

On the Second Edition of Lukes' Third Face

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In this article I argue for two propositions. The first is that Lukes has established the possibility of power's third face, but that the most interesting social science questions about it are empirical: How often does it operate and under what conditions? These are topics for empirical research, not armchair reflection. The second proposition I defend is that the most interesting normative questions about power are best thought of as questions of institutional design geared to preventing domination without interfering with the legitimate exercise of power. Examples in support of both propositions are supplied.

In my view the condition of the power literature is such that most of the interesting social science questions are now best thought of as empirical, and most of the interesting normative questions are now best thought of as matters of institutional design. For reasons that will become apparent, these two convictions are related. They reflect and reinforce my further conviction that normative questions are most fruitfully explored in applied contexts.

Steven Lukes performed a valuable service by emphasising that power can be exercised by manipulating people's preferences, in addition to manipulating agendas and ordering people to do things. In this new edition of *Power: A Radical View* he does a fine job of rescuing his account of all three possibilities.¹ But at the end of the day they are just that: possibilities. Whether and to what extent any or all of the different faces of power operate in a given setting are subjects for empirical research, not armchair reflection.

Some of Lukes' early critics said that his posited third face of power defied the possibility of scientific evaluation on the grounds that it depended on unobservable real interests. John Gaventa debunked this claim, showing that these critics jumped too quickly to their conclusion. Gaventa devised several ingenious tools to get at the difference between consent and quiescence in an Appalachian mining community. By looking at changes in the community over time, comparing practices in relevantly similar and dissimilar mining communities and observing the effects of interventions on the miners' perceptions of their circumstances, Gaventa showed how evidence can be deployed critically to evaluate claims about the third face of power.²

But if Lukes makes a good case that power's third face can in principle operate and Gaventa supplies a compelling analysis of one instance of its operation, this



tells us nothing about how widespread its operation actually is. Are Gaventa's quiescent miners typical or are they outliers? This is not a conceptual question. It could be addressed only by an accumulation of case studies and, perhaps, some large-N studies if appropriate quantitative measures were to be derived – not an easy task. It is lamentable that Gaventa's now more than 25-year-old study has not spawned a large empirical literature on the third face of power and contending theoretical formulations.³

These questions become especially challenging if one abandons, as Lukes now explicitly does, any presumption in favour of a materialist – or, indeed, *any* – one-dimensional account – of people's real interests. Social actors, he says, 'do not have unitary or dual, but multiple and conflicting interests, which are interests of different kinds, and their identities are not confined to their imputed class positions and destinies' (p. 145). Class, gender, status, religion, race and countless other bases of human identification can generate interests that can plausibly be ascribed to people. Power can be exercised over them by frustrating any of these interests, and it will be the third face of power when their preferences about the interest in question are manipulated or altered to their disadvantage by third parties who benefit from the manipulation or alteration in question.

As Lukes goes on to acknowledge, this leaves the researcher bereft of any baseline by reference to which a general account of real interests can be given, and from which we can 'read off' whether the third face of power is at work in a given case. How can we talk about false consciousness when we no longer have available an account of what true consciousness is for a given agent to believe in a given circumstance?

Lukes has an answer to this. He says:

if one is advancing a 'materialist' explanation, like Przeworski's of, say, class compromise under capitalism, then 'real' interests will be material interests. If one is seeking to explain choice under constraints within a 'rational choice' framework, then 'real interests' can mean individuals' 'best interests' for 'in so far as the choice situations in which individuals find themselves restricted to the feasible set, they may be said to work against their wider interests' (p. 148, quoting Dowding, 1991, p. 43).

But, Lukes' answer begs the question, which is whether the materialist explanation, the rational choice explanation, or some other explanation is the right one to advance in a given setting. When workers fail to rebel in circumstances where the researcher thinks that rebellion should be anticipated, this *might* be due to a class compromise. But, perhaps it results instead from racial divisions within the working class that undermine the requisite class solidarity. Or perhaps the researcher's anticipation was just wrong. Perhaps the people in

question are more strongly attached to their social status than their class position, and their social status would be compromised by engaging in industrial action or other rebellious action. When individuals opt for sub-optimal outcomes on one dimension of their real interests, this *might* be because the optimal outcome was outside their feasible choice set. But, it might be because they value something else more.

