argot of everyday activity, seeping into the capillaries of the normal or taken for granted, so does the aggregate become complicit in its own subjugation.

While Foucault generally avoids the question of defining power[2], his analysis is congenial in certain respects with the constructionist emphasis on relatedness. Because of the centrality of discourse to his analysis, and the inherent relational quality of language, Foucault's analysis is primarily concerned with relational processes. The chief focus is the emergence and extension of power within micro-social processes (e.g. the confessional, the doctor-patient relationship) Or, as Foucault (1980) writes, 'power means a more-or-less organized ... coordinated cluster of relations' (p.198). Additionally promising is Foucault's emphasis on the capillary diffusion of power. Rather than seeing power as inherent in vast

centralized structures, or within the capacities of charismatic individuals, power relations are distributed throughout the society. Further, for Foucault, relations of power are not travesties on the normal or the valued. Rather, in certain respects they are essential to social life, and productive of its most valued institutions.

Yet, while drawn by certain aspects of Foucault's writings, it is difficult to locate anything resembling a fully developed perspective in this work. Ambiguities regarding the character of power and oppression are pervasive. Further elaboration is thus invited. In carrying out such an elaboration, I am guided by certain aspects of Bakhtin's (1981) discussions of language and social process. Of particular interest, Bakhtin argues persuasively for the fragmented character of cultural languages. That is, our common languages are seldom unified, guided by an integral and inclusive set of rules. Rather, we inherit a multitude of linguistic usages, a legacy of long and complex relations among various cultural and sub-cultural groups. And, as we move through the novel demands of multitudinous contexts, so are we forced to borrow, patch, elide, and so on. Language is in a continuous state of multiple transformations (or heteroglossia in Bakhtin's terms). When paired with Foucault's emphasis on discourse, we might conclude that no society is bound to a singular discursive regime. Rather, we must entertain the possibility of multiple, fragmentary and partial regimes, of power relations as heterogeneous and ever changing.[3] We shall return to these themes shortly.

In the present analysis there is no attempt to define power in terms of a set of behavioral, psychological, or material coordinates. Rather, the focus will be on discourses of power, their emergence in relationships, and their consequences as they come to possess a lived validity. As I shall propose, within particular contexts of relatedness, discourses of power come to have functional significance. Two analytic moments may be distinguished, the first in which persons in relationship may come to view themselves as possessing the power to act in various ways. In a second set of relational conditions, a discourse of power over is invited.[4] The primary ingredients of this view are contained in four inter-related theses:

*The formation of relational nuclei*

For present purposes I will assume that human beings exist within an array of relationships (both to other human beings first, and further to the environment more generally). They do not commence life as single, unitary or self-contained monads but gain their very capacity to exist in such apparent states (what we call states of individual identity) by virtue of their relatedness. In this sense we are always already in relationship (social and otherwise). However, to gain

conceptual clarity regarding the genesis of power in a constructionist frame, it is useful to explicate more fully the emergence of interdependence within a dyad, what we may call an elementary relational nucleus. Although face to face relationships will ordinarily entail the mutual coordination of bodily movements, sounds, focus of gaze, facial configurations, and so on, let us focus on what will prove a critical element in our analysis, the linguistic construction of meaning.

Language essentially derives its meaning (or capacity to communicate) by virtue of the coordinated activities of two or more persons. In this sense, the utterances (or other actions) of a single individual are not in themselves meaningful. For example, the utterance of a selected morpheme (e.g. ed, to, at) does not itself possess meaning. Standing alone, the morpheme fails to be anything but itself; in the Derridian sense the morpheme operates as a free standing signifier, opaque and indeterminate. Lone utterances begin to acquire communicative potential when another (or others) coordinate themselves to the utterance, that is, when they add some form of supplementary action (which may or may not be linguistic). The supplement may be as simple as an affirmation (e.g. yes, right) that indeed the utterance succeeds in communicating. It may take the form of an action, e.g. shifting the line of gaze upon hearing the word 'look'. Or it may extend the utterance in some way, e.g. when, 'the' is uttered by one interlocutor is followed by ,'end', uttered by a second. Thus the basic unit of linguistic meaning may be viewed as action-and-supplement. The formation of meaning within the primitive nucleus thus depends on the mutual privileging of language (and other actions). If others do not recognizably treat one's utterances as meaningful, if they fail to coordinate themselves around such offerings, one is reduced to nonsense.

