Bringing States Back In

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There is little of value to be said about the concept of power as such. The term itself is best seen as invoking the 'total structure of actions brought to bear' by some on the actions of others. What is of interest, then, is not power as such but rather the special cases in which relatively stable configurations of power can be identified. Lukes' focus on domination obscures the significance of other configurations. One is the political power of the state, which Lukes simply takes for granted, focusing instead on the question of who has control over its use. Another, which overlaps with political power but is not reducible to it, is government of the state. The system of states is the site of a third major limitation in *PRV*'s discussion, which is the point of the plural, *states*, in my title. Neither the American debate to which *PRV* made an influential late contribution nor Lukes' expanded discussion have much to say about the role of these configurations of power in the world today. A view of power that simply ignores them may be radical in certain respects but it is blinkered in others.

The first edition of *Power: A Radical View* (*PRV*) appeared in 1974 (Lukes, 1974). It made a significant contribution to a debate between American social scientists over 'how to think about power and how to study it empirically' by insisting that there were important cases in which power was not recognised by those over whom it was exercised. Steven Lukes begins this second edition¹ by suggesting that underlying this earlier debate was the broader question of how to characterise American politics. This edition is larger and more cautious than the first. It includes the original text, now set out as a single chapter, and adds two equally substantial chapters which offer clarifications, corrections and responses to criticisms in an attempt to tie up some of its loose ends. As a result, it loses some of the clarity and forcefulness which were the great strengths of the original. It also retains the limitations one would expect to find in contributions to a dispute between Americans about how to understand their own internal politics. Lukes' insistence on the link between this dispute and the more technical debate about power to which *PRV* contributed is important and perceptive. Yet it has more substantial implications than he appears to realise. It suggests, in particular, that a parochial debate of this kind may not be the best starting point for our thinking about power in the world today.

This is not to say that we should focus instead on the concept of power as such and in general. On the contrary, as I argued in *Discourses of Power* (Hindess, 1995), there is little of value to be said about power at this level, at least in the area of social life. I share Michel Foucault's suspicion of the view that power can usefully be seen as a capacity to get one's way which some people possess in greater quantities than others. To ask what happens when individuals exert

power over others is to suggest that power in this sense 'does not exist' (Foucault, 2001a, p. 336). The term 'power' is more appropriately seen as a kind of shorthand, a convenient (if not always helpful) way of invoking 'the total structure of actions brought to bear' by some on the actions of others. Power, in this sense, is a ubiquitous feature of social life and, for the most part, a relatively unstable and unproblematic one. What is of interest, then, is not power as such but rather the special cases in which relatively stable configurations of power can be identified. Domination, in which one party's room to manoeuvre is severely restricted by another, is one such configuration. The attempt to analyse it in terms of the category of 'real interests' faces insuperable difficulties (Hindess, 1986) which Lukes has yet fully to acknowledge, but he is right to insist both on the importance of domination and on the limitations of the analyses offered in the American power debate.

However, there are other significant configurations of power that have no place in his discussion. A view of power that simply ignores these may be radical in certain respects but it will be blinkered in others. One of these configurations is what John Locke calls 'political power' (Locke, 1988), a capacity to make and enforce laws that is central to the workings of all modern states. The contributors to the American power debate of the 1960s and 1970s simply take the political power of the American state for granted, focusing instead on the question of who has control over its use. What is at issue in their analyses is the Madisonian concern that American politics might be dominated by faction, that is, by sectional interests 'adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community' (Madison *et al.*, 1987, p. 123). When Evans *et al.* (1985) published *Bringing the State Back In* in the mid-1980s, it served as a manifesto for reform in the social sciences. I have adapted its title to emphasise the importance of the political power of the state for any serious discussion of power in the world today.

A second configuration, which plays an important part in Foucault's later work, is government of the state. This overlaps with political power but is not reducible to it. Government of the state is not restricted to the activities of the state itself or even to developments within its borders. It is also effected in the organisation of relations between states, an aspect of government that has received insufficient attention in Foucaultian discussions, including my *Discourses of Power* (Hindess, 1995).² The system of states is the site of a third major limitation in *PRV*'s discussion, which is the point of the plural, *states*, in my title. At this level, too, I argue that a focus on domination can obscure significant aspects of the operations of power. Neither the American debate to which *PRV* made an influential late contribution nor Lukes' expanded discussion have much to say about the role of political power, government or the system of states in the world today. My discussion focuses on these three issues, leaving other aspects of Lukes' book to my fellow contributors in this symposium.