In another cut at this problem, Lukes suggests that we reconceptualise the Marxian idea of false consciousness as 'the power to mislead'. As with real interests, this should be thought about in an anti-reductionist spirit. It ranges from:

straightforward censorship and disinformation to the various forms of institutionalized and personal ways there are of infantilizing judgment, and the promotion and sustenance of all kinds of failures of rationality and illusory thinking, among them the 'naturalization' of what could be otherwise and the misrecognition of the sources of desire and belief (p. 149).

I agree with Lukes against his critics that recognising this possibility is not 'loftily condescending' or 'inherently illiberal or paternalist or a license for tyranny' (pp. 149–50). That scarcely solves the problem, however. Once the anti-reductionist move has been made, the question of which explanation to advance is always up for grabs. During the late 1990s, particular groups within the legislative coalition which had been organised to lobby for repeal of the federal estate tax in the United States were offered exemptions by Democrats who were fighting to retain the tax – exemptions that would have made the vast majority of those comprising the estate tax repeal coalition better off than the repeal that they were actually able to achieve. Yet, the coalition members stuck together for a sub-optimal result. It was sub-optimal in that the estate tax repeal that they won in 2001 was phased in over ten years in a bill that contained a sunset clause requiring reinstatement of the tax in 2011. Groups within the coalition, notably farmers and small business owners, were at various times offered large exemptions that would have shielded almost all of their members from the tax immediately and would not have been subject to any sunset clause. Yet, they turned these offers down.⁴ To say that they were deluded about their real individual interests, rather than, say, that they cared more about preserving their moral status within the coalition that was organised around the principle that the estate tax is immoral, would assume that what was at issue had been resolved.

As this example illustrates, when we are dealing with contending claims about putative real interests of which actors might not be cognisant, we will invariably be trying to adjudicate among competing sufficient accounts of a particular phenomenon or outcome. Once there is no overarching theoretical reason to prefer one type of explanation over the others, then we are unlikely to be able to develop much confidence in any of them prior to detailed investigation of particular cases. A researcher who is committed to the explanatory

theory that legislators are rent-seekers might be tempted to explain the 2001 estate tax repeal by reference to that theory. The sunset clause in the legislation means that legislators can keep extracting contributions from the interest groups who need to get the repeal extended. A plausible story, perhaps. But if 150 interviews of the relevant legislators, staffers, lobbyists, and other stakeholders, together with exhaustive archival research, reveals no direct or indirect evidence of rent-seeking – as occurred in this instance – then other explanations will need to be sought (Graetz and Shapiro, 2005, especially chs. 13–9). Rent-seeking might occur in Congress, but in this instance it did not. As with Gaventa's Appalachian miners, without additional detailed studies we have no way of knowing whether or not the estate tax repealers are outliers.

Lukes seems not fully to appreciate the radical implications of affirming an anti-reductionist understanding of real interests. Making this move – which I agree with Lukes that we should – commits one to the view that there is no *ex ante* reason to prefer one type of explanation to another, and therefore no way of knowing in advance of empirical research whether some putative real interest is in fact at stake. Any given outcome might involve false consciousness about one set of real interests, true consciousness about a competing set of real interests, neither, or both. Adjudicating among the possibilities will, substantially, be an empirical task. Saying that the third face of power sometimes operates in society is – by itself – trivially true, even though some scholars have sought to deny this. When, where, how and why it *does* operate are the interesting questions. They can be fruitfully tackled only by working from the problem to the theoretical account, not the other way around. In this sense looking for a theory of power's third face is akin to looking for a theory of holes.

What about normative questions? How should we evaluate arguments about political change and institutional design knowing that power might operate in at least the three ways Lukes and Gaventa describe, but without knowing how often it takes the different forms? Indeed, in view of what has just been said, it seems prudent also to assume that we are many a country mile even from a general account of the conditions under which the different faces of power come into play. Nor is our quandary eased if we add to this, as I think Lukes and I are agreed that we should, the presumption that power relations are ubiquitous to human interaction. Only those who think, as the Marx of *The Critique of the Gotha Program* did, that scarcity can be transcended, can believe that power relations can be banished from human social existence (see Marx and Engels, 1970, pp. 15–8).⁵ Power is everywhere, and it takes multiple forms about which we are not well equipped to generalise. How, then, are we to choose among political strategies and institutions?

