Fictional Expectations and the Ontology of Power

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1. Introduction

In the midst of everyday social life, we have little difficulty identifying who has power and who does not. And yet, power is one of the most contested concepts in social and political theory. The literature on the concept "is marked by deep, widespread, and seemingly intractable disagreements over how the term power should be understood", Amy Allen (2016) points out.[1] Indeed, the disagreements are not just about our understanding of the term but also about the nature of power itself. Is power something that individuals possess, or does it circulate in complex social networks? Does it necessarily involve conflict and domination, or is it a social ability based on cooperative relationships? Does it essentially limit, repress, or constrain agents, or can it help create and shape spaces of action? While such debates touch on a range of conceptual, epistemological, and sociological issues, most fundamentally, they signal the lack of a shared understanding of the ontology of power: What kind of thing, as it were, is power? How does it fit into our understanding of the social world?

In this paper, I develop a novel account of the ontology of power. My discussion is not concerned with whether power really exists or whether it is grounded in more fundamental properties (see Harp & Khalifa 2017). While the account appeals to fiction, it is not an anti-realist account. I assume that power is constituted by social practices and then ask about its "way of being" (see McDaniel 2009): What is it for an agent or an institution to be powerful? In particular, I will be concerned with the distinctive temporality that power has in virtue of being constituted by ongoing social relationships. My central claim is that the reproduction of power involves fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. This is, I argue, a crucial implication of power's social constitution, and I elaborate it in this paper with the hope that this will help us make sense of some of the deep disagreements about power.

If power is socially constituted, we need to look at the activities that constitute it if we want to understand its way of being. I therefore

1. See Lukes (2005) and Haugaard (2010) for similar assessments.

take what may seem like a detour to explore the pragmatic character of power ascriptions. What are agents *doing* when they ascribe power to someone in their social interactions? Power ascriptions, I argue, involve fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. They are effectively a form of pretense: When we treat an agent as powerful, we act *as if* that agent had a robust capacity to make a difference to others' actions. Our social interactions are premised upon an ontology of power as robust and stable, even though social reality can never fully live up to its neat logic. But at the same time, this pretense has a performative character (in J. L. Austin's sense) — that is, it helps create and shape social reality. By engaging in the pretense, individuals constitute and reproduce the social relations that ground power. Thus, fictional expectations are built into power.

I develop this pretense account of power by drawing on Thomas Hobbes's myth of an original institution of power in *Leviathan*. I do not aim to settle interpretative questions about Hobbes's text but use one of its central insights as a starting point to think about the ontology of power. In Hobbes's myth, individuals empower the sovereign by *misrecognizing* her as already having an independent, robust capacity to implement and enforce her commands. Developing this idea will help us recognize the central role that fictional expectations play in the reproduction of power. In addition, the mythical form of Hobbes's account is instructive. Since power requires ongoing social support and legitimation, the structure of power-legitimizing myths is central to understanding power's ontology. By attending to the account's mythical structure, we will recognize that conceptions of power play a performative role and should not be understood as literal descriptions of social reality.

The paper will proceed as follows: In the next section, I identify a tension between conceiving power as socially constituted and characterizing it as a robust capacity to prevail in conflict (2). This tension exemplifies the difficulties of formulating a coherent ontology of power. I then turn to Hobbes's myth, which addresses the tension with an account of representation: The sovereign creates the unified social

order necessary for power by representing it as unified (3). I will argue that this involves a form of misrecognition: Individuals act *as if* power existed already, independently of their own support, and yet by acting in this way, they help to constitute power (4). I then analyze the pragmatic function and structure of Hobbes's myth to draw attention to the performative role of conceptions of power (5). In the final two sections, I develop several implications of the pretense account for a general ontology of power. I apply the account to different forms of power than the ones that Hobbes had in mind, focusing on money as a form of power (6). Finally, I explore how fictional expectations show up in everyday experiences of power (7).

2. Power's Social Nature

Power is the ability of an agent to have a reliable effect on other agents' actions or their dispositions to act.[2] Power in this sense is essentially social: an agent has this ability not primarily in virtue of her individual physiological or psychological features but in virtue of her social position.[3] It will be helpful to think of this in terms of what Thomas Wartenberg has called "social alignments": An agent can effectively exercise power only to the extent that the actions of other agents appropriately align with hers (1990, pp. 141–62). For example, my boss has the power to fire me only insofar as the actions of other agents appropriately align with her actions, so that if she fires me, the HR department will stop paying me, the guard will not let me in the building, the IT department will revoke my access to the company server, my coworkers will stop collaborating with me, etc. In virtue of this and other social alignments, my boss's actions make a difference to my actions, directly by firing me or indirectly by making it prudent for me

2. This definition is inspired by Foucault (1983, p. 220) and Luhmann (2002, p. 39). While the definition is framed in terms of power *over* others, it is compatible with understanding power as the power *to do* something; see Pansardi (2012).

3. Accounts of power that emphasize its social constitution include, for example, Isaac (1987), Arendt (1970), and Parsons (1963). See also Allen's (2016) discussion of what she calls systemic and constitutive approaches.

to do things I would not otherwise do. No personal skill or physical ability is sufficient for her to have this power. It is power in this sense that social and political scientists are generally interested in, and it will be the focus of this paper.

While an emphasis on the social bases of power may seem uncontroversial, it appears to be at odds with the robust character that we usually associate with power. Power is generally understood as a robust causal capacity to affect others' actions in a wide range of cases, most importantly in the face of resistance from other agents (see Weber 1978, p. 53).[4] It would be odd to attribute power to my boss if she could get her employees to act on her directives only when they are in a generous mood. Having a robust social capacity to overcome others' resistance requires a more or less stable alignment of agents who are disposed to act appropriately in a wide range of situations. However, social alignments are not static; they involve ongoing relationships that must be continuously reproduced (Wartenberg 1990, pp. 163–82). Since a social alignment is constituted by the mutually responsive actions of the aligned agents, its reproduction is subject to continuous negotiation and struggle. Thus, a dynamic view makes power seem rather precarious or at least "results in a more fluid understanding of the nature of power" (1990, p. 173).[5]

This tension is reflected in the contrast between consensual and conflictual theories of power (see Haugaard 2010; Haugaard & Ryan 2012). Conflictual theories conceive power as a robust capacity that can be used to secure compliance from other agents by overcoming or averting their opposition. While such theories usually specify concrete bases of power, they rarely discuss these bases' social constitution. In contrast, consensual theories take the social constitution of power as their starting point. One prominent example is Hannah Arendt's view,

which conceives power as the "human ability […] to act in concert" (1970, p. 44). For Arendt, power is based on the collective ability to coordinate actions around shared values, goals, and rules. Consensual theories have been criticized for failing to account for coercion, exploitation, and manipulation — that is, for power's role in social conflict (see Lukes 2005, pp. 32–5). Consensual theories would need to explain how social cooperation could be robust enough to persist in the case of conflict, and it is not clear how they can do that.

Consider, for example, John Searle's influential "collective acceptance" account of power. Searle (2010) holds that social facts are created by the assignment and collective acceptance of status functions to objects, actions, and persons. This involves the assignment of "deontic powers", such as rights, duties, permissions, etc. For example, the President of the United States has deontic powers to direct the actions of executive agencies, veto acts of Congress, command the armed forces, etc. Even coercive institutions such as the police and the armed forces are "systems of deontologies" in this sense (pp. 88, 107, 142).[6] The collective acceptance of deontic powers, Searle argues, gives agents desire-independent reasons for action (p. 167). A powerful institution is able to prevail even in the case of conflict or disagreement because most agents are committed to acting in accordance with the directions given by those in power, even when those directions conflict with some of their own interests or goals. Thus, while "all genuine power comes from the bottom up" (p. 165), it can nonetheless be used to get agents to do things they would not otherwise do.