Political Power

There are two discussions of power in the writings of John Locke. One, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, presents a version of the Platonic understanding of power as an ability to affect or to be affected by something else: 'Fire has a *power* to melt Gold ... and Gold has a *power* to be melted' (Locke, 1957, p. 233, original emphases). Lukes endorses this account, with some qualifications, in the second chapter of his new edition. It is this 'generic sense' of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 69) whose usefulness in the analysis of social life I disputed in my opening discussion.

Locke's more directly political discussion of power, in his *Second Treatise on Government*, is not mentioned in either edition of *PRV*. It has been enormously influential in Western political thought, and it focuses specifically on political power:

a *Right* of making Laws ... and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such Laws, and in the defence of the Common-wealth from Foreign Injury, and all this only for the Publick Good (Locke, 1988, p. 268, original emphasis).

Political power is a relatively stable configuration of power whose impact on the world today is difficult to overestimate. Yet Locke's definition is not entirely satisfactory. While he maintains that political power should conform to his own understanding of 'right', he also recognises that it may not. He refers, for example, to usurpation, 'the exercise of a power, which another has a Right to', and tyranny, 'the exercise of power, which no body can have a Right to' (Locke, 1988, pp. 398–9).

Political power is not simply a matter of right, as Locke's examples show. The right of making laws and of enforcing them is inconsequential if it is not backed up by a real capacity to do so. Yet neither is political power simply a matter of capacity, a form of power, in Lukes' 'generic sense', writ dangerously large. Indeed, there is an important sense in which a state's capacity to act on and through its subjects is, at least to some degree, a function of right, that is, of legitimacy and sovereignty. To acknowledge the tortuous relationship between right and capacity in the constitution of political power is to say that it can rarely be reduced to a matter of straightforward domination.

While it is not really examined in either edition of Lukes' book, it would be wrong to say that political power was not at the centre of the American debate to which *PRV* responds. However, participants in this debate did not set out to examine the content of American political power, the specific capacities of the American state or the organisational techniques, forms of calculation and institutional arrangements on which those capacities depended. Instead, they took the content and the legitimacy of political power for granted, focusing

rather on the question of which groups within the community were able to make use of it for their own purposes.

This question is not unimportant, but partisan dispute about its use is not the only issue worth exploring in relation to political power. Some of its components will be matters of partisan dispute, with political parties and interest groups competing to influence their specific organisation and content or to possess both the right and the capacity to exercise control over their use. Nevertheless, there will always be other components whose content and use is not a matter of partisan dispute and which may not even be recognised as power by some of the individuals or groups over whom they operate. We might think, for example, of the role of political power in both regulating and sanctioning the activities of legal and medical professionals. The great achievement of *PRV* was to insist that power may be at work even in cases where there is no overt conflict. I entirely agree. However, Lukes takes too narrow a view of the scope and significance of this point. It applies not just to domination, to A having power over B, but also to political power and to government.

Government

Political scientists commonly understand ‘government’ as referring, in Aristotle’s words, to ‘the supreme authority in states’ (Aristotle, 1988, p. 61), a usage which suggests that government should be seen as emanating from a single centre of control, albeit one which may itself be divided between executive, legislature and judiciary, or between federal, state and local levels. Robert Dahl’s classic, *Who Governs?*, for example, focuses on control over government at this last level. Yet it is not difficult to find other usages. Aristotle (1988 p. 60) also writes of the government ‘of a wife and children and of a household’, the government of a slave, and a government that one exercises over oneself. In his own discussions of government Foucault (2001b, p. 341) notes that, for all the many differences between them, these otherwise distinct practices all share a concern with ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed ... To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others’, or indeed of oneself. Government, in its most general sense, is a configuration of power that lies between two extremes. On the one side are relationships of power that are fleeting and reversible and on the other are states of domination that are enduring and not easily reversed. The latter are ‘what we ordinarily call power’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 19 – quoted in Lukes, 2005, p. 97). Government, like domination, is relatively stable but, while it sometimes seeks to determine the behaviour of individuals, it normally aims to influence them indirectly by acting on the manner in which they regulate their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Government thus leaves its subjects with more room to manoeuvre than domination.