Lukes' discussion of Foucault illuminates the extent of the difficulty. Lukes is right to say that Foucault's critics wrongly attribute to him the view that because power relations are ubiquitous they are all equally objectionable, cornering him with a *reductio ad absurdum* whereby resistance to the prevailing

system of oppression is always pointless: it is bound to be replaced by a different one (p. 123). Lukes is no doubt correct that the critics who take this view focus too much on the rhetoric surrounding Foucault's analyses rather than the analyses themselves, but by the same token it has to be said that Foucault does not supply any normative tools for differentiating among types of power relations. Again, we are left with the plausible possibility that some are worse than others, but little by way of help in making that possibility real.

Lukes confronts a comparable difficulty with respect to his own normative arguments and insinuations. Plausible as he might be in denying that appeals to false consciousness are 'inherently illiberal or paternalist or a license for tyranny', this tells us nothing about how such appeals should be deployed in actual politics. Nor does Lukes say anything about what mechanisms should be institutionalised to reduce the power to mislead – or to expose those who engage in it. If we are not going to lodge the power to recognise the truth in the political representatives of an emancipatory class or other anointed group, where should it reside? It is telling that there is no mention of institutions or institutional design in the index to *Power: A Radical View*, and that the only (brief) references to democracy are to the criticisms of the pluralist conception of it in the original 1974 text. For the literature on power to become useful, it needs to infuse our thinking about political organisation, conflict and institutional design.

This brings me to Lukes' puzzling antipathy for my definition of domination by reference to the illegitimate exercise of power. I would have thought he should welcome this move as offering a congenial way of differentiating those exercises of power that are objectionable from those that are not, and for shifting the power debate on to a more practical terrain.

Part of Lukes' antipathy is the result of a misunderstanding of my claim. It turned on recognising – with Plato, Foucault, and Lukes, among others – that power hierarchies are endemic to human organisation. At the same time, I argued, not every hierarchy is objectionable, from which it follows that not every exercise of power is objectionable. The power exercised in armies, firms, sports teams, families, schools and countless other institutions is sometimes legitimate, yet sometimes it is not. We all know the difference between an adult teacher's deployment of authority to insist that a minor student turns in work on time and the teacher's deployment of that authority to extract sexual favours from the student. The first exercise of authority is legitimate, the second not.

To this Lukes objects that, once I have conceded the possibility of the third face of power, so that domination can take the form of influencing peoples' preferences and desires, then 'domination can influence whom and what people recognize as legitimate. But Shapiro's definition, if it implies that legitimacy is relative to prevalent norms and beliefs, fails to capture such cases – cases, that

is, where the dominated accord legitimacy to those who dominate them'. As a result, my definition of domination as the illegitimate exercise of power 'will not suit our purpose either' (p. 112).

Since I never advanced the claim embedded in his conditional (to wit, that legitimacy is relative to prevalent norms and beliefs), it is gratifying that Lukes adds the following rather cryptic footnote:

Of course, according legitimacy to another or to others is not in itself enough to render them legitimate: their actions must be consistent with established rules and roles that can be justified by prevailing norms, or beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinates who consent to the power relation. On other, normative or 'objectivist', ways of defining 'legitimacy', of course, the problem does not arise (p. 159, citation omitted).

Notice here that Lukes oscillates between denying that the idea of legitimacy is the right sorting device for distinguishing domination from unobjectionable exercises of power and worrying that we lack an adequate account of what constitutes legitimacy – one that will not be sullied by the existence of power's third face. Since neither he, nor any other contributor to this literature of whom I am aware, has proposed an alternative sorting device as superior, I will work with the idea of legitimacy here.

Several possibilities should be distinguished, only some of which are captured in the footnote quoted above. Returning to my example concerning the teacher and the student, notice the following possibilities:

- (1) The student does not rebuff the teacher's sexual advances because she fears retaliation.
- (2) The student does not rebuff because she believes the teacher is in love with her when in fact he is taking advantage of her immaturity and manipulating her infatuation.
- (3) The student is manipulating the teacher by letting him think she is in love with him when in fact she is seducing him with an ulterior motive – intending later to blackmail him.
- (4) They are both manipulating each other. He plans to take advantage of what he mistakenly believes is her innocence, whereas she feigns the innocence to pursue her ulterior agenda.
- (5) Neither is manipulating the other, but both are victims of an ideology pushed in an internet chat room they frequent which holds that society's rules against adults having sex with minors result from a conspiracy to suppress the only kind of love that is truly authentic.
- (6) Neither is manipulating the other. Their mutual attraction is authentic. The teacher loses his job and serves a seven-year prison term when their affair is discovered, but she waits for him. When he is released and she becomes an adult, they marry and live happily ever after.