Searle's theory resolves the tension between the social and robust aspects of power by *fiat*; it simply assumes that the power instituted by collective acceptance will be more or less robust. It passes over the crucial question of how this collective acceptance is maintained

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4. For a systematic discussion of the claim that power is a causal capacity, see Menge (2018).

5. For explicit acknowledgments of power's precarious character, see Douglass (2014), Dumouchel (1996, p. 71), Hindess (1982, p. 506), Hayward (2000, p. 170).

6. Searle further distinguishes political power from military power, police power, and brute physical power more generally (p. 164). He does not spell out how this distinction relates to the claim that even the coercive power of the police and armed forces is based on deontic powers; see Gran (2012) for further discussion.

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in the case of conflict.[7] If the creation of powerful institutions creates agent-independent reasons to act, why would individuals accept such an institution and, in particular, continue to accept it when it exercises power in ways that conflict with the individuals' interests and goals? While Searle suggests that many social institutions "tend to be in everybody's interest" (p. 207), he concedes that this is not a persuasive response in the case of power, which can be used to affect agents even when it is not in their interest.[8] The underlying problem is that Searle effectively thinks of power as a static feature, treating questions about the maintenance of this capacity as secondary. If power is constituted by ongoing social relationships whose reproduction is necessarily subject to continuous struggle, these questions are central to any inquiry about the nature of power (see Wartenberg 1990, p 181). We cannot understand what it is to have power without addressing its continuous reproduction.

In contrast to Searle, Wartenberg emphasizes power's dynamic character, but he does not explain how it could be a robust ability to prevail in conflict. Wartenberg points out that if power can be maintained only by the continued cooperation of aligned agents, dominant agents need to exercise their power in ways that do not jeopardize future cooperation; power itself is thus a site of ongoing struggle and negotiation (p. 172). However, even if that is right, we would still need to explain how a relatively robust social capacity could emerge from such a struggle or, at least, why power is usually experienced in this way.[9] Wartenberg does not provide such an explanation. Indeed, he urges us not to think of power as an objective feature of the social

environment at all, at least "in the sense that human beings could not, by acting differently, alter it" (p. 168). That is right as far as it goes, but power is objective in a different sense. Whether someone has power is usually independent of the beliefs or actions of any particular involved individual.[10] When we experience power in our social interactions, we experience it as shaping our ability to act in ways that we do not control. How dynamic social practices can create such objective facts is one of the central questions of social ontology (Thomasson 2003, pp. 269–70).

An adequate ontology of power needs to reconcile power's dynamic nature with our experience of it as a robust capacity to prevail in social conflict. While Wartenberg recognizes that power is often represented in this way, he suggests that this is based on a mistaken ontology (p. 180). In contrast to Wartenberg, my strategy will be to carefully consider the pragmatic character of representations of power as robust, stable, and self-sufficient. Rather than interpreting these representations as literal descriptions of social reality, I suggest that we need to attend to their role in reproducing power. In the next sections, I will develop this approach by exploring the Hobbesian myth of an original institution of power.

3. Hobbes's Myth of Instituting Power

If power is constituted by ongoing social relationships, we need to understand how these relationships are continuously reproduced. The reproduction of power, I will argue, involves fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. When we ascribe power to an agent in social interaction, we act *as if* that agent had a robust, self-sufficient, and stable causal capacity to affect others. While social reality can never fully live up to this representation of power, it is nonetheless central to its reproduction. Agents reproduce power by pretending that it exists as a robust, stable causal capacity. This view draws inspiration

7. See also Balzer (2002), Gran (2012), Lukes (2006), Papineau (2008), Schmid (2009, p. 47), Sánchez-Cuenca (2007).

8. Searle has clarified that *acceptance* does not require approval and can involve "grudging acknowledgment, even the acknowledgment that one is simply helpless to do anything about, or reject, the institution in which one finds oneself" (p. 8). What would need more exploration is how mere acknowledgment could create or reproduce an institution with power over others.

9. Axel Honneth (1991, pp. 156ff. and 173ff.) notes a similar issue when discussing Michel Foucault's account of power.

10. In Searle's terms, power is epistemically objective but ontologically subjective (2010, p. 17f.).

from Thomas Hobbes's mythical story about the institution of power in *Leviathan*.

Hobbes's *Leviathan* is an attempt to justify political authority — that is, a right to rule. Nevertheless, Hobbes's justificatory strategy requires him to make claims about the nature of power understood as the effective ability to make a difference to others' actions. Hobbes holds that the possession of power in this sense is a necessary condition for having a legitimate claim to political authority: The sovereign has a right to rule only if she can maintain peace and thereby protect her subjects (see Hobbes 1996, p. 153).[11] Since power requires social support, its reproduction cannot be taken for granted, as Hobbes recognizes. He needs to explain how a robust disposition to comply with and support the sovereign could be created and continuously reproduced. This is crucial not just for Hobbes's institution story but also for his account of creating the commonwealth by conquest ("by acquisition", to use Hobbes's own term), since the ability to reliably force others into submission also requires the cooperation of at least some agents. As I will elaborate in section 4 below, we cannot understand the reproduction of power without understanding the structure of claims to and recognitions of authority. Social power is generally reproduced by myriad mundane actions in which individuals misrecognize authority as they negotiate the social world. Because Hobbes recognizes a deep entanglement of claims to authority and the reproduction of effective power, his discussion is instructive for my purposes here. Many Hobbes commentators have focused on questions about the legitimacy of political authority while taking the constitution of power more or less for granted.[12] In contrast, I approach Hobbes's story in the *Leviathan* from

a different perspective and consider what it can tell us about the reproduction of power.

Hobbes's institution myth calls on its readers to imagine how power would be created in a situation where it does not yet exist. We may be skeptical that such an origin can be coherently imagined or that doing so is useful for a general account of power, issues to which I will return.[13] But if we could imagine it, it could help us identify what is needed to reproduce power. In the "state of nature" that Hobbes imagines, there is, by hypothesis, no genuine social power. Individuals in this state can rely on their individual capacities, their strength and street smarts, as it were, but not on the use of means that require social cooperation. No one can trust anyone else to act their part within a social alignment. While an individual (or sometimes even a short-term alliance of individuals) might be able to get others to do things in isolated cases, no agent can stabilize the conditions of their superiority because they cannot prevent others from overpowering them if the circumstances change even slightly.[14] To create effective and robust power, agents need to persistently align their actions, which requires that agents form stable expectations of how others will act.

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11. See Hoekstra (2004) for a thorough discussion of the relationship between the sovereign's ability to provide protection and her *de jure* authority. In particular, Hoekstra focuses on whether Hobbes believed that the possession of the requisite *de facto* power is sufficient for legitimate *de jure* authority. My argument in this paper does not require taking a stand on this issue.

12. See Field (2014, p. 62, fns. 5, 8). Field argues that this "juridical" approach to Hobbes's political philosophy is incomplete since "[i]t is not enough to defend a doctrine of the authorized power of the sovereign; such a doctrine

must be robustly complemented by an account of how the effective power commensurate to this authority might be achieved" (p. 61f.).

13. See section 5 below. My discussion does not assume that Hobbes is pursuing a "story-based approach" to justifying political authority, i.e., trying to give reasons for creating political authority that individuals in the state of nature could act on (Newey 2008, p. 69–86). Newey argues that Hobbes's myth is not intended as a literal description, since political authority is founded on "a collective act of imagination": By imagining that we renounce our rights, we really renounce our rights and thus authorize the sovereign (p. 82). I agree but will emphasize that the reproduction of power requires imagining a past in which robust power has already been created. The origin story plays a central role, but it should not be understood as a literal description of the past. My broader claim in this paper is that this is an important insight into the nature of power more generally: Individuals reproduce power by acting as if it were *already* a robust capacity independently of their own actions.

