



# The role of power in social explanation

European Journal of Social Theory  
2018, Vol. 21(1) 22–38  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1368431017714426  
journals.sagepub.com/home/est



**Torsten Menge**

*Northwestern University in Qatar, Qatar*

## Abstract

Power is often taken to be a central concept in social and political thought that can contribute to the explanation of many different social phenomena. This article argues that in order to play this role, a general theory of power is required to identify a stable causal capacity, one that does not depend on idiosyncratic social conditions and can thus exert its characteristic influence in a wide range of cases. It considers three promising strategies for such a theory, which ground power in (1) the ability to use force, (2) access to resources, or (3) collective acceptance. It shows that these strategies fail to identify a stable causal capacity. The lack of an adequate general theory of power suggests that the concept lacks the necessary unity to play the broad explanatory role it is often accorded.

## Keywords

power, social capacities, social explanation, social ontology, theories of power

Power is a central concept in social and political thought. It is often taken to play an important and broad explanatory role.<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell went so far as to say that power is ‘[t]he fundamental concept in social science . . . , in the same sense that Energy is the fundamental concept in physics’ (2004: 4). The ‘laws of social dynamics,’ he suggested, have to be formulated in terms of power. The idea that there are strict social laws will find few contemporary supporters, but the assumption that power can contribute to the explanation of many different social phenomena is still widely shared. My aim in this article is to assess whether there can be a general theory of power that would underwrite this broad role in social explanation. Such a theory would have to ground power in a stable structure or mechanism, allowing power to serve as an explanatory variable in a

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## Corresponding author:

Torsten Menge, Northwestern University in Qatar, Education City, P.O. Box 34102, Doha, Qatar.  
Email: torsten.menge@northwestern.edu

wide range of different cases. My answer will be negative: I argue that we have reason not to expect a general theory of power.

In the first part of the article, after briefly situating my question in the broader debate about the concept, I will consider how we should conceptualize power for it to play a general explanatory role. I argue that we would need to understand it as a stable causal capacity, i.e. as a causal factor that does not depend on idiosyncratic social background conditions and can thus exert its characteristic influence in a wide range of cases. As such, it would allow us to extrapolate from particular situations and to explain a broad variety of social phenomena. In the second part of the article, I will consider three strategies to substantiate such an understanding of power and argue that all of these strategies fail. This result, while not definitive, gives us reason to doubt that power can play the broad role in social explanation envisioned by Russell and others.

## **Social explanation and power as a causal capacity**

### *Power and its role in social explanation*

My starting point is a relatively extensive definition of power: Power is an agent's ability to have an effect on other agents' actions or on their dispositions to act.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the kind of power that social and political scientists are particularly interested in is a *social* ability in the sense that an agent has power in virtue of the social position that she is in and not merely in virtue of her individual physiological and psychological properties. For example, my boss has power over me only insofar as other agents are aligned with her, so that if she fires me, the HR department will stop paying me, security will not let me into the building, the IT department will revoke my access to the company server, my coworkers will stop collaborating with me, etc. It is socially mediated power in this sense that is at issue in this article.

Power in this socially mediated sense is often taken to play a broad role in social explanations. Social scientists use the concept, for example, to explain the creation, maintenance, and change of social structures, the behavior of individual agents, and the outcomes of social interactions. Power plays an explanatory role insofar as the presence (or absence) of power makes a difference to these explananda. More contentiously, some consider power to be a causal factor that is relatively context-independent and can therefore contribute to the explanation of a wide range of social phenomena. For example, so-called realists in International Relations argue that international politics is largely shaped by the distribution of power among states (Guzzini, 2013: 20). Not everyone writing about power or using the concept understands it as a context-independent variable (and I will come back to an alternative conception at the end of the article). Here, the argument is expressly aimed only at those who do.

The precise scope of power's explanatory role has been an important issue, for example, in the power debate in twentieth-century American political science (in International Relations, the debate between Baldwin (1979) and Keohane and Nye (1977) revolved around similar issues). This debate was initially motivated by questions about the distribution of power in the post-war United States and its effects. C. Wright Mills argued that power was distributed in a radically unequal way and was mostly in the hands

of a 'power elite' who 'by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women' (1956: 3). Robert Dahl and other so-called *power pluralists* rejected Mills's thesis, arguing instead that power was widely distributed and that there was no dominating group in US society.

