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PROSPETTIVE SOCIOLOGICHE SU PACE E GUERRA

a cura di Maria Carmela Agodi e Massimo Pendenza

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la società contemporanea
Prospettive sociologiche su pace e guerra

Marco Marzano

Power: A Radical View

An original and controversial view of power

1. When a second edition of a scientific monograph comes out it means that the first met with considerable success and has remained relevant over time. When a third comes out, with each new edition containing novel features, the book must indeed be an important one. When almost fifty years pass between the first and third editions we have a classic, a seminal work. There is no doubt that this is true of Steven Lukes's book, *Power: A Radical View* (hereafter referred to as PRV, a book in which the meaning of radical is not political but indicates an in-depth view followed through to its extreme). Published for the first time in 1974 as a short booklet and republished with an additional long chapter in 2005, the book's third edition came out a short time ago, in 2021 (London, Bloomsbury Academic). It is on the cusp of 20.000 citations on Scholar (a hundred or so more than Goffman's *Asylums*, twice as many as William Foot Whyte's *Street Corner Society* and just 5.000 less than the English edition of Durkheim's *Suicide*). Its author is now 81 and has written many other books and a multitude of articles, but there is no doubt that it is primarily for this book that he will go down in the history of social sciences.

I will attempt here to explain the reasons behind the book's popularity and why it has been so frequently quoted, discussed and critiqued. First we need to contextualise its genesis, however, and understand its underlying thesis, however necessarily summarily. This requires taking a step back in time to the years in which *Power: A Radical View* first came out and the heated socio-political debate around the concept of power then raging. As is well known, this debate was set in motion by a seminal 1957 article by Robert Dahl in *Behavioral Science* in which this American political scientist argued that anyone managing to get another person to do something they would not have done of their own accord had power. In *Who Governs? Power and Democracy in an American City*, Dahl used the conceptual armoury deriving from this definition to gauge the extent of the American political system's pluralism in a local community, reaching the (reassuring for those defending American democracy) conclusion that absolute decision-making power was not concentrated into the hands of a single figure or elite, that no single dominant group existed. Shortly afterwards, Dahl's theory was contested by a further two American schol-

ars, Bachrach and Baratz (1962; 1963; 1970), who argued that political power was not simply a matter of the ability of a social actor to come out on top in a decision-making process but also the latter's ability to 'keep out', to exclude, certain issues from the decision-making agenda, making them objects of 'non-decision'. This was the debate into which Lukes's book fitted. In fact, in the first edition of *Power: A Radical View*, Lukes argued for the addition of a third dimension to Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz's two, consisting in the ability of the powerful – both individuals and groups – to influence other people's – i.e. the weak, the powerless – perception of their own interests, in various ways, sometimes even unintentionally or without doing anything to make this happen. The powerless could thus, according to Lukes, even sacrifice their own 'real' interests in favour of those of the powerful, without realising what they were doing. For Lukes this altered, or distorted, perception could not be a merely theoretical assumption or remain on paper – without risking taking a conspiracy theory or determinist (as in certain versions of Marxism) turn – but had always to be demonstrated empirically in a thoroughgoing way. This is what certain sociologists have tried to do. The first and foremost of these have been John Gaventa with his Appalachian Mountains research and, more recently, Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun with their formidable empirical work on a district of Buenos Aires devastated by environmental pollution but also by the confusion and chaos surrounding responsibility for this disastrous situation.

The Marxian and Gramscian roots of this vision of power are clear but Lukes has, all the same, avoided all reference to the concept of social class in all editions of his book. By contrast, in seeking to provide a concrete definition of these objective interests Lukes explicitly cited Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum and their 'capabilities approach' in his second, 2005, edition. 'The 'intuitive idea' behind this approach', wrote Lukes (2021, pp. 122-123), is that «certain functions are particularly central to human life, in the sense that their presence or absence is typically understood to be a mark of the presence or absence of human life». Some of these functions relate to material or economic matters (health, home, work, etc.) while others relate to identity (recognition, non-discrimination, respect, etc.). In some cases, Lukes argues, these can be blocked or thwarted as a result of the actions (or inaction) of certain specific social actors. This can be explicit or otherwise and vary in form but it is always bound up with the effects of social power and domination.