14. Even if we follow Hobbes's own definition of power as one's "present means to obtain some future apparent good" (1996, p. 62), we are forced to conclude that individuals in the state of nature are relatively powerless (see Read, 1991, p. 515).

To align my actions with others', I need assurance that they will continue to act in ways that I can anticipate. In the absence of some kind of pre-established harmony, the formation of stable expectations requires the prospect that fundamental behavioral expectations will be enforced. For Hobbes, the sovereign is supposed to play this enforcement function. But the sovereign's enforcement capacity cannot be based on the individual abilities of any person alone; no individual is strong, smart, or persuasive enough to make everyone align their actions. The sovereign's power can only be based on the support of other agents. In other words, it must be socially constituted.[15] Instituting a "common power" that can guarantee social order by making agents align their actions thus already requires some kind of social order. This is a tight circle, and it illustrates the difficulty of squaring the conflictual role of power with its social constitution. Power is needed to ensure that, despite potentially conflicting interests, agents continue to align their actions with others'. But the only possible kind of power seems to require that agents put at least some of their conflicts aside and act in concert.

Hobbes suggests that the creation of a "common power" requires that individuals act *as one*; the social alignment has to be "a reall Unitie of them all" (1996, p. 120). To create this unity, he argues, individuals have to permanently renounce their rights to govern themselves and authorize the sovereign to make decisions for them. The demand for real unity captures the need for a robust social alignment that will continue to hold, even in conflict. But even if we put aside the question of why agents would renounce their rights, such unity seems impossible. As David Gauthier has pointed out, individuals cannot literally transfer *de facto* power to the sovereign (1969, p. 165). They can *promise* to support the sovereign and comply with her commands, but they always retain the ability to renounce their support. Thus, no powerholder can

be in direct control of the actions on which their power depends.[16] But in the absence of direct control, how can there be "real unity"?[17]

In *Leviathan,* Hobbes answers this question with an account of representation: The multitude — by itself a mere collection of individuals, each of whom pursues their personal interest — becomes unified by being represented as unified. He conceives of the sovereign as a representative who authoritatively speaks and makes decisions on behalf of the multitude. As a person with a single will, her actions on behalf of the multitude are unified, thereby *making* the multitude a unified person:

> A Multitude of men, are made *One* Person, when they are by one man, or one Person, Represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that Multitude in particular. For it is the *Unity* of the Representer, not the *Unity* of the Represented, that maketh the Person *One*. And it is the Representer that beareth the Person, and but one Person: And *Unity*, cannot otherwise be understood in Multitude. (1995, p. 114, emphasis in original)

We can reformulate this suggestion in terms of power. Power requires a robust, unified social alignment. When the actions of the multitude's members are represented as stably aligned — that is, unified — these actions become aligned, or so the claim goes. The public representation of power thus plays a constitutive role in the creation of power.

To assess this account, we first need to understand how Hobbes conceives representation and the related notion of a person.[18] In analogy with an actor on the theater stage and their "persona", Hobbes understands a person as a "Representer of speech and action" (1995, p. 112). *Natural* persons speak and act in their own name. A defendant

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15. Field (2014) argues that, in his later political texts, Hobbes "takes significant steps to correct his earlier texts' preoccupation with power as entitlement and neglect of effective power" (p. 62). In particular, *Leviathan* "offers a new analysis by which human power is a socially constituted and potentially shifting property" (p. 70).

16. For a strikingly similar argument, see Latour (1986, p. 265).

17. Crignon (2014, 64ff.) argues that the recognition of this difficulty led Hobbes to develop the account of representation that I discuss below.

18. For an in-depth discussion of Hobbes's account of representation, see Brito Vieira (2009).

who represents herself in court, for example, is a natural person in this sense. *Artificial* persons act on behalf of others; their speech and actions are attributed to the person they represent. A lawyer representing her client, for example, is an artificial person. Representation for Hobbes is thus a relationship of accountability: Natural persons are accountable for their own actions, while an artificial person acts on account of those she represents. To further characterize the relationship between artificial persons and those they represent, Hobbes introduces a second distinction: Artificial persons "truly" represent someone when they are authorized by the represented — for example, when a client retains a lawyer.[19] But an artificial person can also represent an entity that is incapable of authorizing a representative and taking responsibility for its own actions. Inanimate objects such as hospitals and bridges, children, "Fooles", and even purely imaginary things (a "meer Figment of the brain", p. 113) may not be able to authorize a representative, but their representative may be authorized by a third party, such as the owner of a hospital or the parent of a child. If the represented cannot truly take responsibility for their representative's actions, Hobbes suggests that the representative represents them not truly but "by fiction" (p. 111).

With these distinctions in mind, we can clarify Hobbes's claim about the constitutive effects of representations of power. The multitude by itself is not capable of concerted action. But when it has a representative who speaks and acts on its behalf, we can say that the multitude "speaks and acts" in a unified way in virtue of the representative's actions. The sovereign is an artificial person whose actions are attributed to the collective she represents. But the multitude is not capable of authorizing this representative, since it lacks the necessary unity to act on its own. Thus, the sovereign has to be authorized by third parties, which are presumably the individuals who together make up the

multitude.[20] While the sovereign's actions are attributed to the now-unified multitude (the "commonwealth"), the commitments that the sovereign undertakes are ultimately borne by individual human beings. In Hobbes's terms, the commonwealth is represented by the sovereign "by fiction": The sovereign's actions are attributed to the commonwealth, but the latter is not capable of taking responsibility for its actions. The multitude speaks and acts in a unified way, and as such constitutes power, only in virtue of being authoritatively represented by the sovereign.

Hobbes's story of an original institution of power illustrates the tension of characterizing power as robust and yet socially constituted. Hobbes addresses this tension by appealing to the constitutive effect of representations of power: Representing the sovereign as having an already-existing, robust capacity helps bring about a unified social alignment that constitutes this capacity. This proposal suggests that our conception of power as a robust capacity, even if it is not an adequate account of power's ontology, plays a central role in reproducing power. However, it also raises several questions: How can representing the multitude as unified make it so? What precisely is the nature of the resulting social alignment and the capacity that it grounds? In the following sections, I address these questions to work out the implications of Hobbes's account for a general ontology of power.

4. Empowerment Through Pretense

Hobbes suggests that representing power helps to create power. What exactly is the nature of the power and the underlying social alignment that emerges? Many recent commentators have concluded from Hobbes's suggestion that the sovereign represents the commonwealth "by fiction" that the commonwealth itself (the now-unified multitude) would be a fictional entity.[21] For example, Sean Fleming suggests that

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19. See Fleming (2017, pp. 1–6) for further discussion of Hobbes's notion of an artificial person and the disagreements in the literature about its precise meaning.

20. Runciman (2010) discusses the relationship between the individuals of the multitude, the commonwealth, and the sovereign in more detail.

21. Fleming (2017) provides an overview, suggesting that "most scholars […] now agree that Hobbes's state is a person by fiction […]" (p. 1).

"the state, like a figment of the imagination, ceases to exist if it ceases to be represented" (2017, p. 14). One could understand this to mean that the multitude is merely imagined to be unified, but that alone would not adequately serve Hobbes's justificatory project.[22] Legitimate political authority requires that the sovereign has the requisite ability to provide protection. This means that her commands need to be reliably implemented and enforced by the multitude's concerted actions. Indeed, any effective power requires a measure of real social unity, or, in less grandiose terms, a robust social alignment. We need to clarify the nature of such alignments and how they can come about by way of representation. Inspired by Hobbes's suggestion that this representation is, in some sense, fictional, I will argue that the reproduction of power involves misrepresentation about the nature and source of power.