While this may seem like a straightforward empirical question, the debate quickly turned to methodological, conceptual, and ontological issues. Dahl (1958) criticized Mills for not specifying the decision-making context, the participating agents, and the target issues he was talking about, thereby making his claim about the distribution of power untestable. Dahl argued that we are entitled to claim that a group of actors has power only if, in a situation appropriately specified, the preferences of the group regularly prevail over the preferences of others. In turn, critics such as Steven Lukes (2005) have argued that Dahl inappropriately limits the behavior that counts as evidence for the presence of power by relying on an overly narrow conception of what power is. What started as a seemingly empirical disagreement became a dispute about the nature of power. Lukes has argued that this dispute cannot ultimately be resolved because the concept of power is essentially contested, involving 'a set of value assumptions which predetermine the range of its empirical application' (2005: 30). But Lukes has also emphasized power's explanatory role; for him, one of the aims of the power debate is 'to represent it [power] in a way that is suited for description and explanation' (2005: 63). This suggests that the dispute between Dahl and Lukes is, at least in part, about power's role in social explanations.

Dahl insists that in order to use the concept of power meaningfully, it needs to be properly specified. This means that it would be improper, for example, to generalize from influence found in one issue-area to influence in other areas:

Neither logically nor empirically does it follow that a group with a high degree of influence over one scope will necessarily have a high degree of influence over another scope within the same system. This is a matter to be determined empirically. (Dahl, 1958: 465)

In other words, for Dahl power talk seems to refer to distinct single-track dispositions, i.e. dispositions that manifest in one way only.<sup>3</sup> That an agent has the ability to influence decisions in one area gives us no reason to believe that she has this ability in another.

Lukes (2005), on the other hand, believes that power can manifest in many different ways (hence his talk of different 'faces' of power). On his view, power is something more akin to a multi-track disposition. It is the ability to have an effect on other agents with respect to a whole host of issues, in a range of situations, and in a number of different ways. He explicitly advocates for 'seeing power in an all-embracing way', such that 'attributions of power range across issues and contexts (actual and potential)' (2005: 110). If we understand power in this way, then the fact that an agent can prevail over others in one issue-area gives us at least some reason to expect that she will prevail in other issue-areas as well; in addition, it can also provide evidence for the covert operation of power (2005: 64).

This disagreement between Dahl and Lukes has implications for the scope of power's explanatory role: For Dahl, power attributions in one case do not usually license extrapolation to other cases, while Lukes thinks that they can contribute to explanations in

different cases. In the following, I will explore how we can assess this disagreement. What has to be the case for power to play the broad, context-transcending explanatory role that Lukes envisions?

### *Two challenges to power's explanatory role*

While many authors believe that power has an important explanatory role to play, some have explicitly challenged its explanatory utility (see e.g. Barnes, 1988, Guzzini, 2013; Latour, 1986; Morris, 2002). To specify my own contribution to this debate, I want to consider two challenges by Peter Morriss (2002) in this section. Morriss's first argument is that power cannot in principle play an explanatory role because of its dispositional character; I will suggest that this argument fails. Morriss's second challenge is that there can be no general theory of power, given the broad variety of power bases. While this is not sufficient to show that power cannot play *any* explanatory role, it would severely limit the explanatory power of the concept. It is this second point that will be the focus of the further discussion.

Morriss's first argument is an instance of a general objection to claims about the causal efficacy of dispositions: He argues that a dispositional property cannot provide an explanation because dispositions are identified in terms of their potential effects. A reference to opium's dormitive powers only tells us that opium induces sleepiness. While this allows us to predict what will happen when a person ingests it, it does not tell us what it is about opium that causes a person who takes it to fall asleep. Since power is a dispositional concept, it cannot play an explanatory role. Morriss concludes that power is not a 'crucial term in producing a (scientific) explanation of social and political phenomena' (2002: 43).