In this regard, virtually any form of utterance may be granted the privilege of being meaningful, or conversely, serves as a candidate for absurdity. The other may invest profound significance in the simplest groan or monosyllabic grunt, or may respond with an opaque stare to the most perfectly formed sentence. The fate of the speaker's utterance is in the other's hands. As we find, the initial language unit does not, in pristine form, demand any particular form of coordinated action. In principle, an utterance may be taken to mean anything (see Gergen, 1994a). The act of supplementation thus operates in two opposing ways. First, it grants a specific potential to the meaning of the utterance. It treats it as meaning this and not that, as entailing one form of action as opposed to another, as having a particular illocutionary force as opposed to some other. At the same time, as it grants specific meaning, it simultaneously acts to constrain alternative possibilities of the utterance. Because it does mean this, it cannot mean that. In this sense, while others' actions invite us into meaning, they also act so as to negate our potential. From the enormous array of possibilities, only a limited array are made possible. And, as others both open and constrain, so do our

subsequent actions serve the same functions with respect to them.

## The creation of a local ontology and value system

Of course spoken language is only one form of coordinated action, and it may be that the linguistic account just outlined could provide a useful metaphor for the development of all forms of relatedness. In effect, all may require action-supplement sequences that define and constrain. Yet, for analytic purposes it is useful in the present context to distinguish between two outcomes intrinsic to most attempts to coordinate actions through language. In the first instance, to the degree that given patterns of coordination are to be sustained within a nucleus, language usage must be reiterative. Sequences of words-and-supplements must be replicated (or nearly so) under particular conditions. Thus, for example, employees in an office setting may coordinate their actions around such terms as boss, the mail, balance sheets, and the like. In order to carry out the tasks that we generally call getting the job done they will employ such terms on a repetitive basis. In doing so, however, the group succeeds in developing a local ontology. The terms in conventional usage come to establish a localized reality. The vocabularies essential to coordination of the participants take on the sense of a palpable order: what the world is made of in this case. Terms such as boss, the mail, and the like cease to be merely the syllables uttered under certain conditions, but come to serve as literal descriptions of what occurs. They become sedimented or entified.

The second byproduct of linguistic coordination is a valuational (moral, ethical) reality. To the extent that an utterance is indeterminant, open to multiple meanings, coherent patterning is disrupted. That is, established patterns of coordinated action (repetitive action-and-supplements) are threatened. If coordinated action within a group is to be sustained, it is thus essential to seal off the potential of the signifiers. Means must be found of delimiting the range of possible supplementarities. (For example, if he is not the boss but our slave or a vicious exploiter, then the typical patterns of action are difficult to sustain.) Means are invited, then, of restricting the process of signification (or preventing, what in other terms is called unlimited semiosis). At least one common means of doing so is by developing an ancillary language of valuation, a language that both places a positive value on existing patterns of action and impugnes all deviations.[5]

Such valuational supports may take many forms. In many instances groups have claimed certain patterns (e.g. democracy, charity, heterosexuality) to have inherent value. Or, strong appeals are made to the valuational authorities, to God, the Bible, wise men, poets, and so on. In many quarters reliance is placed

on good reasons, as embodied in folk tales and axioms, or in volumes on methodology or philosophical foundations. Typically, each of these languages is also fortified by practices of approbation, means of discrediting the deviant and rewarding those remaining within the ontology and its implicature. In each case, however, the existing ontology and its underlying array of coordinated actions is buttressed by a valuational discourse that discredits deviation and sanctifies tradition.[6]

## The condition of centripetal power

> By not exalting the talented you will cause the people to cease from rivalry and contention. By not displaying what is desirable, you will cause the people's hearts to remain undisturbed. Tzu Tao Teh Ching