To understand how representation can bring about unity, we should think of the multitude's unity as a product of pretense rather than a mere "figment of the imagination". Pretense is *embodied* imagination, which crucially requires *acting* as if something were the case (Picciuto & Carruthers 2016, p. 317).[23] To create sovereign power, the individuals

in Hobbes's myth need to act *as if* the sovereign were powerful by complying with her orders and supporting her enforcement actions if necessary. As enough individuals engage in the pretense, their actions collectively constitute a social alignment that gives the sovereign effective power. Moreover, once a stable alignment exists, individuals have prudential reasons to comply with the sovereign's orders, since the sovereign now has the capacity to enforce agreements and punish disobedience. The pretense — acting as if the multitude were already unified — helps to constitute a situation in which individuals have sufficient reason to act in ways that produce the necessary unity. By acting as if the multitude were already unified, individuals help to unify it.

However, this operation requires a form of misrepresentation, the precise character of which we can unpack using Louis Althusser's (1971) account of *constitutive misrecognition*.[24] Althusser's classic example features a police officer who calls out to me ("Hey, you!"). As I turn around in response, I *mis*recognize myself as being subject to the officer's authority. I act as if I am *already* bound by the officer's authority to call on me. But since normative authority binds us only in virtue of our recognition of its force, it is only by repeatedly responding to such authoritative calls that I *come to be* bound by it. Althusser uses this example to illustrate how a social order creates obedient subjects that inhabit the social roles and relationships that this order requires (1971, p. 132). At the same time, the example also suggests that obedient subjects are actively involved in reproducing the social order. The police could not maintain it without a sufficient number of individuals who comply with its commands. By responding as if I were already, independently, the obedient subject I am called on as being, I help reproduce the social order that gives the officer effective power and authority.[25] In other words, I misrecognize the source of the officer's

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22. Fleming argues that Hobbes's commonwealth is a "fictional character" which is represented by the sovereign, similar to a play's character, which is represented by an actor. Robin Douglass (2014) argues that it is the covenant that is fictitious, which makes the commonwealth "a fictitious body": Individuals think of themselves as having consented, and by doing so, they really consent to be governed by the sovereign. Neither Fleming nor Douglass denies that the (attributed) actions of the fictitious commonwealth are backed by real collective action. However, if our question is how effective power is generated and reproduced through this process, we need to better understand how "imagining" can generate an alignment of actions and what implications this has for the nature of the resulting power.

23. Picciuto and Carruthers suggest that pretending requires that one performs an action of a certain sort *because* one imagines performing an action of a different sort. Imagination, understood as a mental state, is necessary though not sufficient for pretense. As will become clearer, the pretense account of empowerment developed in this paper does not require a specific mental act of misrepresentation or imagination. I can act *as if* money had stable value even though I know that money's value is likely to fluctuate (see section 6 below).

24. The discussion below draws on the insightful interpretation of Althusser's account in Kukla's (2000, 2002, 2002a) work.

25. It gives the officer power *and* authority if having *de facto* power is central to (though maybe not sufficient for) having authority. In the act of turning around, I help constitute the social order underlying the officer's power by complying, *and* I help constitute its authority by implicitly recognizing its

power and authority; my turning around does not simply recognize an already existing authority but helps constitute it.

Hobbes's mythical account of empowerment has an analogous structure. By speaking on behalf of the multitude, the sovereign represents herself as possessing political authority — that is, a claim to her subjects' compliance. Moreover, since having the ability to protect the peace is a necessary condition for political authority, the sovereign needs to portray herself as having the effective power necessary to enforce that compliance. As individuals comply with her demands, they act as if they were already bound by her authority and vulnerable to her power. And yet, the sovereign has power and, consequently, political authority because individuals comply. By complying, the individuals participate in the social alignment that is the basis for the sovereign's ability to provide protection. The individuals of the multitude *mis*recognize themselves as already being vulnerable to sovereign power since it is, in fact, their recognition that constitutes this power. In other words, the pre-political individuals in Hobbes's myth are pretending that the sovereign already has political power even though she has it only because they pretend as such.

Althusser is offering his example to illustrate the ideological reproduction of social order. As I turn around, I help to reproduce authority by responding as if I am already, independently, the obedient subject that is being called upon. The social order and its authority are represented as a given, as a fixed fact, rather than the dynamic product of contingent human actions and interests. What looks like a description of reality is actually a masked demand, made by a representative of the social order, to make this description a reality by acting as if it were already true (see Kukla 2002a, p. 72). Althusser's analysis helps us see that the reproduction of power involves the misrepresentation and misrecognition of authority. Unlike Althusser, Hobbes is not just trying to understand the social dynamics of claims to authority; he is trying to legitimize a particular claim. He calls on his readers to misrecognize

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claim on me. See my discussion of the entanglement of authority and *de facto* power above.

the sovereign's claim to authority precisely because this is required to create the capacity to maintain peace. The goal of this paper is not to determine whether Hobbes's myth successfully legitimates his call. We can learn from Hobbes in any case that the constitution of power requires misrecognition. The power that emerges can be characterized as fictional, not in the sense that it is merely imagined but rather because it persists only insofar as its social agents constitute it by misrecognizing it as already persisting independently of their own actions.

Althusser's mundane example also helps us further explicate the temporal structure of empowerment. Hobbes's myth imagines a one-time, original creation of power: Robust, stable power is brought into existence in a single moment. But, as we saw, this would require that the individuals who create power pretend that it *already* exists independently. Similarly, in Althusser's example, the police officer appears as a mythical figure with an already existing, independent authority. The reproduction of power involves imagining a mythical past in which power already exists. This past is mythical not because it is merely imagined (Althusser's officer needs to be in an authoritative and powerful social position to make me turn around) but because it plays a legitimizing and constitutive function. It is *by* acknowledging this past as already affecting and binding them that individuals reproduce power.

At the same time, the reproduction of power also requires a particular orientation toward the future.[26] Real power has to be continuously reproduced by innumerable mundane acts of misrecognition, and each of these acts implies a certain view of the future. Since the creation of power does not involve a literal transfer of personal strength, social disunity always remains a possibility. Instances of disobedience or dissent would call into question the powerholder's capacity to guarantee the social order's continuation. If enough individuals were to

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26. See Rouse (2002, p. 353). Responding to Kukla's retrospective account of the constitution of authority, Rouse argues that constituting normative authority also requires a prospective mythical invocation: "To have something at stake in one's performances is for it to matter how things turn out, for there to be a difference it makes to what is subsequently made of these performances."

judge that it will not continue, the social alignment would collapse. Thus, social reality can never fully live up to an image of power as independently robust and stable over time. Acting as if power were robust and independently stable requires disregarding these possibilities, at least in practice. Ascribing power thus involves an imaginative projection into the future: a projection because a unified alignment has to persist into the future for power to exist at all and imaginative because the ascription has to disregard the real possibility of collapse.

Maintaining the pretense of a robust and stable social alignment in light of the possibility of collapse requires an ongoing and socially distributed effort. Representations of power, and the dispositions to give them proper uptake, have to be continuously reproduced, for example through signs and symbolic practices (uniforms, documents, titles, etc.), educational institutions that inculcate habits of obedience, spectacles of violence, etc.[27] The sovereign needs to rely on other agents acting on her behalf, and yet she has to prevent the appearance of depending on them. It is not a surprise, then, that Hobbes has shown considerable interest in the representations of power, their appropriate use, their possibilities, and their dangers.[28] But it is beyond this paper's scope to discuss under what conditions such practices succeed or fail.[29] I only defend here the claim that misrepresentations are required for the reproduction of power.

