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Power

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The concept of power is acknowledged as one of the few steady axes around which the social sciences have been revolving at least since the first half of the 20th century. In fact, very few concepts have been as pervasive and generative. Equally undisputed is the lack of a shared understanding among social scientists of what *power* is. This situation has been clearly encapsulated by the claim of power as an “essentially contested” concept (i.e., neither empirically settled nor conceptually commonly defined). To reduce the complexity of the many faces of power, two main limitations can be imposed. First, from a metatheoretical viewpoint, the focus is posited on the different conceptual uses of power within the social sciences. Even if no one feature is common among all the conceptual uses, it is still possible to realize how they are connected by a series of overlapping “family resemblances” that simply make it possible to talk of power as such. Second, from a theoretical viewpoint, the reference to the concepts, practices, and institution of surveillance helps narrow down the field, guiding the selection of the many and different conceptual uses. Therefore, emphasis is placed on what might be called the modernist matrices of power in the social sciences—those theoretical frameworks that keep inspiring, as reference points or critical targets, scholarly reflections on power today—and then on disciplinary and postdisciplinary theories of power, recognizing the seminal role of Michel Foucault’s contribution to any discussion about power and surveillance. This entry, therefore, first undertakes an examination of the work of three philosophers whose concepts and theories shaped the meaning of power. It then reviews in detail the concepts of disciplinary power and postdisciplinary power.

Modernist Matrices

The works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Friedrich Nietzsche can be accredited as modernist matrices of the main current concepts and theories of power in the social sciences. Their reflections have offered foundational images, metaphors, and storylines on the meanings and relations between power, the individual, and society. Apart from their seminal role, few common threads might be identified among them. Marx and Weber both seem to endorse a conception of power that is *causationalist* (power as cause), *distributive* (one either has power or does not), and *commodified* (power as object). They offer agency-based (power as the causal effect of a social agency) or structure-based (effect of a social, economic, or political structure) accounts, conceiving of power as a causal relationship between intentional individuals or groups. Moreover, power is conceptualized as a property whose gain or loss by one of the participants in the social relationship is exactly balanced by the losses or gains of power by another participant. According to Nietzsche, the idea of power is less systematically elaborated and much more philosophically oriented. Nietzsche (like Marx) sees power as linked to conflict and expressed by a set of ubiquitous relations of forces informing and homogenizing both the human and the nonhuman realm.

Marx understands power as the social function of keeping a specific arrangement of relations of productions tightly connected to and promoting class domination. This arrangement circularly makes possible the development of certain forces of production in a given historical period. In this systemic perspective, power is expressed as a structure-based course of action causally aiming to maintain the social conditions essential for developing capital accumulation. Power is concentrated in a range of legal, political, economic, and social institutions that work toward the conservation of the prevailing economic system, securing the position of those who effectively own the productive resources. In this perspective, power is not only a political matter. It is also diffused beyond the state, in terms of the “needs of capital,” requiring legitimation and conditions for social acceptance. The concept of ideology fulfils this requirement. Ideology, as an integrated system of cultural and normative

assumptions responding to the needs of capital within as much as beyond the state, secures obedience and acceptance of the social order (i.e., of a given distribution of the means of production, supporting the prevailing class interests). Ideology is pervasive inasmuch as a “false consciousness” makes the working class fail to realize their acceptance of the ruling class ideology as their own. In a Marxist view, power cannot be exercised in a legitimate way unless the working class reaches control of the means of production. Only the socialized ownership of the means of production might render power as something different from the domination and subordination of social classes based on the relations of production.

While Marx deliberately neglects the role of individual and strategic agencies in exerting or facing power within a given historical social-economic context, Weber acknowledges that while power is derived from owning and controlling the means of production, it is indeed not reducible to ownership and nonownership of them. Weber’s overall idea of power, embedded in his understanding of the rationalization process of Western modernity, points to how power is also resulting from the knowledge of how production actually works, reflecting the differential ability to control methods of production. People are not passively bewitched by the false consciousness but by the intentional actors of social relationships, who are able to make strategic use of their own knowledge of the production process. Thus, the foundation and maintenance of positions of dominance are not simply grounded in economically defined class relation, as Marx argues, but also subject to the strategic action of individuals operating under socially constructed “structures of dominancy” (i.e., norms socially constituted), which legitimize authority and consistently privilege certain ways of thinking and doing. Weber operationalizes this overall conception by distinguishing between power (*macht*), which can function whether or not it is legitimate and whether or not it wins voluntary compliance, and domination (*herrschaft*), which implies some element of voluntary compliance and legitimacy (i.e., rationally, traditionally, or charismatically based). Power is then described by Weber as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his or her own will despite resistance and regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. Domination, on the other hand, is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of people. In both cases, it is clear how power is understood as a social relationship that necessarily includes an agentive role for both parties, a form of voluntary compliance (i.e., a differentially shared interest).