Tendencies toward coordinated action also establish the conditions for what may be termed centripetal power. Consider here a condition (idealized for analytic purposes) in which varying groups succeed in stabilizing valued patterns of coordinated activity. The local ontologies are embraced and the valuational discourse functions so as to sustain the common reality. In effect, by the internal standards of the group, they function in an effective way. Centripetal power is achieved within a group when they can achieve their own goals according to their own definitional terms. They are empowered from within their own conceptual configuration. Illustrative, for example, is a couple who believe they have control of their lives, and can live in a reasonably stable and fulfilling way. Or, centripetal power is exemplified by an organization that sees itself as achieving its goals, expanding, profiting, and innovating in just the ways it defines as valuable. In effect, we are not speaking in this instance of a power over, but the sense of power to achieve specific goals.[7] It is also important to reiterate that the concept of power is not objectified on this account. That is, I am not speaking here of the actual capacity of a relational unit to achieve its ends. Rather, the concept of power operates in this case as a discursive vehicle for those within the relationship, a means of indexing a particular configuration of coordinated action. It is manifest in attempts, for example to label such coordination as achievement, or to see the interaction as possessing a goal which is being fulfilled.

The concept of centripetal power enables us to open several lines of discussions occluded by classic treatments of the subject. First, on the present account, we may see the culture as one in which local coordinations are everywhere under development. Thus, rather than a singular hierarchy, as suggested by much classic work on power, we find a multiplicity of groups, each

of which may define power and its attainment according to different ontologies and value systems. In principle, with each movement toward coordinated action within a dyad or group, there are corresponding possibilities for centripetal power. To the extent that persons participate in multiple groups, with different conceptions of the real and the good, configurations of power are multiple. To the extent that the terms of the real and the good are negotiable, such configurations undergo continuous transformation.

The present perspective also acts as an antidote to common tendencies to define power in terms of a singular dimension, commodity, or criterion. The analyst standing outside the culture is not free, on this account, to render a general characterization of the source of power (e.g. capital, military might, freedom of action). Rather, in the present case we find that attributions of power, powerlessness, and oppression must always take account the local character of power ascription. Each group may come to see itself as coordinated around certain ends or goals, and these ends or goals may be as varied as there are differences in vocabulary. At the same time, any group may come to see other groups, those who fail to share their forms of coordinated action, as inferior, lacking judgement, lacking motivation, and powerless. This is to say that attributing power to those in executive positions, with high income levels, occupying political office, reaching championships and the like, is to join the interpretive systems of the particular groups in question. It is to capitulate to the apparent objectivity and valuational systems of the local realities, raising these constructions to the level of fundamental ontology. The valued coordinations of any given group may either be devalued or considered irrelevant within the local ontology of other groups. For the Buddhist monk, those bent on economic gain are pitied; they are running dogs. For those valuing the simple life, close to community and nature, high office is tedious and pressurized; and for communities devoted to intellectual or aesthetic ends, team championships exact a form of slavery. The present conception of centripetal power, then, acts to inhibit broadscale or unilateral critiques of existing power imbalances. Such critiques always presume some standpoint; their problem is in generalizing their ontology across all sectors of society.

Further, the present analysis also militates against knee-jerk condemnations of exclusionary practices, often viewed as expressions of power. As people consolidate communities, school systems, private clubs, and the like in such a way that entry is difficult or forbidden by others, we are quick to criticize. Such actions seem to be raw and unfair exercises of the powerful to exclude all others, to sustain their own positions of superiority while denying others the right to participate. Yet, as the present analysis suggests, groups whose actions are coordinated around given constructions of reality risk their traditions by exposing them to the ravages of the outliers. That is, from their perspective,

efforts must be made to protect the boundaries of understanding, to prevent the signifiers from escaping into the free-standing environment where meaning is decried or dissipated. In this sense, unfair or exclusionary practices are not frequently so from the standpoint of the actors. Rather, they may seem altogether fair, just and essential to sustain valued ideals against the infidels at the gates. This is also to say that we may anticipate, on these terms, perpetual struggles against oppression. For centripetal forces within groups will always operate toward stabilization, the establishment of valued meaning, and thus the exclusion of alterior realities. Exclusive communities, private schools and secret societies are simply the most flagrant manifestations of a process that operates at all levels of social life. From international negotiations, to the whispered gossip of daily relationships, processes of coordination and exclusion are in operation. Let us consider a second site of power ascription.