27. See Brito Viera (2009), Latour (1986). Bejan (2010) discusses Hobbes's view of education, arguing that the goal of civic education for Hobbes was conformity to the doctrine of the *Leviathan* — in particular, to its claims about the "mutual relation between protection and obedience". For a discussion of the role that spectacles of violence play in constituting power, see Menge (2019).

28. For an extensive discussion, see Brito Vieira (2009, p. 118ff.).

29. I am not offering the pretense account as a solution to the collective action problems in the state of nature that have been discussed extensively in the literature (see Eggers 2011; Newey 2008, pp. 69–83). Since pretense involves action, it would be rational for individuals to adopt this stance only if they have the assurance that others will also adopt it. Without explaining why it would be rational for individuals to adopt this pretense, the pretense account does not provide a satisfying way out of the state of nature. I argue in section 5 below that the legitimizing function of Hobbes's myth does not require

Social reality can never fully live up to the images that power needs to project of itself. That is particularly clear in Hobbes's myth, in which the sovereign is presented as capable of overwhelming any attempt to challenge her power. In reality, even the most powerful agents are indebted to others for support, and their power is consequently always limited and precarious. But this gap between power's image and any realistic description of it is not a defect of Hobbes's account of empowerment. Rather, it reveals an important insight about the ontology of power: Power can exist only if it is misrepresented.

5. The Pragmatic Structure of Hobbes's Myth

I have distilled two important insights from Hobbes's account of empowerment: Reproducing social power requires representing it, and, more specifically, it involves a form of constitutive misrecognition. In this section, I will discuss the mythical form of Hobbes's account. One might ask how a mythical story could provide any insights into the ontology of power. To answer this question, I will discuss the pragmatic function of Hobbes's myth and consider how its complex structure serves that function. Drawing on Quill R. Kukla's (published as Rebecca Kukla 2002, 2002a) argument of the mythical legitimation of authority, I argue that Hobbes's myth calls on its readers to make themselves into agents that are bound by political authority. The myth is an attempt to legitimize authority by telling a story about its origin. But it is not and cannot be a literally true story; what does the legitimizing is the *telling* of the story. Since power requires ongoing social support, understanding the structure of power-legitimizing myths is central to an account of power's ontology. In particular, it draws our attention to the performative character (in J. L. Austin's sense) of conceptions of power.

Myths are told to make sense of the present, and Hobbes's institution myth specifically is told to legitimize political authority by telling a story about its origin (see Kukla 2000, p. 165). To understand how

a coherent chronological account of the origin of authority, or what Newey (2008, pp. 69–86) has called a story-based justification.

his origin story serves this role, it will be instructive to compare it to two alternative myths. Hobbes alludes to these myths in *Leviathan's* dedication, where he suggests that he is trying to avoid both views "that contend, on one side for too great Liberty, and on the other side for too much Authority" (Hobbes 1996, p. 3). The former locates the source of power in the consent of the people, understood as a free-standing collective entity, while the latter takes it to be based on divine ordination (see Skinner 1999, p. 24). I will first consider how Hobbes responds to the divine ordination myth and return to the other myth below. The divine ordination myth suggests that power does not require social support, since it has an extra-social source. But the point of telling such an origin story is to give subjects reasons for compliance. The telling of this story is thus an implicit acknowledgment that power depends on compliance.[30] As a result, the myth is pragmatically incoherent: It calls for support, and yet the story it tells to legitimize this demand suggests that this support is not required.[31]

Hobbes's legitimation myth does not characterize power as self-sufficient. Instead, it tells a story of individuals creating a "common power" by agreeing to obey and support it, thereby recognizing a collective authority to hold them accountable if they fail to play their part in the necessary social alignment. This myth locates the origin of power in collective social action rather than an extra-social origin. But, as we have seen, there is a twist to the story: Hobbes's mythical individuals cannot institute power in good faith. To properly align their actions, they have to pretend that a power that can reliably affect their actions and punish disobedience already exists independently of their actions.

30. Moreover, if *de facto* power is a necessary condition for legitimate authority, this also implies that this authority depends on some form of recognition—for example, in the form of actively participating in the social alignment that constitutes power.

31. Recognizing this pragmatic incoherence makes sense of Hobbes's worry that public claims about the divine origin of political power cause political conflict. If individuals forget that power depends on compliance, they are more likely to fail to do their part in constituting a stable social order.

This means that they have to inhabit two seemingly incompatible perspectives, one that takes power to be a product of their own creation and one that takes it to exist independently of their actions. As Noel Malcolm (2002) has put it:

> […] although Hobbes's theory instructs the people that the sovereign is merely an artificial person, representing the collective identity of which they are the real constituents, at the same time it requires them to believe in the 'person' of the commonwealth as something outside them and greater than any of them. (p. 228)

Since power is not self-sufficient, it needs to be instituted through collective action. Each individual has to take responsibility for doing their part, which makes it pragmatically necessary to emphasize the collective origin of power. But for individuals to successfully align their actions, they have to imagine power as something that already exists independently of their actions. Neither perspective alone is sufficient to make sense of the reproduction of power, and yet they do not fit together coherently.

We can make sense of this tension by attending to the pragmatic structure of the myth in which it appears. When Hobbes's individuals treat power as a given, they are forgetting their constitutive role in creating it. But Hobbes's readers need not do the same. His account of representation helps us see that the image that these individuals have of power is not supposed to be a literal description of how things are. Rather, it is shown to play a performative role: Hobbes's individuals institute power by misrecognizing it as already existing. Hobbes does not fully dispense with the idea that power is self-sufficient; rather, he subsumes it in his own origin myth to emphasize its performative role (see Kukla 2000, p. 198). This insight allows us to reevaluate the disagreement between consensual and conflictual theories that I discussed earlier. Consider first conflictual theories, which characterize power as a robust capacity that can be used to prevail in conflict. Rather than treating this conception of power as a literal description

of social reality, we can recognize that it plays an important role in the social reproduction of power. Its reproduction requires misrecognizing power as a robust, static feature, even if real power can never fully live up to this conception.

A parallel insight emerges for consensual theories of power. If we claim that power is spontaneously created through cooperation, we treat the necessary social alignment as a given and forget the role that representations of social unity play in the alignment's reproduction. The continuous reproduction of social alignments requires that agents are assured of continued cooperation. Thus, no chronologically coherent story can locate the origin of power in a spontaneous event of cooperation. Whenever we try to imagine such an origin, we realize that cooperation can happen only if individuals find themselves *already* committed to align their actions. Moreover, even if an original cooperative event could be coherently imagined, it would not be sufficient to make sense of the reproduction of power, since it requires that the cooperation continues into the future. But the lack of a coherent chronological story is not a flaw in Hobbes's myth. Rather than being a literal description of power's origin, it serves its legitimizing function by calling on its readers to participate in creating the social unity necessary for political power and authority. Hobbes believes that individuals can align their actions to guarantee peace only if they see themselves as already bound to align them in a way that is not ultimately up to them.[32] This is why Hobbes rejects the second myth he mentions in the Leviathan's dedication, the idea that the origin of power is the people, understood as a freestanding entity with an independent capacity to form a will and act (see Skinner 1999, pp. 24–7). Taking social unity as a given, this myth forgets that unity is in constant need of reproduction. In order to reproduce power, people need

to be reminded to participate in its reproduction, and yet they cannot see this participation as something that is up to them.[33]

Consent thus plays a very specific role in a Hobbesian account of empowerment. Hobbes suggests that consent is necessary for legitimate political authority, but he interprets any acceptance of protection as a sign of consent, even if it is under the threat of death (see Hoekstra, p. 58ff.). That is a thin and controversial notion of consent, but even this thin kind of consent contributes to the reproduction of power: Agents who accept protection rather than choosing death help, through their forced cooperation, reproduce the power of the dominant agent. Since, for Hobbes, the effective capacity to provide protection and peace is central to legitimate political authority, a call on individuals to cooperate is a call to make sovereign power legitimate. But this kind of consent requires that those who are cooperating recognize themselves as already vulnerable to someone's power; consequently, it cannot be an original source of power. The appeal to consent is thus not in the first place a literal description of power's nature but instead a demand for cooperation. Consensual theories of power seem to identify spontaneous, unforced consent as an original source of power. Despite important differences between their accounts, both Arendt and Searle hold that all political power, even if it involves the effective use of force, originates from non-coercive communicative relationships or acts. But, as we have seen, this cannot be an accurate description of how power is reproduced. Instead, attention to the complex pragmatic structure of Hobbes's myth suggests that appeals to consent may be playing a performative role. What lends plausibility to both conflictual *and* consensual theories is that they appeal to conceptions that play a central role in the reproduction of power.

