The Meaning of Power

Author(s): Justice, Power & Resistance

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REFLECTIONS

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The critical analysis of power and especially the harms of power have been central to the critical criminological tradition. Whilst the focus has rightly often been on state power, considerable attention has also been given to the insights of Michel Foucault and his conceptualisations of power.

Introduction

"The meaning of the word 'power' seems like a will-o'-the-wisp: it tends to dissolve entirely whenever we look at it closely" (Morris, 2002: 1). Indeed, there is no clear universally-accepted definition of 'power'. Morris makes the distinction between 'power to' and 'power over'. He explains that 'power to' is about capacity or disposition to do something whereas 'power over' concerns the ability to exercise coercion over others, to make them do something they don't want to do (Morris, 2002: 32). Yet, this power is most effective when it is subtly exercised. As Lukes notes, power is "at its most effective when least observable" (Lukes, 2005: 1). For Lukes, the notion of power as something that can be exercised is a one-dimensional view of power that places the emphasis on a particular actor or group of actors who hold power. A two-dimensional view recognises the role played by the object of power in accepting coercion. A three-dimensional view is much more complex. The 'third dimension' acknowledges the power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things (Lukes, 2005: 11). It relies on the imposition of internal constraints that result in people consenting or adapting to being dominated in coercive and non-coercive settings (Lukes, 2015: 13). The bias of the system in favour of those who hold power can be mobilised, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individual choices (Lukes, 2015: 25).

Hegemony and power

Lukes' subtle understanding of power, like that of Gramsci (1971) and others (Hall et al, 1978), highlights the important issue of consent, going beyond classic analyses of power as coercive power exercised over others; allowing us to better understand how exactly that power is effectively exercised. Indeed, for Gramsci (1971), coercion alone was insufficient to enable one class or group of people to dominate others – the role of ideology was crucial to gain the consent necessary for the exercise of power. The idea is not to impose power from above but rather to get people to internalise power relations. It is in this sense that Foucault regarded power as productive rather than being solely about domination and subjugation. Importantly, power produces knowledge, or at least certain kinds of knowledge, that help to reinforce that power. Knowledge therefore is not objectively or impartially fashioned but rather produced through the exercise of power, via the mechanism Foucault described as the power/knowledge axis. This knowledge establishes a "regime of truth" in each society (Foucault, 1980: 133) that is the political, economic and institutional mechanisms and procedures that originate, regulate, circulate and distribute statements pertaining to provide accurate description of reality. It is through such a regime that distinctions between true and false statements are made. This has a number of implications.

The regime of truth is exclusionary in that it creates narrow confines proscribing what is deemed as worthy of attention, limiting the field of the discursive. Only certain ways of thinking are considered appropriate and the discursive structure both *rules in* and *rules out* certain ways of talking, thinking or interpreting events. Thus, what becomes constructed as the legitimate knowledge of any event, object or meaning is linked with hierarchies of credibility and power. For knowledge to be utilised, the 'knower' must establish a right to speak, as the authority of a statement is linked to the status of the speaker. The apparent truthfulness of a statement on, for example prisoner human rights is therefore only possible through the privileging of certain knowledge, speaking positions and ways of interpreting the world to the exclusion or marginalisation of others. Not all voices are heard; and not all speakers are viewed with the same standing, or subsequently invested with the ability to provide a legitimate interpretation of events and circumstances. Despite there being an apparent plurality of meanings and perceived realities, one interpretation acquires dominance. Erstwhile discourses are displaced or

excluded and an ascendant or 'hegemonic discourse'[1] shapes the lens through which authorities define what is real and what is 'the truth'. Presenting itself as an all-encompassing means of making sense of the world, the hegemonic interpretive framework provides a cultural script laying down the conventions, codes and representations to be followed. Other ways of interpreting the world continue to exist, but the hegemonic understanding becomes the obvious, 'common sense' way of thinking, setting out legitimate knowledge and the "difference between what one could say correctly at one period (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said" (Foucault, 1991: 63).

The long-term consequences for the 'truth' and hegemonic meanings imputed within everyday talk, as conceived by those currently in positions of power, should not be underestimated. Each statement by the authorities of delimitation map out both its present usage and, as each statement leads on to further statements, lays the parameters of what can be said in the future. Such statements are both instrumental in the production and reproduction of power relations. In other words, they perform a central role in how 'truths' are institutionalised (Scott, 2006).