## Counter-reality and the emergence of centrifugal power

> When all the world recognizes good as good, this in itself is evil. Indeed, the hidden and the manifest give birth to each other. Lao Tzu Tao Teh Ching

As the present analysis suggests, all those practices taken to be unfairly exclusionary or oppressive are only so by virtue of a particular ontology. Outsiders to a group would fail to experience exclusion, except for the fact that they have come to accept the ontology and related values of a particular group. If members of a bridge club hold a closed tournament, there is no outcry of discrimination by the local bowling league. Outcries of injustice and discrimination are the result of generalizing the ontology and related value system of a particular group beyond its borders, and possessing a rationale by virtue of which this condition is held to be wrong (i.e. unjust, inhumane).

Of course, daily life is seldom so tranquil as at the borders of France and Switzerland or between those who prefer bridge as opposed to bowling, both instances of centripetal power processes at work in relatively independent groups. Rather, we confront widespread fears of power imbalances, accusations of inequity, and attributions of exploitation. Unions are created to curb the self-serving tendencies of management; feminists work to right the balance of power in the workplace; and the 'have not' nations express resentment and contempt for the hegemonic tendencies of the 'haves'. To understand such actions our analysis must press beyond the condition of centripetal power. More specifically, the prevalence of intergroup conflict requires an understanding of the transformation from conditions of centripetal power to those of centrifugal power. Rather than

viewing a group as possessing power to (as in the case of centripetal power), we must explore the conditions in which the sense of power over becomes dominant.

The critical transformation in this case has its origins in the production of counter-reality. As we have seen, participants in a continuing relationship will tend toward a stabilized ontology. Physicists will agree, for example, that the world is fundamentally material, and idealist philosophers that it is fundamentally mental. Yet, in moving centripetally toward a stabilized reality, the interlocutors simultaneously set in motion an opposing tendency. For in generating agreeable assertions concerning what is the case, in effect a positive ontology, the soil is also prepared for the growth of a an oppositional discourse, a negative ontology This is so because the intelligibility of any assertion is only made possible through contrasts, differences, or negations. That something is the case can only stand as an informative assertion against the backdrop of an alternative or a contrary. To specify that Joan is the boss stands as meaningful only if the world contains non-bosses; to declare profit to be a 'good' is only significant if there are other outcomes that are not good.

To press further, in the creation of the positive ontology possibilities for its own subversion are generated. As participants in a relationship come to organize themselves around discourses of the real and the good, they set the conditions for disorganization. This is so because the terms of the discourse have no fixed context of application; they may be applied over a broad arena. And as 'language goes on holiday' (in Wittgenstein's terms, 1953), any object of one naming becomes a candidate for another. Any proclamation stands subject to question. If there are the rich, then there must be the poor; and if there are the poor by what rights are certain persons granted status as the former and not others? On what grounds are the designations made? Could the reverse be possible? And if there are justifications for the present arrangement, let us say in terms of rights, then the possibility is simultaneously created for a concept of wrongs. And questioning is again invited: Why are certain conditions granted the status of right or proper, and others designated as wrong or unjust? Is it possible that what now stands as just could be its opposite? Without the creation of the positive ontology, there would be little means of challenge; to question or criticize one must possess an intelligible discourse of counterclaims. Without version there is no role for subversion.

We thus find that participants in a relationship exist in a state of continuous threat. In creating a given ontology and its rationalization, they also generate grounds for doubt. Their very proclamations of what is the case simultaneously assert the possibility of their negation. In this sense, the process of assertion feeds upon itself. For to begin the process is also to create tendencies toward opposition. In turn, the threat of opposition invites a further strengthening of the

network of assertions. Thus, for example, to create an arsenal for purposes of superior might is simultaneously to create the possibility that one is not superior. The possibility instigates further arms development, which again raises the question of sufficiency. The quest for power incessantly feeds upon its own doubts.

More central to our purposes, as the negative ontology is articulated, and critique becomes possible, the conditions are established for centrifugal power, an emerging sense of inside vs. outside, we vs. them, and most focally, the power of one over the other.[8] This is to say that the ascription of power over, is importantly dependent on a language of critique. If a manager gives a raise to an employer, or a policeman apprehends a criminal, we are not likely to speak in terms of power. So long as these are creditable aims, we are not likely to see one as manifesting power over the other. However, if the manager gives a raise far beneath what the employee deserves, or the apprehended individual has committed no crime, then ascriptions of power are apposite. The critique separates subject from object, us from them; and because they do not succumb to critique (their patterns remain obdurate) it is possible to see them in terms of having power over. It is the result of the negative ontology that the concept of power acquires the moral force with which it is often embued.