This analysis supports a critical look at the ideological function of consensual conceptions of power. Consider, for example, Charles

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32. This way of interpreting *Leviathan* is in line with what Kinch Hoekstra (2006) has called Hobbes's "doctrine of doctrines", which holds that "subjects cannot rightfully publish doctrines contrary to those laid down by the sovereign as necessary for their peace and defence" (47).

33. This makes sense of Hobbes's worry that claims about the divine origin of political power cause political conflict: If individuals forget that power depends on compliance, they are more likely to fail to do their part in constituting social order.

Mills's (2000, 2009) criticism of John Rawls's contractarian theory of justice, which takes as its starting point a consensual social ontology of society as a "cooperative venture for mutual advantage". Mills points out that, by foregrounding questions about fair cooperation, Rawls's theory fails to explore the normative implications of white racial domination, conquest, and violence, all of which have been central to the making of the modern world (2009, p. 173). The above analysis suggests that the claim about society's cooperative nature masks a demand to continue cooperating. Moreover, since it characterizes this cooperative nature as a fixed fact, the consensual social ontology obscures the coercive sources of cooperation. It is an important insight of the social contract tradition that sociopolitical institutions are artificial human creations, but this does not entail that their origin lies in spontaneous consent (Mills 2000, p. 447). Any real cooperation occurs in the context of pre-existing social and material conditions that shape how agents can act. Powerful social institutions may expand society's collective capacities, but they are often appropriated for particular interests and used as a means of domination. Because consensual theories such as Searle's take a static approach to power and do not concern themselves with how power is reproduced, they cannot explore the performative and ideological roles of appeals to consent.

Hobbes's origin myth is instructive not because it could help us locate the origin of power but because it draws our attention to a different pragmatic role of conceptions of power. Neither the appeal to power as a robust capacity that Hobbes's mythical individuals must make nor Hobbes's own appeal to consent should be read as literal descriptions of social reality. Instead, they play a performative role in Hobbes's call on readers to reproduce power by acting as if it already existed independently of their actions. Since power requires ongoing social support and legitimation, it should not be surprising that the structure of power-legitimizing myths is central to understanding power. With that in mind, we can reevaluate the apparent conflict between consensual and conflictual theories of power. On their face, these theories are usually formulated as attempts to describe or explain aspects of social reality, not as normative demands. But they draw on everyday experiences and conceptions, and we should not assume that the pragmatic role that these everyday conceptions play is that of literal descriptions. In the following two sections, I will further develop this point and explore how everyday power ascriptions involve fictional expectations that help constitute power.

6. Money as Power and the Articulative Effect of Fictions

The reproduction of power is premised upon an ontology of power as robust, stable, and self-sufficient. Even though the messy reality of social life can never fully live up to this idea, it is built into our social practices. While this may seem like an odd conclusion, it is already familiar to us from the ontology of money. The use of money is premised upon an ontology of intrinsically stable monetary value, even though in practice the value of money is always precarious. Drawing on the work of the economic sociologists Jens Beckert (2016) and Geoffrey Ingham (2004, 2008), I argue in this section that the use of money involves fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. Money is a form of power; it gives agents an ability to affect the actions of others. Specifically, it gives its holders an abstract purchasing power, a claim to receive goods and services from others. Moreover, the reproduction of stable monetary value faces the same problem as the reproduction of political power: It involves a collective capacity that can be and often is appropriated by particular interests and used to prevail in social conflict (see Ingham 2008, p. 67), raising the question of how the necessary collective support is reproduced. Exploring money's ontology will allow us to extend the pretense account of empowerment beyond the centralized form of power that Hobbes had in mind. It will also be an opportunity to clarify further the sense in which expectations involved in ascriptions of power are fictional.

The proper functioning of money requires a "working fiction of an invariant monetary standard" (Mirowski 1991, p. 580; see also Ingham 2004, p. 84; Beckert 2016, pp. 105–9). Money can function as a medium of exchange and a store of value only if we can expect that it will retain

its value in the future. The value need not be strictly invariant, but the devaluation of money through inflation has to be slow and predictable (Beckert 2016, p. 106). Older monetary systems tried to secure this expectation by tying monetary value to objects presumed to have extra-social value, such as precious metals. In the case of capitalist credit-money, central banks bear principal responsibility for maintaining a fixed value. Only if monetary value does not greatly fluctuate is it possible to coordinate supply and demand in large-scale, impersonal markets. Moreover, long-term debt contracts require stable money because this gives lenders the confidence that their interest is not eroded by inflation. Since modern credit-money is created through the creation of private and public debt, its use is based on the assumption that debts will be repaid in the future, which in turn is based on expectations of future economic performance (Ingham 2008, pp. 65–91). Accepting money in exchange or using it as a store of value requires acting on the assumption that a particular kind of future will come to be.

The projection of future monetary stability relies on an idealization that disregards possible futures in which money fails to retain its value. The monetary future is uncertain in the sense that actors cannot fully understand all the relevant factors influencing the future value of money (Beckert 2016, p. 45). Even reasonable confidence in the stability of money can be disappointed in unexpected financial crises. Moreover, the successful maintenance of money's value requires the continuous efforts of central banks as well as governments, private banks, credit-rating agencies, etc. (Ingham 2008, p. 79). But since we need to assume a future in which money retains its value to use it intelligibly, the possibility that these efforts fail, as they sometimes do, has to be disregarded. As John Beckert puts it: "[…] to create belief in the stability of money, its future value must be successfully feigned" (2016, p. 108). This "feigning" does not require that individuals privately imagine a particular future; I may well be pondering the possibility of a severe financial crisis as I use money. However, for my use of it to make sense, I have to *act* as if its value were guaranteed to be stable.

In Kukla's words, the assumption of an invariant monetary value is "a transcendental condition of my coherent use of money" (2002a, p. 69).

Because they have constitutive effects, idealized expectations of monetary stability need not necessarily be false or unjustified. A stable monetary future comes about if and because enough agents act on these expectations. If banks are not convinced of a stable economic future, they are less likely to enter into debt-contracts, with the consequence that economic performance will likely slow down. In contrast, if people are convinced that the value of money is stable, they are more likely to engage in economic interactions that will help keep the value of money stable. That means that fictional expectations about money's future value are not necessarily false. They often *become* true because they have a constitutive effect (Beckert 2016, pp. 65, 72).[34] By acting on the assumption of stable monetary value, say by granting a loan or by accepting payment in the form of money, I help to stabilize money's value. Therefore, we should understand expectations about stable monetary value not as claims about already-determined truths but as akin to performatives, which make it the case that money continues to have value.