The claim that dispositions cannot play a role in causal explanations is philosophically controversial. It comes with a significant cost, ruling out many seemingly reasonable everyday and scientific explanations: The glass broke because it was fragile; I got a shock because I touched something electrically conductive; the man stood his ground because he was courageous (McKittrick, 2005). But Morriss's conclusion is too strong even if we grant that dispositions are distinct from their causal bases and that they are therefore causally inert. If we grant this, we should say, for example, that social scientists who talk about power in terms of resources are referring not to agents' abilities but to their causal bases. Knowledge about these causal bases will still be useful to understand a particular (realized) disposition and explain its manifestations. Just as cognitive scientists are interested in the causal bases of mental properties, social scientists are interested in the causal bases of the social abilities of agents. Insofar as our talk about power refers to the causal bases of abilities, or at least commits us to specific claims about those causal bases, it is relevant to causal explanations.

A dispositional approach to power is thus not incompatible with a causal approach. For power to be dispositional, it has to be the case that someone can have power without exercising it, and power talk surely is dispositional in this sense. But a particular agent will have power only in virtue of a causal base, and this causal base will play a role in explaining the effects of an agent's actions *when* they exercise (or otherwise manifest) their specific power. The causal base of an ability has causal relevance even if having the

ability is not sufficient for the effect. I conclude that Morriss's first argument does not establish the strong conclusion that power cannot play any explanatory role.

However, Morriss presents a second consideration that does not depend on controversial claims about the metaphysics of dispositions: He argues that there is no hope for a general theory of power. Social scientists might hope for a general account of the causal bases in virtue of which agents, in many different cases, have an ability to have an effect on the actions of others. Robert Dahl has (rather skeptically) articulated this hope as follows:

First (following the axiom that where there is smoke there is fire), if so many people at so many different times have felt the need to attach the label power, or something like it, to some Thing they believe they have observed, one is tempted to suppose that the Thing must exist; and not only exist, but exist in a form capable of being studied more or less systematically. (1957: 201)

Morriss argues that this expectation is unreasonable because 'one's powers are far too varied for even the most systematic synthesist to say anything general about them' (2002: 45). A general study of power is not promising because the causal bases of our abilities have little or nothing in common (consider, for example, the ability to lift 50 pounds, the ability to read, the ability to speak German, and the ability to get others to do something). Whatever general claims we can make about them will have little explanatory utility. This does not imply that power cannot play *any* explanatory role, but it raises the question how much explanatory depth the concept has.<sup>4</sup> Does it identify causal factors that can contribute to the explanation of many different phenomena?

Of course, social scientists are not concerned with all human abilities but mostly with the limited subset of our *social* abilities. A general theory of *social* power would help to unify our understanding of different kinds of social interactions, allow us to make predictions about the social effects of actions in a wide range of cases, and identify the features we need to manipulate in order to change the overall distribution of opportunities and constraints in society (Reiss, 2008). But it is an open question whether we can say anything general and informative with respect to social abilities; the question whether there is any explanatory unity to the concept of *social* power remains. The disagreement between Dahl and Lukes that I laid out above is about this question: Dahl believes that we always need to carefully specify the context because we cannot assume that the concept has any context-transcendent unity, while Lukes hopes that it is unified enough to contribute to explanations in a broad range of different cases.

### ***Power as a social capacity***

A general theory of (social) power would help us understand how agents can have an effect on the actions of others *in a wide range of cases*. In other words, we are looking for a theory that identifies causal bases (properties, structures, mechanisms, etc.) which are present and tend to be effective in many different social situations and with respect to many different outcomes. I will now argue that for this purpose power needs to be understood as a stable causal capacity and will discuss a number of implications of this idea.

It is generally accepted that power requires robustness of the following kind: For an agent to have power, her actions need to make a difference to the actions of others in a range of circumstances. If my boss can get her employees to work late *only* when they are in a generous mood, it would be inappropriate to attribute power to her. More specifically, authors like Weber (1978) suggest that for an agent to have power, she needs to be able to prevail even if the subordinate agent resists. But this kind of robustness is not sufficient for a concept of power with significant explanatory depth. An agent might be able to overcome another agent's resistance only because of the idiosyncratic conditions of a particular social situation, and in that case it does not allow us to extrapolate to other situations.