Let us consider the emergence of such attributions in diachronic dimension. It is not simply the potential for critique that evokes claims of power discrepancies. The stage must be properly set; a particular array of relational scenarios is implicated. Consider first the development of 'power over' within a given nucleus. As relational nuclei expand and develop over time there is a tendency toward differentiation, with different individuals carrying out different tasks with different results. In effect, no organization or society is constituted by homogeneous living conditions. With variation in such conditions, and the availability of a negative ontology, the stage is set for questioning and critique. Why are outcomes distributed in just this way; why are they privileged and we are not; why am I positioned in this inferior way? The mounting of questions and critique, in turn, commonly evoke a posture of defense and counter-critique on the part of others. And, as I have outlined elsewhere (Gergen, 1992), the rhetorical process of argumentation, at least within the Western tradition, is typically accompanied by progressive tendencies toward isolation (with each group turning increasingly inward toward those with whom coordination of language and action is most easily accomplished), and antagonism (with each group locating forms of evil within the other, and acting on these assumptions). Those under attack thus become invested in defending and reinforcing the traditions, while those engaged in critique seek means of change. As such efforts are thwarted in various ways, so do attributions of power become relevant.

These attributions may be intensified by the existence of other, adjoining

groups. In the earlier account we spoke first of a hypothetical condition in which each nucleus developed its own reality, independent of all others. However, as the thesis unfolded we found social life more properly viewed as a plurality of nuclei, ever shifting, ever interpenetrating. In this sense, instances of an independent nucleus should be rare. Rather than a single ontology and its negations, there are multiple ontologies and valuational discourses (and their antitheses) available to most relationships. Such cases occur most frequently as members of one group become functional in other groups, the family member is also a student, the executive a marriage partner, the worker a union member, and so on. The greater the complexity of society, the more porous the boundaries of a group's reality.[9]

Most important for present purposes, these alternative realities become available to those in contention. Thus, any group embarking on critique is likely to find available a host of supplementary rationales for bolstering its case; likewise, those on the defensive can make use of many ambient rationalities. The sense of boundaries between, and power over intensifies. Further, and most interestingly, as the various bodies of signification begin to interpenetrate, the stage is set for what may be termed contrapuntal conflicts. In this condition, members of differing groups come to share conceptions of valued ends, but carry out critique in terms of local vernaculars, each but dimly understood outside the confines of the group. Groups view themselves as contending for particular resources, but the grounds for the claims are carved from different intelligibilities. The government of Iraq shares in the common value placed on economic resources, but the rationale for the invasion of Kuwait fails to be rhetorically compelling outside the Arab community; similarly the US government's claims to the injustice of the invasion fail to be understood within Iraq. As the rhetorics are converted to acts of brutality, the relationship is indexed in terms of power differences.

As a general surmise, it may be said that both centripetal and centrifugal forces are always at work within the culture. As relationships form, friendships, colleagueships, partnerships, and so on, actions will be coordinated, outcomes will be invested with significance, and efforts will be made to stabilize and exclude. Simultaneously, doubts are created in the existing coordinations, and the complex configurations of normal society will work toward their questioning. To the extent that memberships within these complex configurations equip people both to value and to doubt, the stage is set for ascriptions of power differences, exploitation, and injustice.

## Consequences of the configuration

These remarks outline an orientation to power consistent with certain aspects of a constructionist metatheory, namely its assumption of fundamental relatedness and its focus on the discursive structuring of the social world. As I have tried to argue, we may envision two major moments in the emerging construction of power. The first derives from the capacity of groups for self-organization, and the concomitant moulding of local realities. With local conceptions of fact and value in place, groups may come to see themselves as possessing power in various degrees. This concern with local conceptions of power enabled us to view power as a comparative concept, differentially established, variably distributed and continuously changing. The second moment in the construction of power derives from the generation of a negative ontology, the necessary counterpart to the group's construction of reality. With this conception at hand we were prepared to treat the moral dimension of power differences, the prevailing sense that power is corrupt and oppressive.