The point of characterizing idealized expectations about money as fictional is not to make their truth or justification an issue but rather to draw attention to their role in articulating social possibilities. Joseph Rouse (2015, p. 300) has pointed out that even our conception of *literary* fictions would be too narrow if we understood them merely as representations of non-existent situations. The primary point of a fictional work like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is not to *represent* non-existing persons. Rather, the book's fictional universe *articulates* a set of character traits and their development.[35] Focusing on "three or four families in a country village", Austen's novel provides a controlled setting in which the complex consequences of a few selected features and their relations can be elaborated. Moreover, because

34. See also Kukla (2002a, p. 69, fn. 2).

35. The example is Catherine Elgin's (cited in Rouse 2015, p. 303).

this articulation "draws upon, plays with, and is ultimately accountable to the larger material-discursive setting within which it works" (Rouse 2015, p. 300), the complex domain of possibilities that it articulates can help Austen's readers understand themselves, their actions, and their relationships to other agents in new ways.

Similarly, the point of the working fiction of stable money is not to represent a non-existing fact. Rather, it helps articulate complex ways in which social agents can relate their present and future actions to one another. Money is an abstract and transferable claim; it abstracts from the concrete material features of goods and services for which it can be exchanged and from the idiosyncrasies of particular debtor-credit relations (see Ingham 2004, p. 72). This abstraction makes it possible to use money to plan for the future despite uncertainty of what we and others will need and want; in Beckert's words, it "absorbs uncertainty, buys time, and calms actors" (2016, p. 106). The expectation of stable monetary value allows agents to engage in complex multilateral exchanges and enter long-term, anonymous debt relations. By articulating complex ways in which agents can relate their own actions to others' actions, it facilitates social relations that would otherwise not be possible. Of course, this general increase in "societal infrastructural power" does not affect and benefit all actors in the same way (see Ingham 2008, p. 67). Struggles over how money is concretely instituted and reproduced are thus inevitable. But if money is to be stable at all, this requires that agents act as if it were already valuable on its own and disregard these potential conflicts as they use it.

We can further generalize this discussion of money by noting that all power ascriptions involve an expectation of stability under conditions of uncertainty. To ascribe power to an agent is to expect that they will continue to be able to affect others' actions in the future, whatever else may happen.[36] But the future toward which such expecta-

tions are directed is uncertain. Empowerment is not a literal transfer of personal strength or other individual features. It depends on the ongoing willingness of aligned agents to comply with the directions of the powerholder, or, in the case of money, to honor the abstract claim that it represents. Since an alignment of actions is never guaranteed to persist, it is always possible that it will unravel. In treating someone as powerful in social interaction, I have to practically disregard these potential futures. I have to abstract from the specific goals and attitudes of many aligned agents and their relationships to one another, particularly insofar as they might cause conflict.[37]

The above discussion of money's ontology has shown that the pretense account does not just apply to the centralized form of power that Hobbes had in mind but also applies to more distributed forms of power. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop this point much further, but I briefly want to sketch how the account can be applied to disciplinary power. Michel Foucault has explicitly contrasted his analysis with Hobbes's: "We must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power" (1980, p. 102). In particular, he has challenged the assumption that all power resides in a central, sovereign position and extends outward. Instead, Foucault draws our attention to how power is reproduced in all social relationships and, in particular, through the bodies of individuals. But these important points do not challenge the main point of the pretense account. Consider Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon as a blueprint of disciplinary power. Its design ensures that prisoners cannot see when they are being observed, so that they have to continuously act *as if* they were. It thus promises a continuous, automatic, and anonymous functioning of power:

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36. In Hobbes's myth, individuals have to act as if everyone will continue to support the sovereign if the need arises, even in cases of conflict or resistance. Hampton (1986), for example, emphasizes the role of future-oriented expectations: "[…] the sovereign-elect can use *the prospect of future selective*

incentives to help resolve the conflict in this situation and defuse the dangers of shortsightedness" (p. 182, emphasis added).

37. Hobbes's description of the state of nature makes this abstraction seem natural by emphasizing the similarities and shared interests of individuals. But we should read this characterization in light of Hobbes's pragmatic goal of bringing about unity by (mis)representing it. Since social unity is not given, individuals need to abstract from the possibility of conflict in order to collectively constitute power (see also Douglass 2014, p. 142).

[…] to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be *a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it*. (Foucault 1977, p. 201, emphasis added)[38]

But the image of a "machine of power" ascribes a unity to the arrangement to which no real practice can live up.[39] Real-world disciplinary institutions need to mobilize people and things to conduct surveillance, document performances, and carry out sanctions for deviations, and they may fail to align them properly. Nonetheless, those who are subject to these practices have to assume that deviations will have consequences, an assumption that is built into the Panopticon's architecture. Acting on this assumption, individuals regulate their behavior, and by doing so, they add themselves to a social alignment that constitutes power. As Foucault puts this point: "The prison is […] a machine whose convict-workers are both the cogs and the products" (p. 242). The image of a machine of power is built into the material structure of disciplinary practices, and while social reality can never fully live up to it, it nonetheless helps to constitute power. As with money, disciplinary power does not require a central position from which all power is exercised. However, it is premised on the assumption that social institutions will have reliable effects on agents' actions (and their dispositions to act), even though it is only by acting on this assumption that this power is constituted.

38. For further references to this image, which are not restricted to the specific structure of the Panopticon, see, for example, pp. 164, 177, 242. By emphasizing this machine metaphor, Foucault is explicating the self-understanding that organizes disciplinary practices, not using the machine metaphor himself. He quotes a contemporary who comments on Bentham's plans: "The English reveal their genius for mechanics in everything they do […] and they want their buildings to function as a machine subject to the action of a single motor" (endnote 13, p. 319).

39. See Foucault's (1977) discussion of the "failure" of the prison (pp. 264–8).

7. Pretense in Everyday Power Ascriptions

As we navigate the social world, we frequently experience power as something that exists independently of our own attitudes or actions, something that can negatively affect us and is recalcitrant to our resistance. We might be able to criticize, circumvent, or fight it, but we still must navigate it. In other words, ordinary power ascriptions seem to be recognitions of existing social facts. In this last section, I want to wrap up the discussion by showing that even the most ordinary experiences of power involve fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. As an example, I will discuss a confrontation with a police officer, because it seems to involve most clearly the recognition of power as a robust capacity that exists completely independently of my own actions.

Everyday power ascriptions, which are often implicit in how we act and treat others, seem to be mere observations of social facts. When a police officer stops me and demands identification, I am likely to comply because I take the officer to have power over me. The officer's commands might be immediately compelling, or the "force" of her commands might present itself by way of potential consequences of disobeying: arrest; being convicted of a crime; losing my job, my freedom, my social standing, my ability to vote, etc. Even if, on reflection, I would not accept as legitimate the officer's claim to authority, I know that I am unlikely to avoid such consequences if I disobey. I have to act on the assumption that she can rely on others to support her actions and implement those consequences. Thus, as I comply with her orders, I treat power as something that exists independently of my own attitudes or actions. My ascription of power seems to be an observation of an already existing social fact.[40]

However, this is only part of the story. For one, the consequences of non-compliance do not obtain automatically but have to be actively

40. This insight is echoed by Paolo Freire's observation that people who are oppressed often have "a diffuse, magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor" (1970, p. 64). My above argument is that this is a general feature of our experience of power to which we are subjected.

implemented by other agents. Suppose I disregard the officer's order, and I get arrested as a result. I could challenge the arrest in court, hoping that I will be able to convince a judge that the demand for identification was illegitimate. If I succeed, it will have turned out that the officer did not have the power that I initially assumed she had (though she still had some power). The likelihood of such an outcome depends on the circumstances. The point here is simply that for effects of power to materialize, the powerholder has to call upon a network of social relationships to implement these effects. Many others, such as other police officers, bystanders, judges, correction officials, employers, etc. will have to align their actions continuously to bring them about. It is possible — though often unlikely — that this support will not materialize. In treating the police officer as powerful, I disregard these possible futures. In that sense, ordinary power ascriptions involve fictional expectations.