Criminological knowledge may be regarded as creating a 'regime of truth' in the Foucauldian sense, helping to legitimate state-defined notions of 'crime' and 'justice', which in turn help to legitimate and normalise existing power relations. Throughout its history, mainstream criminology has produced 'knowledge' about crime trends and 'criminals', which give scientific respectability to state practices. Coleman, Sim, Tombs and Whyte (2009) have thus criticised "the conjoined, cosy and intertwined relationship which many in the discipline had developed with micro and macro structures of power and domination, including the state and its institutions" (Coleman, et al., 2009: 1). Critical criminology, on the other hand, has sought to unmask the mechanisms at play in the construction of popular consent for coercive power. Stuart Hall et al.'s (1978) work in *Policing the Crisis* was of central importance. They clearly demonstrated how the State and its allies effectively used the crime issue – namely public fears about mugging – to construct consent for authoritarian practices. What was in reality a crisis of consent regarding hierarchy and authority in the 1970s was skilfully transformed into a crisis concerning crime and disorder, as young black men in particular were scapegoated for the social problems of the day. By appearing to simply respond to public fear, the State could present such practices as being entirely consensual in nature. Yet its

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[1] Hegemony entails offering a convincing moral, political, or intellectual worldview that can provide cultural and ideological leadership.

response was in reality authoritarian to the extent that it effectively closed down debate on the issue, leaving people powerless (Sim, Scraton and Gordon, 1987).

As Foucault made clear then, power is not just legitimised when it is used in its most brute form, notably the sovereign power to punish. It is equally, or more, effective when used as disciplinary power, getting people to subject themselves to power through the 'normalisation, habit and discipline' inherent in working and educational practices, or even as pastoral power whereby behaviour is regulated through more inclusive forms of control. The State in reality never relinquishes its Weberian monopoly on violence: "state violence is always implied or corrected to the so-called 'soft' forms of power" (Coleman et al., 2009: 14). Nowhere is this more clear than in the 'welfare sanctions' that have become ever-more prevalent in recent years: ostensibly welfarist, inclusive measures, such as those directed at 'troubled families', have been underpinned by the threat of coercion and control and permitted the extension of state power into the regulation of family life and parenting.

Yet such power is not only disciplinary in the sense that it can be understood as the power the State and other institutions can hold over citizens. Power is not just about domination but also about liberation. This latter notion of power became particularly popular in the context of neoliberalism as individuals were to be empowered to take responsibility for their own destinies in place of the State. They were to be empowered to become property-owners and to choose their own service-providers. Latterly, they have even been given the capacity to become service-providers, setting up their own local schools, for example. Yet, in practice, this has simply become another means for the State, together with corporate elites, to exercise power as hegemony. State power has not been reduced but rather diffused via a wider range of actors. It is no longer state-appointed experts such as social workers, teachers and probation officers who exercise such power (as per Foucault, 1991), but increasingly a range of entirely private actors. Although in theory they are meant to share power with individuals, in practice they are dominant. Importantly, however, this diffusion of coercive power is masked as individuals are convinced of their own *powerfulness*. Behind the language of empowerment, coercive power has simply been exercised in more subtle ways, via 'soft power'. People are encouraged to think of themselves as free and responsible, as having the capacity to act, whilst in practice they are participating in their own subjugation to the power of private capital (Bell, 2015). As Gramsci pointed out long ago, coercion and hegemony continue to coexist (Davies, 2012). Individuals have

voluntarily participated in the empowerment of the elites and in their own disempowerment.

Producing powerlessness

Exercising all three forms of power, the 'power elite' (Mills, 1956) is particularly strong at the present time, continuing to manufacture consent for hegemonic neoliberal power relations via the scapegoating of offenders, migrants, welfare claimants and other 'undesirables'. In short, in flagrant contradistinction to the discourses of empowerment widely adopted by the political and corporate power elites, citizens experience extreme disempowerment and the inability to engage in democratic processes (Bell, 2015). It is increasingly difficult to hold the powerful to account or to force them to use their power in a way which might benefit society as a whole. This exacerbates existing problems with democracy; given that powerlessness is accumulative, the more we fail to exercise power, the less motivation we will have to assume it and challenge existing power relations (Gaventa, 1980). In this way, asymmetrical power relations reinforce feelings of powerlessness: "Power works to develop and maintain the quiescence of the powerless" (ibid, 1980: vii). Power is thus also productive in the sense that it produces a fatalistic passivity.

Power leaves us incapable of acting against the harms that it causes, including death, social injury and environmental harm (Tombs and Whyte, 2003). But it is also power that causes these harms in the first place. As Ruggiero has pointed out, "These offenders exercise power not only when committing crime, but also in all other spheres of their social, economic and political life. Their offences may be termed 'power crimes'" (Ruggiero, 2015: 9). The only way to turn these power relations on their head is to assume another form of power: resistance. As Foucault pointed out, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1980: 95). Even the State is not only a repository of power:

> the state is also a site (or series of sites) where claims for social justice and 'progressive' politics are forged, fought over, resisted and sometimes implemented. Conceptualizing state power in this way means thinking about processes of resistance and spheres of contestation that exist within social relations and how such contestation is articulated and rendered as socially and politically possible (or impossible) in relation to state power. (Coleman et al., 2009: 14).

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