Foucault acknowledges that, from the beginning of the modern period, one form of government has been seen as having a quite distinct status: namely, ‘the

particular form of governing which can be applied to the state as a whole' (Foucault, 2001b, p. 206). He observes, for example, that those who wrote of the art of government in the early modern period 'constantly recall that one speaks also of "governing" a household, souls, children, a province, a convent, a religious order, a family' (Foucault, 2001b, p. 205). He also notes that they treat these 'other kinds of government as internal to the state or society' (Foucault, 2001b, p. 206), thereby always giving the government of the latter a superior status. This modern understanding of government follows Aristotle in treating the state as 'the highest of all' forms of community (Aristotle, 1988, p. 1).

Yet, where Aristotle identifies the government of the state with a supreme authority, Foucault insists that it need not be seen as emanating from a single centre of control. Government will often be performed by elements of what is now called civil society – by religious organisations, employers, financial institutions, legal and medical professionals and voluntary associations – and even by markets and other institutionalised patterns of interaction. Perhaps the most influential account of this last appears in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1976). Smith describes the economic activities of commercial societies as constituting a system of interaction in which the conduct of participants is regulated not only by the values, interests and the like which they bring to their interactions but also by the signals of other actors – that is, by the prices for goods and labour resulting from numerous individual decisions to buy or to sell, or to seek a better deal elsewhere. This view suggests not only that state interference in economic interaction – for example, by setting prices or minimum wages – will produce misleading signals, thereby distorting the system's own regulatory mechanisms, but also that markets themselves can operate as instruments of government.

Governmentality scholars have adapted and extended this perspective to produce a powerful and innovative analysis of contemporary neo- or advanced liberalism as a specific rationality of government, a way of thinking about the problems involved in governing a state and its population and about the resources that could be employed for this purpose. They describe it as favouring the use of market and audit regimes, and the more general promotion of individual choice and empowerment in the government of domains which earlier forms of liberalism had subjected to more direct forms of regulation.³ From a rather different perspective, public administration scholars (e.g. Rhodes, 1997) have used the term 'governance' to describe contemporary forms of governing 'without government', suggesting that the work of governing within states is increasingly being conducted by public-private partnerships and by formal and informal networks involving a variety of state and non-state agencies. It matters little for the present argument whether we use the term 'government' or 'governance' to describe these forms of governing. Either way, there are configurations of power which play a fundamental part in the

workings of all contemporary states that are overlooked by Lukes' focus on power as domination.

Foucault notes at one point that the population will often be 'ignorant of what is being done to it' by government (Foucault, 2001b, p. 217). In this respect, government might seem to be an instance of Lukes' third dimension of power, in which its workings are not acknowledged by those whose interests are most affected. However, Lukes' concern is to emphasise an aspect of *domination* which, in his view, participants in the American power debate have not properly acknowledged. Government may well make use of domination, but it is not commonly so directive, aiming less to determine particular actions than to influence overall patterns of conduct.

Moreover, in the case of domination there is always an individual or group whose interests are favoured and another whose interests are not. This is what is at stake in the debates over how to establish whether A has power over B. The case of government, however, is less straightforward. What particularly distinguishes liberalism, for example, from earlier versions of the modern art of government is the concern that the state may be 'governing too much', that there may be cases in which 'it is needless or harmful for [the state] to intervene' (Foucault, 1997, pp. 74–5). In this respect, liberalism aims less to reduce the overall size and the scope of government in its broadest sense than to change its form by shifting the work of government from state to non-state agencies. The neoliberal rationality of government which emerged in the late twentieth century takes this shift even further. However, with the partial exception of the economic sphere, it is far from clear who benefits and who loses from this style of government. Elements of government will sometimes be captured by special interests, as observers on the left and the right of politics have often noted. Yet, in all but a small minority of states, there is no straightforward sense in which the overall government of the state is reducible to the pursuit of sectional interests. This is to say, not that government should therefore be considered unproblematic, but that it is not just a matter of winners and losers. Government is a configuration of power that helps to make us who we are and many of its effects at this level precede the formation of interests.