To see that, consider a variation of my earlier example: Suppose Boss has the ability to get others to work overtime even if they do not want to; say they are afraid that she is going to fire them if they refuse. But suppose Boss's firings have been effective in the past only because others in the company (the HR department, the IT department, security, other employees, etc.) have implemented her decisions. The reason why they have done so in the past is that everyone really likes Boss and cannot stand seeing her sad when things do not go her way. Boss's ability to fire employees and her ability to get her employees to work overtime are, in this case, based on the rather idiosyncratic features of the situation. If Boss became less lovable, if some of her peers started to care less about her feelings, or if relevant background conditions changed (for example, if a law prohibited companies from forcing employees to work overtime), she would lose those abilities. This idiosyncratic causal structure is not likely to be present in other situations, and even if it was, it is not likely to have the same effects.

I am not denying that Boss, in this case, has an ability to affect the actions of her subordinates. But the causal basis of this ability has no general explanatory utility. A similar causal structure will not help our explanations in different cases. We might want to explain, for example, why employees generally tend to work overtime without pay. Or, more ambitiously, we might want to explain how agents can affect the actions of other agents in a variety of relationships: between bosses and employees, between the government and its citizens, between teachers and students, between members of different racialized groups, etc. When we invoke the concept of power in these general explanatory projects, we assume that there is some informative general characterization of the social structures that makes such effects possible. But for power to play this role, it cannot depend on idiosyncratic factors.<sup>5</sup>

This means that we would need to understand power as a *stable* disposition, i.e. one with a causal base that tends to manifest its characteristic influence in a wide range of cases. Following Nancy Cartwright (1989, 1998), I will call such stable dispositions *causal capacities*. Causal capacities are tendencies in the sense that other causal factors might interfere with the production of the characteristic effect. A statement about a capacity, such as 'aspirins have the capacity to relieve headaches' (1989: 3), tells us what would occur when all interfering or countervailing factors are absent. However, a capacity can exert its characteristic influence and contribute to an overall effect even when interfering causal factors are present. In this sense, causal capacities are relatively stable even though they need not produce empirical regularities.

For our purposes, we are looking for what Julian Reiss (2008) has aptly called *social capacities*, capacities that depend on complex social structures, mechanisms, or

interactions. Jeffrey Isaac has previously proposed to understand power as ‘those capacities to act possessed by social agents in virtue of the enduring relations in which they participate’ (1987: 80). The power of teachers to grade assignments or to direct classroom activities, Isaac argues, is to be understood in terms of the nature of the enduring teacher-student relation, not in terms of contingent regularities of their behavior. Of course, this raises the question how we identify such enduring relations and in virtue of what they obtain; I will take up this question below. Here, the main point is that capacities do not reduce to regularities of behavior: A teacher may well fail to direct an unruly class because of countervailing factors, but this does not mean that the teacher does not have an enduring capacity based on the nature of the student-teacher relation.

Neither are regularities sufficient for establishing a causal capacity. The mere fact that her employees happen to regularly do what Boss tells them to do does not mean that Boss has a stable capacity to get them to do things. The regularity might simply depend on a fortuitous interaction of other factors (e.g., the employees might have independent motivations to do what Boss tells them to do). If the alignment were to break down, if the situation or the social background conditions were to change, we could not extrapolate to these situations. In contrast to an understanding of power as a causal capacity, an understanding that reduces power to regular patterns of behavior is thus not helpful for explanatory generalization.

So far, we have established only what it *would* take for power to play a broad, context-transcending role in social explanations: It needs to be a stable causal capacity. Whether such social capacities exist is an empirical question, though one that might be difficult to answer. Experimental control of social factors, by which we could isolate single capacities by controlling potential interfering factors, is usually out of reach for ethical and practical reasons (Reiss, 2008).<sup>6</sup> One alternative is to consider whether we can come up with a plausible theory or model that identifies social structures, mechanisms, or interactions that tend to produce characteristic effects in a wide range of cases (Cartwright, 1998). In the second part of the article, I will consider three initially promising candidates for such a theory and argue that they fail.

### Three substantive theories of power

For power to be useful in general, context-transcending explanatory projects, it has to be understood as a social capacity that can exert its characteristic influence in a wide range of cases because it does not depend on idiosyncratic social background conditions. I will now consider three candidate theories that attempt to identify structures or mechanisms that tend to allow agents to have an effect on the actions of others in a wide range of cases. I will argue that all of these initially promising strategies fail. While this is not a decisive argument against *all* potential theories, it gives us reason to be doubtful that a general theory of social power is possible.