Although it is possible to assess the proposal in a variety of ways, I wish in closing to confront one important critique and then to explore several implications of the analysis. The critique is that of the realist who may find little of value in the present account. Does the present analysis not deny the evidence of power in the capacity of large armies to rampage across helpless lands, the capacity of wealthy nations to control the outcomes of the poor, or the ruthlessness of dictators in silencing the people through threat and torture? These are the realities of the world, the realist proclaims, and the fact of power is undeniable. Of course, this is a rhetorically compelling critique, and in certain walks of daily life I might well speak of power in realist terms. But the critical point is the situated character of such speech acts. For under other circumstances, I might also intelligibly speak of the power of a beautiful face, the power of an infant's cry, or the power of a magnet. The meanings here are clearly different from the initial examples, but how should we distinguish between the more and less accurate meanings? And if we are free to negotiate about such matters, then by what particular authority does the concept of power necessarily apply to armies, wealth and tyrants? Are there not other and different means of describing these same conditions, ways for example that might be used by the actors themselves? And if taking a scholarly stance, would it not be possible to demonstrate the metaphoric character of the concept of power, its problematic assumption of linear and efficient causality, and the incapacity of analysts to locate specific referents? As Lukes (1974) proposes, the concept of power is essentially contested, and it is that essential ambiguity which the present proposal attempts to embody. Let us turn, then, to two realms of implication.

There are a number of important implications of the present analysis for issues of organizational management. Chief among them is the challenge posed for the hierarchical model of power. The traditional view of organizational structure, with a CEO as senior in command, followed by various levels of managers, workers, and the like proves problematic on a variety of grounds outlined above. Further, as suggested within the present analysis, what are termed achievements within organizations are first and foremost the result of coordinated activities. There most certainly are individuals we single out as high and low level managers and the like. However, such labels should not obscure the extent to which their actions are embedded in patterns of reciprocity. Those who lead only do so by virtue of a shared system of understanding in which others agree to do what is called following. The labels could be switched with no ontological consequences; leaders might be viewed as victims of their underlings, and followers as the true power behind the office. Further, the extent to which all such patterns are sustained depends on the extent to which participants keep the borders of meaning secure.

As the present account also suggests, the attempt of organizations to achieve effective outcomes takes place in highly tenuous circumstances. As languages of efficacy are developed, so do they engender a local sense of reality that is at once self sustaining and self-justifying. Thus, the world looks different within an organization than it does to those outside, and those within one sector of the system come to see reality as different from those within another. And the sense of what is the case in any of these sectors comes to seem correct and superior. Further, because the viability of a business organization depends on the realities outside itself, and the functioning of each organizational sector is vitally affected by functioning in another, then the strong tendency toward local ontology works against the longterm vitality of the organization. As each organization or sector within the firm forms its realities, necessary for effective action, so do they unleash the forces for their own undoing.

This latter outcome is hastened in some degree by the creation of the negative ontology. As the firm establishes a definition of the good and the powerful, so do they lay the groundwork for challenging their local ontology. Yet, in the end, the health of the organization may depend on a sensitive listening to the counter-reality. For as the alternative realities are given credence within the firm, so is the firm more fully coordinated to the surrounding environment. As the firm listens to the angry voices of those who accuse of them of exploitation, environmental pollution, unfair employment practices, immoral or insensitive practices of takeover, and the like, they stand to gain. If they do not use such instances to bolster the validity of their internal realities, and incorporate these

languages into their own, then they may increase their capacity to co-exist in a larger world of coordinated interdependence. Success may require the undoing of effective patterns of action within the organization, but from the present standpoint, the only viable organization is one in which there is a continuous process of organizing and disorganizing.

*Power, values, and constructing society*

Within a constructionist perspective, one of the most important questions to be put to a theory concerns its ramifications for lived vocabularies. That is, rather than asking whether a theory accurately reflects life as it is, (an obfuscating question in itself), the constructionist asks, what are the social implications of a given system of theoretical intelligibility should that system be incorporated into ongoing social life? In this respect, the present analysis has several implications I take to be of promising proportion.