And we have now come to the matter of the book's popularity. I would argue that it is, to a considerable extent, a negative popularity as it seems to me that Lukes theory of power has attracted a very limited number of supporters and a great many adversaries and critics, from both left and right, namely from liberals and anarchists on one side and post-structuralist and Foucauldians on the other.

2. Let us start with the right (so to speak). For liberals, for example pluralists such as Dahl and Polsby (1980, but also Bradshaw, 1976; Hay, 1997; Clegg, Courpasson, Phillips, 2006), the idea of 'objective' interests is absolutely unthinkable. For these scholars the only real and fully legitimate interests are those which can be deduced from behaviours and attitudes, namely those expressed consciously and rationally by the social actors themselves, both individually and collectively. In the liberal vision if something is not important to me it is because something else is. The supreme ruler in all this is the individual or the collectivity (parties, trade unions, associations, etc.) which are, in turn, formed by free individual choice. The preference for one interest or another is not only legitimate but also a welcome expression of liberty and freedom of choice. If pollution in the place I live in is not important to me and four-lane motorways increasing traffic and worsening air quality are more so, this must be accepted as an incontestable expression of my will and preferences. Liberal-pluralists (who are also liberal in the American and political sense of the term, i.e. moderate progressives) certainly admit that some opinions count more than others, that there are individuals whose chances of bringing their wishes to fruition are greater than those of others but they deny that such differences mean that some are capable of deceiving others to the extent of inducing them to act against their interests. For liberals, individuals are each the best judge of their own wishes, the best exponents of their own will.

Seen in this way, Lukes's 'objective' interests are none other than a reworking of Marxist class interests in a form less unpalatable to contemporary sensibilities and the third dimension of power is none other than Gramsci-style hegemony. From this point of view Lukes's theory is a textbook example of anti-liberal paternalism, as it attributes needs to people and organisations which they themselves are not conscious of. Who does this Lukes, or anyone else, think he is, believing he knows the interests of this or that social group better than they do themselves? This is the liberal view of this British political scientist's radical vision of power.

Liberal-pluralist arguments go deep, however frequently implicitly, in many views now central to the contemporary socio-political debate, for example in those effusive eulogies to multiculturalism which take for granted that certain cultural expressions (such as the veil for Muslims) are genuine expressions of value diversity and as such deserving of respect and even protection. By contrast, in a perspective such as Lukes's, before we define cultural expressions as spontaneous and harmless we must empirically assess (using social science tools) whether the presence of these values might not perhaps be the effect of power, if there might not be some advantage to be gained for someone in the persistence of such beliefs, some increase in their influence or power over others. This is the antithesis of the arguments of the exponents of political correctness, those for whom cultural relativism has become a dogma. For such people

a viewpoint as radically anti-relativist as Lukes's merits immediate censure, an outright ban.

Similar criticisms of Lukes's vision, at least on the epistemological if not the political plane, have been put forward by anarchist ethnographer and anthropologist James Scott on the basis of considerable and lengthy empirical research in South-East Asia into what he calls 'hidden transcripts' (i.e. what both powerful and powerless say amongst themselves when they are not in each other's presence). Scott concluded that there is no such thing as the third dimension of power (or Gramscian hegemony), i.e. that no form of cultural manipulation can distort the lower classes' perception of their interests. He argues that the latter's obedience, their failure to rebel against the powerful, is to be explained solely by their reasonable fear of the consequences and awareness of the huge gap in their power and above all their available force resources. Thus, for Scott, the proletariat only rarely rise up against the powerful, their masters, because they are frightened of punishment, not because they believe in the right of the latter to tell them what to do. For Scott, cultural domination is a Marxist invention and ultimately an analytical fiction. The powerless cannot be manipulated and retain a clear perception of the conflicting nature of their, and the powerful's, interests.