Nietzsche rejects the idea of power as a human cause of certain effects as well as its objectified and distributive nature. He emphatically claims that all reality is “will to power.” This vaguely defined and contested concept can be variously interpreted. In a metaphysical sense, it seems to say that everything that exists is the will to power (i.e., that reality has only one basic character or intrinsic quality: the will to power). In a biological/organic sense, the will to power appears specifically related to all life, as its constant tension toward change is an instinctual drive toward self-preservation, while in a psychological perspective, it seems to be related to living creatures as a will or desire in competition with other human drives. Finally, in a methodological sense, the will to power might be thought of as a principle of interpretation for reality, a lens through which we can signify and understand the world. “Power” in “will to power” is a concept characterized by intrinsic relationality: Power is only power in conflictual relation to another and opposite power. In his early writings, Nietzsche claims that the primordial strength (*kraft*) that may be exercised by anything possessing it is sublimated for creative purposes by the opposite idea of power as self-overcoming (*macht*). In the same way, the “Apollinian” power (pleasure giving, productive, and creative) is tied to the “Dionysian” power (destructive and negative) to create, in their interplay, the achievements of culture and any meaningful historical development. The relationality as a specific feature of power does not exclude the idea that the result of interaction between powers might end up in creating a

hierarchical order. Actually, any change or transformation is nothing but a symptom of both the formation of a new hierarchical order and the breakdown of a previous one. Finally, power must be understood as necessarily striving for more power, as characterized by a natural and purposeless tension to expand and overcome itself. In Nietzsche's view, nothing has existence and meaning outside the "game" of power relations, because there is no withdrawal from this game. The Nietzschean idea of ubiquitous, value-neutral, productive, and dynamic relations of power was further elaborated on in the 20th century by Foucault.

Disciplinary Power

Foucault elaborates on the concept of power within his history of the different modes by which, in Western civilization, human beings are made subjects. In this context, power cannot be viewed as a causal effect of subjective agency or social structure, since it is itself informed and even constituted by power. Power is not a flow of commands exercised from the top down, expressed by law and centralized in institutions aiming at subjugating, repressing, or dominating. Foucault sees power as relationally diffused, detached from the form of law within which it has been so far confined, always implying resistance. Power is not just repressive and negative, but it is also productive and positive: It fashions subjectivities, produces truths on how the world is, and shapes ranges of conduct. Power is relational—it consists of intentional and nonsubjective relations that aim at achieving something without being reducible to individuals' intentions. The existence of a centralized, repressive, juridical-discursive power (*puissance*) is not rejected but enriched and complemented by this understanding of power (*pouvoir*) as a productive, ubiquitous set of precarious transindividual relations that entail the possibility of freedom and resistance as opposed to and permanently linked to power.

During the first half of the 1970s, Foucault elaborated on a specific and now famous understanding of power—the disciplinary power—which has since been inspiring and challenging surveillance and security scholars. The panopticon is first and foremost a diagram of power, a metaphor of the modernist strategy for the creation of subjectivity. By adopting a Nietzschean perspective, Foucault views the panoptical gaze as exercising a "positive"—in analytical and political terms—effect on individuals recorded. This effect is expressed by extracting, organizing, sorting, and arranging individuals in social categories to produce knowledge about the social world (connected to the emerging human sciences) and to subjectivize/normalize individuals (docile bodies/manageable souls for the emerging political and economic arrangement). This power is relational insofar as even the inspector is caught in the mechanism of power. It is disciplinary insofar as it creates a specific form of freedom consistent and functional to the liberal state, binding together individuals, the state, and the market through surveillance.

Operationally, the disciplinary power works by compelling the inmates to internalize an automatized and deindividualized gaze. The inmates are induced by the same organizational and spatial arrangement within which they are confined to watch over themselves—to adopt the inspector's gaze. The main consequence is a form of self-surveillance (or discipline) that shapes inmates' behavioral patterns and induces certain modes of being and becoming. The disciplinary power works then as a subjectivating process, which is the production of certain experiences of ourselves—the organization of our self-consciousness mediated by an internalized sense of visibility that orientates individual actions.

This account echoes the works of Jean Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser. According to Sartre, the gaze of the other deprives the subject of his or her freedom. The subject's endless

possibilities of being are shaped according to the other's definition and desires, resulting in being reduced, fixed, and objectified. Likewise, according to Althusser, the subject's formation is made possible by an external interpellation (i.e., by hailing individuals into definite structures of meaning organized by ideological apparatuses). The gaze's power exerted by an internalized inspector, an objectifying "other," or by ideological apparatuses is commonly operationalized by Sartre, Althusser, and Foucault through the modelling of behavioral patterns and the formation of subjectivity. The disciplinary power captures the relationship between visibility, subjectivity, and discipline, which, even if originally situated within specific architectural forms (e.g., prison, factory, madhouse), is not theoretically and practically limited to them. It implies instead a movement toward the social diffusion of visibility as a disciplinary mechanism across an indefinite range of institutional structures and organizational arrangements, all at work to turn individuals into "docile bodies." The overall context of this movement is the epochal transformation in the political, economic, and social order, away from the sovereign power embodied by the political paradigm of the ancient régime toward the liberal society based on individual rights and free market, where the freedom is produced and consumed by a disciplining surveillance, widely diffused in society.