Another way of approaching this last point is to note Lukes' response to the Foucaultian insistence that government of the state is often performed outside the state itself 'by employers, administrative authorities, social workers, parents, schoolteachers, medical personnel and experts of all kinds'. All this means, he maintains, is 'that criteria will be needed to decide where their power amounts to domination' (Lukes, 2005, p. 97). Otherwise, governmentality simply restates:

some elementary sociological commonplaces. Individuals are socialized: they are oriented to roles and practices that are culturally and socially given; they internalize these and may experience them as

freely chosen; indeed, their freedom may, as Durkheim used to say, be the fruit of regulation (Lukes, 2005, p. 97).

There are indeed important parallels between Foucault and Durkheim, just as there are between Foucault and Weber. But, we can make this point without denying that much of what is 'culturally and socially given' involves significant configurations of power. The governmental activities of 'employers, administrative authorities ... and experts of all kinds' have an important impact on contemporary societies, even when they do not amount to domination.

The System of States

If contributors to the American power debates showed little interest in investigating the political power of the American state they were even less interested in the system of states to which it belonged. Yet, it is no exaggeration to say that the latter is the single most important configuration of power operating in the world today. Domination is certainly part of this configuration, and it can indeed be analysed in terms of the three dimensions of power that Lukes identifies. I suggested earlier, however, that the system of states should also be seen as a regime of government. Few commentators would deny that effective government within states is predicated on political conditions that operate above the level of the individual states themselves. The standard view of government nevertheless remains that it is something which operates essentially within states. As a result, relations between states tend to be seen as largely ungoverned, as a kind of anarchy that is regulated to some degree by treaties, a variety of less formal accommodations and the occasional war between them.

Yet, if government in its most general sense aims 'to structure the possible field of action of others', then the modern system of states clearly operates, like civil society and the market, as a regime of government with no controlling centre. Thus, where the Aristotelian view treats the state and the government of the state as 'the highest of all', the modern system of states reflects the emergence of a more complex regime of government. The state clearly retains its privileged position with regard to its own population, but there are also important governmental contexts in which the 'international community' is now regarded as 'the highest of all'. The modern art of government has thus been concerned with governing not simply the populations of individual states but also the larger population encompassed by the system of states itself. It addresses this task at two levels: first, by promoting the rule of territorial states over populations; and secondly, by seeking to regulate the conduct both of states themselves and of members of the populations under their control. States are thus expected to pursue their own interests, but to do so in a field of action that has been structured by the overarching system of states to which they belong.

My final point is to insist that the first of these two levels, the modern partitioning of humanity into citizens of states and a small minority of others, should

also be seen as an aspect of government, and thus of power. At this level, government is a form of power with powerful (if I can be forgiven the use of this word) and often destructive effects. For example, it requires each state to assume primary responsibility for looking after its own citizens, and thus to accept a lesser responsibility for others. This in turn suggests to the rest of us that the inhabitants of less fortunate states are ultimately responsible for their own condition and, further, that if their states fail them in a manner which appears to threaten the interests of other states, it may be necessary for the international community to step in and sort them out. There is a disturbing denial of history and, indeed, of responsibility at work in such perceptions (Hindess, 2005). Or again, the system of states promotes an exclusive sense of solidarity among the citizens of individual states. Such commonplace sentiments, as Durkheim also used to say, should be seen as products, as much as they are causes, of the institutional arrangements they appear to sustain – in this case of the governmental division of humanity into the discrete populations of individual states. At the international level, just as at the domestic, government helps to make us who we are. It is intentional without being reducible to the pursuit of merely sectional interests.

To conclude, *PRV* made a salutary intervention in the American debate over 'how to think about power and how to study it empirically' (p. 1) but, like other contributions, it focused on one configuration of power to the neglect of several others. While this new edition clarifies, qualifies and extends the arguments of the first, it exhibits the same fundamental limitations. I have argued that political power and government, at both the national and the international level, are significant configurations of power in the world today and that their workings cannot be grasped by a view of power, however radical, which focuses exclusively on the problem of domination.

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Notes

- 1 Lukes (2005). All page references for unattributed quotations in this article are to this new edition.
- 2 Some of the exceptions can be found in Larner and Walters (2004).
- 3 Rose (1999) is the most ambitious elaboration of this approach. Dean (1999) is a useful survey of the field.

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