Additional possibilities could be added if we took up other aspects of the context in which the affair takes place and the possible permutations of unconscious motivations between the teacher and the student. The general point is that a legitimate hierarchical relationship can atrophy into an illegitimate system of domination for a variety of reasons. Some turn on the volitions of the parties, some on their beliefs and the veracity of those beliefs, some on established rules and roles and some on independent assessments of what is at stake. Moreover, we might well be disinclined to evaluate them all in the same way. For instance, even if the student takes advantage of the teacher as in (3) and (4) above, we might be disinclined to hold her accountable on the grounds that she lacks the adult judgement that he is presumed to exercise, that he is in the more powerful overall position, or for some other reason. There is no general account of legitimacy to be had because domination has different sources and takes different forms.

This should be obvious when we recall the anti-reductionist discussion of real interests above. If there is no underlying metric by reference to which domination and non-domination can be calibrated, on which Lukes and I are agreed, then there is no reason to anticipate a general account of legitimacy. We have to be sensitive to the myriad possibilities, not least those that are hidden from the agents. By the same token we are bound to acknowledge that there is likely to be considerable disagreement over just what interests *are* at stake in a given situation, how – if at all – they are being compromised, and how they might bear on other interests that might also be threatened.

Indeed, once we acknowledge that domination can occur along multiple metrics of real interest, we have to take seriously the possibility that reducing domination on one such dimension will increase it on another. Getting rid of debilitating inequities that are rooted in race or gender might reinforce equally or more debilitating class-based inequities.⁶

These difficulties are compounded once we consider the instruments of remediation, and their opportunity costs in terms of new sources of domination. Consider the difference between a couple in which the wife is a victim of battered women's syndrome and one in which she is a fully consenting participant in S & M. In the former case the husband has her believing that she is worthless, that the only reason he does not mete out even more serious punishment than he does is because of his great love for her. In the latter case she is indulging a fetish, or perhaps engaging in some therapeutic self-help. She is fully cognisant of what she is doing and chooses it authentically, even though this involves placing herself in situations where she is beaten and humiliated. In a society geared to reducing domestic domination we should want to proscribe the former without interfering with the latter. But this can be exceedingly difficult in practice. Nor should we discount the possibility that someone who starts out freely engaging in S & M might over time evolve into a victim of battered women's syndrome. But would we want to empower a social worker

to determine when this has happened, or even to distinguish between the two when it has not?

This example might seem contrived, but it is only a pointed instance of the dilemmas that arise when we start thinking about engaging the state in the battle against domestic domination. To cite a different case, some Mormon women argue that polygamy is desirable from a feminist perspective because it offers more resources than conventional monogamous marriage for combining a career with meeting family obligations (Joseph, 1991; *New York Times*, 1991). Are we confident enough of our judgement that they are brainwashed victims of the third face of power to dismiss these arguments out of hand? And, should we be willing to empower public officials to enforce paternalistic judgments of this kind, as the US Supreme Court did when it outlawed polygamy in 1878?⁷ Perhaps they were trying to protect Mormon women from domination as the Court claimed, but perhaps they were in fact subjecting many of them to the different – and, in the eyes of the women, at least, worse – form of domination that was part and parcel of the conventional nineteenth-century model of patriarchal marriage.

These examples underscore the multiple ways in which legitimate hierarchies might atrophy into systems of domination, as well as the fact that many of the dilemmas people actually confront involve choices among lesser or greater forms of domination, or among qualitatively different types of domination, where the optimal choice is far from clear. In much of sub-Saharan Africa tribal forms of polygamy prevail that by most measures are more oppressive than Mormon polygamy in the US. However, if African polygamy were outlawed tomorrow a predictable result would be huge numbers of elderly African women thrown out of their families into destitution. Intervening to reduce domination can make things worse unless it is informed by a relevant contextual knowledge and the consequences of the intervention are well thought through for other dimensions of real interests.

This complexity does not render us unable to say anything general about the legitimacy of hierarchical social relations. Because of their propensity to atrophy or be co-opted into systems of domination, I have argued that hierarchies should always be presumed suspect. This presumption is not conclusive, but the burden of persuasion should rest with the defender of the hierarchical arrangement in question while those who are subjected to it should be empowered to question and alter it (Shapiro, 1999, ch. 3). How heavy the burden of persuasion should be and how strong the empowerment has to be informed by contextual considerations, but even here some general arguments can be supported.