As I pointed out at the beginning of the article, social scientists are interested primarily in socially mediated power, power that an agent has in virtue of her social position. A substantive theory that vindicates an understanding of social power as a capacity will have to make reference (among other things) to other agents and their abilities. The abilities of these aligned agents can either be social abilities or non-social

abilities (i.e. abilities agents have *not* in virtue of their social position). If the theory makes reference to their social abilities, we need a further account of the causal structure in virtue of which *those* abilities obtain (and do so in a relatively stable way), otherwise our account would be incomplete. Theories of power that simply presuppose the existence of stable social capacities, while useful and legitimate in some contexts, are of no use in finding a theory that is supposed to show that attributing a social capacity is warranted in the first place. In the following, I will consider three strategies which ground power: (1) in the (non-social) capacity to use force; (2) in the (non-social) capacity of agents to access and use material resources; and (3) in the collective acceptance of aligned agents.

### *Strategy 1: Coercion and the use of force*

So-called ‘coercive power’ is often understood as a paradigmatic form of power. Can coercion, in the sense of influencing or altering the will of a person by way of threats (Anderson, 2010), ground power understood as a capacity? This appears to be a plausible strategy because changing the incentive structure of other agents is generally an effective way of getting them to do things they would not have done otherwise. However, as formulated, the coercion strategy already assumes that the coercer has a stable capacity to affect the action of the coerced. A threatened person will reliably re-evaluate her options in light of the threat only if the coercer can reliably alter her incentive structure.<sup>7</sup> Suppose Boss threatens to fire Employee if he does not work overtime. Employee will take the threat seriously only if Boss actually has the power to fire Employee, and she can have this power only in virtue of standing in an appropriate social alignment. But our question was precisely what kind of social structures have a stable capacity; the coercion strategy at best presupposes the existence of such a structure, rather than characterizing the structure for us.

The strategy becomes more promising if we understand coercion more narrowly as the use of or the threat to use physical force (Anderson, 2002). The physical ability to use force provides a ground for effective threats that does not seem to depend on social conditions. Consider a standard case: Someone holds up a loaded gun and threatens to shoot me unless I give him my wallet. Suppose the threat is credible: The robber is a good shooter, his weapon is working, he is willing to shoot if necessary, and I have good reason to believe those things. The robber’s ability to injure me does not seem to depend on social structures and thus does not fall prey to the above objection. Could we ground social power in the non-social ability to use physical force?<sup>8</sup>

The problem with this strategy is that the non-social ability to use force alone does not yield a stable social capacity; Hobbes’s account of power illustrates this point nicely. In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes (1996) attempts to show how stable social power could be instituted in a state of nature in which it does not yet exist. In the state of nature, individuals can rely only on their own, non-social abilities; they can make no reliable use of means that require social cooperation because no one in the state of nature can trust others to act their part within a social alignment. An agent might have fortuitous opportunities to achieve her goals by using or threatening to use force. But given the conditions in the state of nature (equal strength and vulnerability), this is not sufficient to attribute a stable



capacity that is insensitive to changes in social background conditions. One agent can coerce another one to do something in a single case, but she cannot stabilize the conditions of her superiority because she would not be able to prevent others from overpowering her should the circumstances change even slightly. Hobbes argues that stable social power can only be instituted with the creation of sovereign power. But the sovereign has stable power only in virtue of a stable social alignment of agents who obey and support her commands. Thus, the use of force by itself is not sufficient to ground power as a stable capacity.

The robber in our example case does have a context-dependent ability to get his victim to hand over the wallet. Indeed, the threat of physical violence can plausibly secure compliance in many cases. But it lacks the explanatory depth we are looking for. Consider a slightly modified example, in which the robber forces her victim to sign over the deed to her house. Even if the victim complies by putting her signature on a piece of paper, that by itself is not sufficient for the robber to own the house or even to take physical control of it; a broader social background is required to facilitate these further effects. The scope of reliable effects that the threat of physical violence can secure *by itself* is relatively small; it is not sufficient to explain more significant social effects. The ability to use physical violence can play an important role in many social situations, but in order to have significant social effects, it has to be embedded in the right kind of social structure. Since we wanted to know what kind of social structure makes stable effects possible, the strategy to ground power in the ability to use physical force alone is inadequate.