In addition, my actions are likely to affect how others will act and thereby can affect the bases of the officer's power. Social alignments are precarious; they must be continuously reconstituted by the ongoing activities of the aligned agents. If I do not comply with the officer's demand, I effectively challenge her and the police's public presentation as powerful. If the officer or the police fail to answer this challenge, this may give others reason to engage in similar challenges. An active response is required to affirm the continuing effectiveness of the police's power. But such a response would require the police force to shift its plans to an effort to publicly prove its enforcement power because it cannot rely anymore on the presumption that it has effective power. If enough individuals refuse to show an ID, for example, the police may soon be overwhelmed by trying to enforce this demand. Sometimes, whole regimes collapse more or less overnight because they appear weak and, as a result, lose the necessary social support. In light of the possibility that alignments collapse, powerholders have good reason to signal that they are willing to make challenges very costly for subjects (see Luhmann 2002, pp. 46–7). But even such threats are risky; their enforcement may fail or be so severe that it

undermines the support from other agents. It is always an open question whether an alignment is going to hold up in the future, and it cannot hold up unless enough agents continue to ascribe power. Thus, the police's power depends on the disposition of many agents to treat the police as robustly powerful.

Ordinary power ascriptions can thus not be understood as mere descriptions of social reality. Ascribing power to an agent (or failing to do so) will likely make a difference to what is purportedly described. That is not to suggest that it is easy to undermine power by simply refusing to ascribe it. The potential costs of a challenge usually make compliance the prudent response for subordinate agents. I have good reasons to ascribe power to a police officer and treat them accordingly, even though I cannot rule out the possibility that the social support I presume will not materialize. Structures of power can thus become relatively robust even though they depend on continuous social support. Nonetheless, any ascription of power involves an idealizing assumption: It assumes that the necessary social alignments will persist, even though this is never guaranteed. Acting on this idealization has a constitutive effect: By complying with the police officer's demand to identify myself, I add myself to the social alignment that is the basis of her power. By doing what I am told, I am acting in concert with her. She achieves her goal without mobilizing aligned agents and exposing her presentation as powerful to a crucial test.[41] Moreover, my compliance may provide others with evidence of her power, giving them a reason to comply as well. Thus, by treating someone as powerful, I am doing more than simply responding to already-existing social facts; I act on an idealized account of the future and, by doing so, help bring about that future.

It is not an objection to this analysis that we usually have good evidence that the police will be able to enforce their commands. As I discussed above, the point of characterizing power ascriptions as fictional

41. It is widely recognized that the mere anticipation of power's exercise can have power effects — see, for example, Lukes (2005, pp. 45ff, 124), Luhmann (2002, pp. 46, 51–4).

expectations is not to assess their truth or justification but rather to focus on their articulating effect. This effect distinguishes power ascriptions from ordinary capacity ascriptions to material objects, even though superficially they may appear to be very similar. When I make justified claims about the capacities of a toaster oven, based on my knowledge of its internal mechanism or its past performance, such claims can turn out to be false (maybe the oven is not working because of a short circuit). But this does not mean that the claim involves fictional expectations. The oven has a determinate internal structure in virtue of which it does or does not have its capacity, and this structure is not affected by my claims about it. In contrast, power ascriptions are vindicated only in a future that is yet to be shaped. Whether the officer will be successful in imposing particular social consequences on me depends on the continuous reproduction of her relationships with other agents.

In contrast to an oven's internal structure, a social alignment is not like a machine waiting to be turned on to crank out an effect. Nor is it — to use a different metaphor commonly used for power — like a material resource that is ready to be picked up and put to use. Social alignments are never simply present; they exist only insofar as they are continuously reconstituted by the ongoing activities of the aligned agents and in light of what other agents might do in the future — this is the central insight of Wartenberg's dynamic view of power (1990, pp. 163–81). It is not an epistemic point about the difficulties of predicting future action; it is an ontological point about power's way of being. In other words, uncertainty about the future of social relationships is not an epistemic limitation of our ability to ascribe power but the very point of making power ascriptions. To act meaningfully in a complex social world with an open future, I have to assume that there are relatively stable structures that make the effects of my actions and those of others predictable. It is no accident that we often think of power as a static feature — for example, in analogy to physical strength, mechanisms, or material resources. But while these are, strictly speaking, misrepresentations, they have constitutive effects. It is this insight into

the constitutive effects of misrepresenting power as a robust, static capacity that helps us reconcile the insights of Wartenberg's dynamic view with the commonsense conception of power as a robust capacity used to prevail in conflict.

The future-oriented nature of power can be usefully thought of as a form of credit. Ascribing power to a police officer involves expectations about her future ability to bring about certain consequences. If I do not challenge her commands, they may affect me (e.g., getting me to comply) without her having to "cash in" these expectations. In addition, my compliance can bolster her credit because it communicates the continuing stability of her power to others. She may be able to draw on this credit in her interactions without having to prove, in each case, that it is backed. When individuals do challenge her power, she will have to "cash in" and draw on the support of aligned agents. But the more complex the underlying alignments are, the more stable and unchallengeable power can appear, since individual challenges can be diffused more easily. Despite its future-oriented, dynamic character, power can thus appear as quite robust. Nonetheless, having credit relies on the continuing dispositions of others to defer repayment. Similarly, the continuous reproduction of power requires that individuals regularly defer, acting as if power were robust rather than testing its strength. As such, it is never simply present; rather, it essentially involves a projection of stability into the future. Power is not a static feature, and yet it always depends on fictional expectations about its continuing stability and robustness.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I developed a pretense account of power, arguing that power ascriptions involve fictional expectations oriented toward an open future. Social interactions are premised upon an ontology of power as a robust capacity, even though social reality can never fully live up to it. Acting on this premise helps to reproduce the social relations on which power is based. Power is never simply grounded in

a present structure; it is always based on imaginative projections of future stability.

I situated my account by comparing it to two common ways of thinking about the ontology of power. Conflictual theories conceive power as a robust capacity that can be used to prevail in conflict, while consensual theories emphasize power's cooperative character. Both kinds of theories find plausible starting points in everyday experiences of power, but these starting points are in tension with one another and thus yield seemingly incompatible theoretical accounts. We can make sense of the tension by paying attention to the pragmatic character of everyday power ascriptions. On their face, they look like literal descriptions of social reality, but these descriptions often mask calls to participate in reproducing power by acting as if it already existed independently. Recognizing this helps us make sense of some of the deep and persistent disagreements in the literature on power. It also encourages us to critically examine the ideological roles that conceptions and images of power may play.

I developed the pretense account by drawing on Hobbes's origin myth. The myth provides a useful model to think through how power is socially reproduced even though it can be used against the interests of the individuals whose support it requires. Moreover, its mythical form is instructive because it draws attention to the performative character of representations of power. However, the pretense account developed here is not tied to Hobbes's focus on a centralized form of political power. The reproduction of all social power requires that agents act on fictional expectations oriented toward an open future, as my discussions of money and disciplinary power suggest. The use of money is not generally oriented toward a powerful center, but it does require that agents act on the presumption of stable monetary value. Similarly, in the case of disciplinary power, power is not imagined as flowing from a political center but is exercised within local relationships — for example, between prisoners and guards, or between students and teachers. But its reproduction requires that individuals act

on the expectation that there are relatively stable structures that make the effects of my actions and those of others predictable.

The reproduction of power requires ongoing social support and legitimation. It makes sense then that we can learn something about the ontology of power from power-legitimizing myths. In particular, we learn that representations of power often play constitutive roles in reproducing power. Social and political theorists who are interested in power need to pay more attention to the performative force of images and conceptions of power. Doing so will help us make sense of some of the deep disagreements about the nature of power. They may not be signs of epistemic failure but instead a reflection of the fact that the constitution of power involves fictional expectations.[42]

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