Helpful tools for thinking about them are provided in Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, which should have been incorporated into the power literature a long time ago (Hirschman, 1970). Adapting Hirschman's basic insight,

we can say that the greater the costs of exit from a hierarchy to those who are subjected to it, the more important it is to empower their voice to challenge and change it. In this respect I have argued that if there is a robust social wage that includes unemployment insurance, health insurance and pensions, then there is less reason for intrusive legislation protecting the rights of employees within firms. Because the costs to them of exit from their employment are comparatively low, they are less vulnerable to domination by employers whose efficiency reasons for preserving hierarchical organisation merit greater deference. In a minimal social wage context, by contrast, the worker is exceedingly vulnerable to domination within the workplace, so that stronger legal protections are warranted (Shapiro, 1999, ch. 6).

Comparable considerations apply to forms of domestic association. We should be much more troubled by polygamous marriage that is the vigorously enforced law of the land than when it is embraced in a withdrawing sect in a country that permits multiple forms of domestic association. To be sure, women who embrace it in the latter circumstance might be victims of face three power. If the costs to them of leaving are high – they would be ostracised from the only community they know, would lose all their assets and lack the resources to survive on their own – then the case for intrusive regulation of polygamous family forms is strong. But, governments act with blunt instruments. Given the dangers that the intrusive regulation might fail or itself foster new mechanisms of domination, the better course is to work at reducing the costs of exit.

This is true of all forms of adult domestic association, whose immunity to regulatory interference should vary with the social wage for reasons analogous to those that apply to the firm. In addition, divorce should be easy to obtain, and people should be able to create designer marriages by contract. But, the division of assets at divorce should not go unregulated, and courts should not enforce prenuptial agreements that leave either party destitute upon dissolution. The elimination of the conclusive common-law presumption against the possibility of marital rape should become universal, as should the abolition of intra-spousal tort immunity. These throwbacks to the doctrine that the wife is the chattel of the husband feed into and legitimate spousal battery. Battered women's shelters should be supported by the state, and there should be widespread publicity about battered women's syndrome with hotlines for victims, resources for them to escape and prosecution of perpetrators. None of these measures *guarantees* that some women will not accept domination and abuse for face three power reasons, but they make it less likely (see Shapiro, 1999, ch. 5 for elaboration).

The time has passed for pointing out that power's third face *sometimes* operates. The worthwhile questions to tackle concern when and how it operates, and what should be done about it. My suggestions in this regard have been to democratise power relations through the redesign of social institutions so as to minimise domination. This is a huge endeavour, not least because it has to be

pursued in context-sensitive ways. I invite Lukes, and others, to join me in its pursuit.

(Accepted: 8 December 2005)

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Notes

- 1 Lukes, 2005. All page references for unattributed quotations in this article are to this new edition.
- 2 Gaventa (1980). For a discussion of Gaventa's empirical techniques, see Shapiro and Wendt (2005).
- 3 A notable exception is Hayward (2000), a rejection of the third face argument in favour of a Foucaultian theory that is based on ethnographic studies of two fourth-grade classrooms – one suburban and one inner city.
- 4 For the story of how and why this happened, see Graetz and Shapiro (2005).
- 5 On Marx's account the superabundance of wealth made possible by capitalism would obviate the conflict hitherto generated by scarcity – once capitalism was replaced by socialism and then communism. Goods would be distributed on the basis of need, and government displaced by mere administration. It is often thought (as Marx himself appears to have believed) that such a view could be rendered persuasive by distinguishing needs from wants. Wants might be infinite, as the bourgeois economists argued, and scarcity with respect to them inevitable therefore, but needs are not. Alas, these formulations assume a static and unrealistic view of human needs. Life-saving technologies such as dialysis machines and artificial hearts satisfy needs, not wants, on any plausible definition, yet clearly the potential for such innovation is limitless. Indeed, recent developments in genetics suggest that it is in its infancy. Once technological change is taken into account, human needs are infinite, making scarcity and concomitant conflict inevitable.
- 6 The definitive treatment of this subject is Rae *et al.* (1980), especially ch. 5.
- 7 See *Reynolds v. New York* 98 U.S. 145 (1878).

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