### **Strategy 2: Access to resources**

The second strategy is to provide a substantive account of power in terms of resources. This is a promising strategy because resources are undoubtedly involved in many cases in which agents attempt to affect the actions of others. For example, if I have a resource that you need but do not have access to, you depend on me for access and thus have a motivation to do what I tell you to do in exchange for the resources (Emerson, 1962). Moreover, resources can often be used directly in the process of getting another agent to do something: A gun, for example, allows me to injure others in an effective way and can thus serve as an effective means of threat. A news organization is a social resource that allows me to widely distribute my views, influence public opinion, and thereby get others to do what they would not have done otherwise. Generalizing from such examples, the resource strategy claims that power is constituted by the possession of the appropriate resources (Dowding, 2008).

Nonetheless, this approach does not provide us with the theory needed to vindicate capacity attributions. First, it is an open question whether we can make any general claims about which resources in which circumstances provide an actor with stable power. Which resources reliably allow an agent to get other agents to do something depends on what the agent is trying to achieve. To use an example by David Baldwin (1979), the resources needed to deter a nuclear attack are likely to be very different from the resources needed to influence the trade policy of other countries. More broadly, as Stefano Guzzini (2016) points out in his discussion of Baldwin, we need to specify the

values, preferences, and skills of the involved agents. But the more specification is necessary, the less the account allows for extrapolation and generalization.

Second, even if we could come up with a general account of effective power resources, a more fundamental problem remains: 'Having resources' or having access to resources is itself a *social* ability that is attributed to an agent in virtue of standing in the right social alignment. This is obvious in the case of 'social resources'. It requires little reflection to see that the availability of such a resource requires a constantly reproducing network of social relationships in which some people have the capacity to reliably affect the actions of others. The idea of a 'social resource' already presupposes capacity attributions.

Does the resource account become more convincing if we narrow our focus to *material* resources, which are arguably not socially constituted? This proposal will not do either. In order to be able to access and use material resources in a social context, one needs not just physical strength, bodily skill, or physical proximity. One also needs to be in the right position vis-à-vis other social agents. For example, others need to be willing and ready to stand down from using the same resource. Moreover, many material resources require a complex social organization to make them available or to put them to use. Having reliable access to material resources requires the right kind of social structure in the background. The resource strategy thus fails to provide us with a complete account of a stable power mechanism. That does not mean that resources are not relevant to the analysis of power relationships; material resources obviously play an important role in human interaction and in the processes by which agents make a difference to other agents' actions. But an account of resources is not sufficient for an account of power understood as a stable causal capacity, since having reliable access to a resource itself requires standing in the right social alignment.

### *Strategy 3: Power through collective acceptance*

The final strategy that I will consider attempts to ground power in collective acceptance: An agent has power insofar as the agents aligned with her accept her directions. On this account, Boss has power over her employees by virtue of the fact that aligned agents such as the IT department, the HR department, security, etc. accept and act in accordance with her directions. The acceptance strategy comes in a number of variations that differ with respect to how they construe acceptance and explain its emergence. For the acceptance strategy to vindicate power as a stable capacity, collective acceptance needs to be relatively insensitive to changes in social background conditions. If we counted an agent as *accepting* a powerful agent's directions whenever she complies with them, this would not get us beyond a mere regularity. What we need is a notion of acceptance that involves stable compliance. Thus, any version of the acceptance strategy needs to provide an explanation for why an agent would comply in a wide range of cases. I will consider two possible explanations below by looking at Lukes's (2005) false consciousness account and a Hobbesian account of rational acceptance.

*A false consciousness account of acceptance.* The *false consciousness* version of the acceptance strategy argues that agents reliably participate in a social alignment because they

hold certain beliefs, for example, that the demands of powerful agents are justified, that compliance is ultimately in their own interest, or that a hierarchical social order is natural and inevitable (Lukes, 2005). These beliefs explain why the aligned agents comply with the directions of powerful agents in a wide range of cases, even if these demands are not in the interest of the complying agents. The beliefs are inculcated by powerful agents and ultimately serve their interests. Because the beliefs are not arrived at in an autonomous way, it is easy to see why this should count as a form of power.