Postdisciplinary Power

As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, whatever else the present stage in the history of modernity is, it is also, probably above all, postpanoptical. The expression "postpanoptical" (or postdisciplinary) refers to the critical overcoming of the Foucauldian power model elaborated on in the mid-1970s. There have been many different attempts to rethink, develop, or criticize the Foucauldian perspective; its hierarchical scheme; the focus on the body; or the seemingly static spatiality of the cell as a site of the disciplinary power. Within the security and surveillance studies, the criticism toward the panoptical model has taken many different forms. In general, it is claimed that the disciplinary power has been overcome by forms of power that reduce and even neutralize distance, transcend time, and focus on prevention. They are decentralized, invisible, diffused, and they focus on personality more than body. The panoptical model is then replaced by a social sorting, working through a discriminatory technology that identifies, classifies, and assesses individuals based on all the information produced by them to produce economic value. It has been argued that subjects are no longer under the gaze, but now, the model consists of data about him or her and the "surveillant assemblages" that are in place by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows and then reassembling them in different locations as discrete and virtual data doubles.

All these theoretical attempts to overcome the disciplinary power model are based on various concepts of power, some of which are derived from the modernist matrices, some of which are derived from the same Foucault beliefs of the late 1970s, and some of which are derived from seemingly new conceptual intuitions. A Marxian attempt to go beyond the Foucauldian model (like that of Bauman) would criticize the inmates' immobilization as integral to disciplinary power, stating that the late modern access to the means of transportation and the resulting freedom of movement have laid the foundation for new forms of power. In this perspective, the warden becomes the bourgeois, in economic terms, while the inmate becomes the proletariat in the context of liquid modernity, in which freedom is depoliticized due to the closing down of spaces of active political engagement and the increasing feeling of uncertainty and nomadism.

Postpanoptical, however, does not necessarily mean post-Foucauldian. Foucault himself has offered tools to overcome the panoptical model, namely, the concept of biopower. Actually, the

panoptical/disciplinary power can be thought of as conceptually and historically functional to biopower, as the disciplinary society is functional to the biopolitical paradigm. The biopower is a model of power that appeared in the late 18th century, and unlike the theory of sovereign power (of life and death), it is not focused on the practice of ruling over the individual body but on the empowerment of human population as a totality of living beings. The biopower aims to regulate human population in a preventive way, rendering biological life as the main issue and target of politics. This model of power is deployed through mechanisms of control and intervention that are “immanent” to all areas of life such as the control of rate of reproduction, the regulation of fertility of a population, or the drafting of birth policies. If disciplinary power is about individual shaping of human bodies, biopower is about empowering the population as a political resource, managing the births, deaths, reproduction, and illnesses. It is possible to see biopower as complementing the disciplinary power insofar as the latter aims at producing a collection of separated individualities, as an object of knowledge, as manpower for the capitalist market, and as citizenry for the liberal state. This “threefold product” is taken as a target by biopower as a control apparatus exerted over a population as a whole, focusing on all aspects of life under its gaze and creating the human conditions for the further development of the neoliberal market and society.

A concept of power different from the ideas of both disciplinary power and biopower is that of control as elaborated by Gilles Deleuze, who argues that the disciplinary society has long ceased to exist. The closed institutions of prison, hospital, factory, school, and family are in a generalized crisis. The institutions of postindustrial societies are more unstable than the institutions embedded and functional to the disciplinary power. The effect of this epochal transformation is to decouple the panoptical dyad of seeing/being seen, destabilizing the panoptic gaze and space. Deleuze proposes that control has replaced discipline. Discipline as a mode of power relies primarily on material, cultural, or psychical enclosures. Control instead encourages mobility in an attempt to manage the wider territory and not just the social space of enclosures. Whereas discipline is analogical and molding, control is digital and modulating. While discipline stabilizes and objectifies bodies, control modulates them. Control does not act on individual bodies but on “dividuals” (i.e., individual doubled as data). The panoptical gaze deprived of the inmate’s body (replaced by its data double) as a privileged target loses its conceptual salience and practical condition of possibility and is supplanted by data analysis. Power as control represents a new form of a subjectivating process and is diffused, silent, and discreet, made possible by the capacity of digital technology to generate and manipulate data doubles of citizen subjects.

See also [Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari](#); [Foucault, Michel](#); [Panopticon, The](#)

- biopower
- power with
- power of ideas
- prisoners
- surveillance
- relational power
- social power

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