3. From a different post-structuralist and Foucauldian perspective (which we might parallel with certain Marxist approaches such as Poulantzas's hyper-determinism) Lukes's book has been criticised on diverse, virtually opposite grounds. From this purely European, and extremely French, perspective, power is not something possessed or exerted by individuals or groups but rather a 'device' to which everyone is subject, a faceless, impersonal, disconnected mechanism independent of real-world social relations. From this perspective, certain individuals and groups do live in a privileged state, but this is not in itself enough to label them powerful or, on the other hand, to label those without these advantages 'powerless'. Seen in this way individual actions are irrelevant overall. For Foucault what counted was reconstructing the genealogy of power devices and then measuring their effectiveness and power. In Foucauldian terms, Lukes's theories, with their focus on the 'responsibility' of social actors, are excessively individualist. For Lukes, expressions of power are solely those in which responsibility can be identified and attributed to specific social actors. The responsibility spectrum is an extremely wide one – even encompassing responsibility for not being aware of the effects of one's actions or inaction – but for Lukes it is this which marks the confines of power. Where responsibility is absent, for Lukes, we cannot speak of power but rather of structural or systemic effects. It is precisely this which the post-structuralists focus their attention on. For these latter, structural conditions limit social actors' room for manoeuvre in a deter-

minant way, exerting formidable pressure on these to behave in this or that way, to choose a specific course of action (Hayward, Lukes, 2008).

4. The critiques set out here are not the only possible criticisms of Lukes's theory. The structural-functionalist social scientists might accuse Lukes of paying excessive attention to the domination and conflict dimension at the expense of the consensual dimensions. For the disciples of Arendt and Parsons, power is a tool for the creation of common goods, a medium whose role in the political system is that which money performs in the economic sphere. An orthodox Marxist, on the other hand, might contest his excessively 'creative' use of certain Marxist notions. And so on.

The book is thus solidly at the heart of a debate which is still raging.

I would, however, like to conclude by trying to summarise what I consider to be some of the key merits of Lukes's book.

a) PRV is an especially original theoretical hypothesis capable of taking full part in both philosophical and socio-political science debates. In PRV Lukes measures up to Spinoza, Gramsci, Poulantzas, Nussbaum, Sen, Rawls, Morris and great swathes of contemporary political theory, and equally discusses the sociological implications of his theory, taking on and critiquing the thought and work of social scientists such as Dahl, Bachrach, Scott, Elster, Cremson and Gaventa, amongst others. His vision is theoretically robust but also capable of stimulating and driving empirical research, as the concepts and tools he proposes are potentially operable. All this makes PRV one of a kind (or nearly) in the field of human and social sciences.

b) In not limiting itself to analysing decisions and behaviours, PRV has much more potential than many other works to act as a general theory of social power applicable to much more than simply the political process. For example, it can profitably be used to explain the new forms of cultural manipulation and power exerted in the context of the growth of digital capitalism, described so excellently in Zuboff's book on surveillance (which Lukes makes ample reference to in the most recent edition of PRV) and bound up, on one hand, with the extraction of meta data and the consequent formulation of accurate forecasts of the behaviour of large masses of individuals and, on the other, the ability to actively direct many of the choices of these latter. 'The picture', Luke comments in concluding his analysis of Zuboff's work, 'is one of people engaged in a game but not the game they think they are playing. In pursuing their subjective interests, they freely provide data that, fed into algorithms, advance the interests of others while not advancing, or else harming, their own.'

c) PRV constitutes an extraordinary, and ultra-original, contribution to the sociology of conflict tradition. Significantly extending the range of objective interests as compared to class interests alone salvages many of Marx's sociology of conflict intuitions in a social scenario in which

the topicality of social class antagonism has diminished. In this respect, however, the relative continuity is not solely that of a certain Marxist revisionism (of a culturalist and Gramscian sort) but also of Max Weber's thought, as the genesis and original spark of the whole subsequent debate on power, as we know.

d) Lastly PRV has been shown to be a precious tool on the purely legal plane in the debate around democracy and its forms. Its marked anti-relativism is clearly out of fashion but it is precisely this which constitutes its value in a public and political debate in which 'enlightenment' perspectives, both secular and rational, are frequently marginalised in favour of hyper-liberal (political correctness, multiculturalism, etc.) or identity-based (presumed cultural superiority, implicit racism, etc.) approaches.

PRV is thus a work which has succeeded in growing and consolidating over its half century of life. It is now an adult book which is still getting us thinking and reflecting today.

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