Lukes has argued that false consciousness in this sense is a paradigmatic form of power:

[I]s it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (2005: 28)

Lukes is reacting to conceptions of power that require some prior difference in preferences for an action to count as an exercise of power. Excluding questions about the formation of preferences from the study of power seems arbitrary because shaping people's preferences is one way in which agents can get others to do things; indeed, it is a particularly insidious one because it avoids open conflict and thereby makes resistance more difficult.

But while that seems right, this theory does yet not identify a stable causal capacity. To identify a stable capacity, we need an account showing that the disposition of aligned agents to participate in the social alignment is insensitive to changes in the social background conditions. On the false consciousness account, the explanation is that 'the powerful' are in a position that allows them to produce and maintain false consciousness, presumably because of their social status, or their access to resources, or their ability to use force effectively, etc. If false consciousness is not effective unless it is constantly maintained by some mechanism, it does not provide us with an account of a stable capacity. False consciousness might be an important form of power, but by itself it does not provide us with an adequate account of a stable mechanism or structure underlying power.

*A Hobbesian account of acceptance.* The false consciousness strategy runs into problems because it needs to show that false consciousness is relatively insensitive to changes in social background conditions. A Hobbesian account of collective acceptance seems to avoid this problem. On this version, an agent counts as *accepting* the directions of another agent only if she comes to believe that these directions are authoritative without undue influence. Hobbes's (1996) account of sovereign power is one example of this strategy: He argues that it is rational for agents to refrain from the use of force and to obey the sovereign's commands and her commands only. The fact that it is rational for agents to participate explains why they will participate even if conditions change.

While agents, on this account, participate in the alignment because they autonomously decided to do so, we can still understand this as a form of power. Authority

provides content-independent reasons: If A has authority over B, B is committed to do X simply because A says so, whether or not B thinks that there is good reason to do X (Shapiro, 2002). If B accepts A's authority, she might comply with a particular command by A while believing that there is no good reason for this particular demand. For example, if Boss tells an HR employee to terminate someone's employment, the HR employee might accept the demand as authoritative even if she believes that there are no good authority-independent reasons for this particular firing. Accordingly, the firing can be attributed to Boss, even though the employee's autonomous commitment to follow Boss's directions is the source of Boss's power.

The challenge for this approach is to show how collective acceptance can generate a *stable* social alignment. To ground power understood as a capacity, collective acceptance needs to be maintained against changes in social background conditions. But why should agents commit themselves in such a robust way? Consider a modified version of my earlier example: Suppose that Boss leads a cooperative, employee-owned company. The other employees have authorized her to determine their daily work assignment and have thereby committed themselves to implement these assignments, to disapprove of other employees who fail to do so, and to accept such disapproval as justified. The employees need not believe that each assignment is a reasonable or fair one, but suppose that they have good reasons to accept the overall arrangement and that they came to see this without undue influence from others. Is Boss's power in this case a stable capacity to get others to do things?

For that to be the case, the other employees would need to have reasons to maintain their acceptance of the arrangement that are independent of the idiosyncratic features of the situation. They would have to maintain their support even if, for example, they stop caring about the future of the company, or about good relations with their fellow employees, or even if they have more attractive employment options elsewhere. Moreover, since the arrangement is good for its participants only if (nearly) everyone participates, the alignment is open to standard collective action problems, which makes the arrangement even more sensitive to changes. Unless the defender of the Hobbesian account of acceptance can show that agents have reasons (at least in some cases) to accept the demands of an empowered agent that are independent of the particular social background conditions, the acceptance is not sufficiently stable. Hobbes (1996), for example, attempts to show that acceptance of a sovereign's demands is always rational, given the risks that agents face in the state of nature. His argument relies on claims about motivations that (supposedly) all human beings share. But many commentators doubt that this argument can succeed even if we grant Hobbes's assumptions about human motivation because of insurmountable collective action problems (Kraus, 1993).

## Conclusion

The three strategies that I have discussed fail to provide a good model for a stable social capacity. Either, they simply fail to describe a structure or mechanism with a sufficiently stable capacity. Or, they presuppose the attribution of social capacities; since we were looking for an account that vindicates the attribution of a social capacity, that makes them viciously circular. While I have only discussed the strategies in broad strokes, the

encountered difficulties illustrate a general problem. Since an agent's social power is constituted by a social alignment, power effects are brought about, on each occasion, by a myriad of interacting causes. The role of each causal factor depends on the total context in which it is situated. For example, what effect the use or the threat of force can have on the actions of other people will depend on many social background factors. Even if we can identify separate causal factors that do play a role, these factors do not seem to be stable capacities because their effects will change depending on what other factors are in play.

