

Professor Roar Hagen
Department of Sociology,
University of Tromsø, Norway
roarh@sv.uit.no
CAS Fellow 2008/2009

Collective power: Reception and prospect of a scientific concept

Social power has both distributive and collective aspects. Power is used to repress and exploit, and power transforms collective incapacity to collective action. Collective power is behind turning points in human history as the transition from prehistory to civilization and the emergence of the modern state. The scientific literature however, focuses on the distributive aspects of power, neglecting its collective properties, or has difficulty discerning between the two.

Collective power

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1960) introduced the concept of collective power in a polemic against C. Wright Mills' (1959) monograph *The Power Elite*. According to Parsons, Mills is interested only in who has power and what *sectoral* interests he is serving with his power, not in how power comes to be generated or in what communal rather than sectoral interests are served. Mills adopts what may be called the "zero-sum" concept of power. "The power A has in a system is, necessarily and by definition, at the expense of B" (119 - 220). This is the distributive aspect of power, where what one gains necessarily is the loss of another. Parsons pointed to a second collective aspect of power, whereby persons in cooperation can enhance their joint power over third parties or nature.

This distinction has met with little resonance in the social sciences. Of the huge amount of scientific literature on power only a small proportion deals with the concept of collective power and its empirical applications.¹ The main focus is on the distributive aspects and the sociological inclination towards power is critical.

¹ The search term "collective power" appears in only about 1100 of the more than one million texts in JSTORE dealing with power, as of December 2008.

Utopia: Society without power

Parsons observed that behind Mills' critical attitude towards power lies a utopian conception of an ideal society in which power does not play a part at all. Underlying it is an "individualism" of a certain type, where social organization as such is presumptively bad because, "on a limited, short term basis, it always and necessarily limits the freedom of the individual to do exactly what he may happen to want" (222). The question of the deeper and longer-run dependence of the goals and capacities of individuals themselves on social organization is simply shoved into the background.

In the political radicalization of academic life in the 60's and 70's these arguments had little impact. The critical stance towards power became stronger and the scientific interest shifted towards relations of power where B does not recognize that she is exploited by A. The repressive character of the relation that makes B work to increase the power of A is disguised by language and symbols (Bourdieu & Thompson 1991). Michel Foucault (2002) identifies power with "conduct of conduct", which is also the social relation per se – of one actor taking the reaction of another actor into consideration before she chooses her own actions. Society is permeated by power and everything social becomes the object of critique.

Obscurities in the concept of collective power are another and independent source for its lack of scientific success. In both Parsons' original discussion and a later more extensive contribution (Parsons 1963), the conception of collective power constitutes a theoretical puzzle: Why would power be necessary to motivate cooperation that is useful to the participants? Is collective power the result of cooperation, a means to it, or both?

Man(n) and the social cage

There are a few important exceptions to the general dismissal of Parsons' sociology. Michael Mann (1986; 1993) made his ambitious project of writing a history of society from its beginning until the present dependent on the ability to discern the collective and distributive aspects of power throughout human history.

After several thousand years of dawdling societal development humankind were able to make the step from prehistory to history only in a few places on earth. On Mann's account they did so unwillingly. Even if civilization increased their col-

lective powers people fled, leading to what Mann call social devolutions. The reason was the distributive power involved (Mann 1986:39). Civilization implied stratification and usurpation of power by elites of managers. The first cities rose only in those places where people were trapped in a process of *social caging*, which effectively closed off the escape route back to prehistory.²

On the conceptual level Mann makes an explicit connection between coercion and distributive power. Empirically he tells a story where also collective power is based on restrictions. At the battle of Courtaai (1302) the Flemish burghers were penned against the river by the French knights. Unable to engage in their usual tactics against charging knights, namely flight, “they dug their pikes into the ground, gritted their teeth, and unhorsed the first knightly rank” (Mann 1986:20). The collective, military power of the European pike phalanx was born, to the surprise of everyone concerned. Initially physical caging was decisive, but this military formation derived its collective power from the relative egalitarian, communal life of the Flemish burghers and yeoman farmers.

The same relation holds between the Greek polis and the Greek hoplite, both social inventions that changed the course of history. The hoplite consisted of free citizens exposed to three years of military drilling which enabled them to interlock themselves socially and physically on the battle field (Mann 1986:199). Its military power was dependent on the hoplite’s ability to control the impulse in an individual to give in to his fear of death. Partly this collective power was inherent to the hoplite structure of combat. In tight formation each soldier protected himself and the comrade on his left side with his shield. Partly it was due to relations within the wider community. The decision to engage in war was made by the polis – the soldier as a citizen or by someone representing him. This created a bond of solidarity; an expectation that the citizen should be willing to sacrifice himself to protect his community, and which was a normative expectation against which he could be both a hero and a coward.

Collective power works in two directions. Internally it restricts the scope of individual choice and thereby increases the society’s capacity to act as a unit towards the environment. In small groups the sanctions against defection on the common

² One important factor was delayed return on agricultural investments that made the producers dependent on a habitat or geographical space.

cause are informal, in larger communities the right to reward and punish are embedded in hierarchical and formal organization. The emergence of the nation state augmented the collective powers of its members tremendously (Mann 1993). In his revision of Parsons systems theory, Niklas Luhmann maintains that it is precisely the function of the political system to secure for society *the capacity for collectively binding decisions* (Luhmann 2000). Thus caged the state may force its citizens to labour and to pay taxes. However, would this be the collective or distributive aspect of power?

Collective power redefined

Parsons original definition creates the impression that the use of force applies to distributive power only, and that collective power is based on consent. But coercion is a property of collective power as well. It is the ability of the society to use force against non-cooperative behaviour that transforms collective inertia to capacity for collective action. Only when their freedom of choice is restricted the actors are able to reap the benefits from cooperation and gain new opportunities. Collective power is both consensual and repressive of certain kinds of “individualism”, and serves as a lever between individual and society, enabling the development of both.

The scientific community fails to see this dialectic, or sees it dimly. Mann observes correctly that distributive power emerges from collective power. But it is too simplistic and perhaps somewhat utopian, as Mann does, to identify hierarchy with distributive power, while collective power is assumed to be horizontal (Brenner 2006). Formal structures of command are inherent properties of the coordinating and organizing role of modern states.³ This makes it both more difficult to distinguish and collective power more urgent as a research problem.

³ Moreover, “it is the functional indispensability of those at the top that is ultimately decisive in making for their domination over those at the bottom” (2006:199).

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre & John B. Thompson. 1991. *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brenner, Robert. 2006. "From theory to history: "The European Dynamic" or feudalism to capitalism?" Pp. 189-232 in *An Anatomy of Power*, edited by Johan A. Hall and Ralph Schroeder. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2002. *Forelesninger om regjering og styringskunst. Oversatt og introdusert av Iver B. Neumann*. Oslo: Cappelen akademisk.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 2000. *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Mann, Michael. 1986. *The sources of social power: A history of power from the beginning to A.D. 1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mann, Michael. 1993. *The sources of social power: The rise of classes and nation-states, 1760-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The power elite*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1960. "The Distribution of Power in American Society." in *Structure and Process in Modern Societies*. New York: The Free Press.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1963. "On the concept of political power." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107:232-58.