First there is an important sense in which the present analysis can soften existing tendencies toward ascendent or competitive striving. As we have seen, conceptions of power arise within particular groups, and are embedded within various forms of social practice. Mutually annihilating competitions come about largely through the broad dissemination of a single reality system. It is the unquestioned assumption that wealth, victory, high office and so on are valuable and important that moves people to competitive action. As the present analysis suggests, such assumptions of the effective and the good should always be placed in question. The grounds for question are always there, born of the negative ontology. Thus, rather than joining the bandwagons of the culture (e.g. striving for increased income, placing children in competitive sports programs, purchasing the latest electronics, etc), the present analysis suggest a scanning of alternative realities. For as the oppositions become apparent, the glitter can be removed from the prevailing goals.

In a similar vein the present account also dulls the edge of absolutist critiques of unfairness and injustice. Traditionally, critiques of this kind recognize only a single reality. There are the oppressors and the oppressed, the exploiters and the exploited, and so on. The former are deemed evil, the latter good, and where evil was, good shall now prevail. In effect, in their one-world myopia, such critiques are highly devisive, exacerbating conflict and galvanizing resistance. From the present standpoint, such accusations are considerably softened. One is instead invited to expand the range of relevant perspectives, to explore the realities of the dominating groups, as well as those of still other groups whose realities may differ. This is not to negate the moral force of existing accusations of inequity and exploitation. Such accusations are fully legitimate within the ontology of the exploited group. But rather than unleashing unilateral attacks in

the name of righteousness, the present urging is for a co-mingling of perspectives.

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## Notes

1. As I have outlined elsewhere (Gergen, 1994a) most behaviourist theory in psychology represents a recapitulation at the theoretical level of the suppositions built into the empiricist metatheory guiding the research.

2. As Cousins and Hussain (1984) summarize, 'there is in Foucault's writings no theory of power, not even a sketch of such a theory' (p.225). However, as they see his more positive contribution, Foucault offers an invaluable tool-kit for the anlaysis of power relations.

3. Influenced by Derrida's analyses of the undecidability (continuous deferral) of meaning, much the same conclusion is reached by Laclau & Mouffe (1985).Arguing against the Marxist view of power as essentialist, they are concerned with the ways in which meanings are distributed across relationships and altered in usage.

4. In distinguishing between the power to take action vs. the power over other, the present theory reflects what many theorists (see, for example, Pitkin, 1972) take to be a central distinction in the description of power. However,

where most view the distinction as primarily referential, the present analysis is concerned with its performative potential.

5. It is within the development of these local ontologies of the true and the good, that individual actors also become identified as such and furnished (discursively) with various attributes (e.g. emotions, intention). For Foucault, this process would be seen as one of subjectification. Yet, while the process of subjectification (let us say, by a given regime of knowledge) would be viewed by Foucault as a power relation, in the present analysis power is an ascriptive implement growing out of relational forms. There are, on the present account, discursive relationships, and the resulting discourse may include accounts of power (attributed to groups, individuals, material, etc.).

6. It is the attempt to fix meaning within the group that constitutes the moment of power for Laclau and Mouffe (1985).Thus, 'in a given social formation there can be a variety of hegemonic nodal points ... some of them may be highly overdetermined: they may constitute points of condensation of a number of social relations and, thus become the focal point of a multiplicity of totalizing effects' (p.139). In contrast, in the present analysis it is not the self-organizing process that itself constitutes power. Rather, such self-organization sets the context for a particular discourse of power.

7. It is in this respect that the present account is in accord with Arendt's (1969) view of power as a consensual (rather than imposed) outcome. As Arendt argues, power refers to the ability of a group to realize its own ends through cooperation. In the present case, the concern is not with actual capacities, but the group's construction of what they take to be such capacities.

8. I have borrowed the concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces from Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of forces in the organization and disorganization of cultural languages. However, where Bakhtin views such disorganization as naturally derived from the varied demands made on language (thus forcing multiple uses), the present analysis focuses on the inherent potential for conflict within any ontological aggregate.

9. See also Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of dialogized heteroglossia, a term referring to the subtle and self-consciousness undermining of a language system (its beliefs and suppositions) as it interacts with other languages.