It might be objected that the strategies that I discussed are unnecessarily ambitious because they try to reduce power to *one* kind of causal factor (such as force, material resources, or acceptance). Could we instead identify a more complex mechanism or structure that involves a combination of these factors? For example, while material resources alone are not sufficient for a stable capacity, they often play a role within a broader social-material arrangement. I recognize that this possibility is not ruled out by my discussion above, but the challenge for any such proposal will be to show that a more complex mechanism is insensitive to changes in social background conditions. It is not sufficient to show that a combination of factors can produce power effects in a particular situation. I do not deny that a precarious combination of different factors can help to explain singular causal effects. But such explanations, while surely important, do not vindicate power as a fundamental variable useful for the explanation of a broad set of social phenomena. A mechanism that is sensitive to changes in social background conditions will be of little *general* use for social explanation.

This leaves open the possibility of mid-range theories of power, which identify mechanisms that operate reliably in a particular social-historical context. A mid-range theory might address, for example, the role that the use of force plays in mostly peaceful democratic societies. Such mid-range theories use the concept of power as a shorthand for the complex interaction of causal factors at play in a particular social-historical situation. Without further argument, we cannot abstract away from the particular background conditions and assume that the use of force will have similar effects under different social conditions. Thus, mid-range theories cannot redeem the idea that power is a unified causal factor.

Understanding power as a capacity is tempting because it treats power as a social analogue to physical strength or to the capacity of a machine: as an invariant disposition that exerts its characteristic influence in wide range of cases. But the previous discussion has shown how difficult it is to substantiate such an ontology of power. To show why the right kind of ontology is needed to underwrite a certain explanatory role for power, I want to briefly discuss an alternative, Thomas Wartenberg's (1990) dynamic account of power.

Wartenberg also takes as his starting point the idea that an agent's power depends on how other agents are aligned with her. But he points out that a social alignment is not a static arrangement: It is not analogous to the arrangement of a machine's components, simply waiting to be turned on. Social alignments need to be continuously reproduced, and this reproduction has to be sensitive to changes both within the alignment and in the social background. Take the alignment underlying Boss's power over her employees: A number of interactions have to take place continuously for the alignment to continue to

exist. For example, employees need to be continuously paid. More globally, in order for payments of money to have an effect on those agents' actions, a relatively stable financial system has to be in place that ensures that people can buy things for their money; a vast number of agents have to continuously act in a concerted fashion to make that possible.

If a social alignment is continuously constituted by the ongoing activities of the aligned agents, Wartenberg points out, the actions of the 'powerful' agent and of the aligned agents need to be responsive to each other. Suppose that Boss tells Employee to work overtime on a Saturday. When Employee decides how to act in light of that direction, he has to consider, for example, that Boss can fire him, or give him a bad review, or refuse to promote him, etc. Boss, on the other hand, has to be mindful what options for action are available to her subordinates. For example, if her subordinates work less effectively because they are demotivated, this can have consequences for Boss's power; her superiors might, for example, demote her or reduce her responsibilities as a response to decreased productivity. An agent's power depends on how she is situated within a field of possible actions of other agents. Since this situation is constantly reconfigured by the actions of these agents, an agent always has to act in anticipation of what other aligned agents will do.

This means that social alignments are not like a material resource (ready to be picked up and put to use) or like a machine (waiting to be turned on to crank out an effect). A social alignment persists only insofar as it is constantly reproduced by the mutually responsive activities of aligned agents, and as such it is subject to continuous negotiation between these agents. On Wartenberg's conception, power cannot be a unified and robust causal factor. Rather, the concept refers to shifting, future-oriented 'coalitions'. Power talk is used, in each case, as a shorthand for the local and complex social and material arrangements and their effects (allowing some agents to affect or guide the actions of others). Unless there is a way to codify generally and in advance how agents will respond to each other's actions and to changes in the social background, power is not a robust capacity of agents.

The concept can still play a local explanatory role. Indeed, the agents participating in an alignment arguably need the concept to orient themselves within the alignment. But the dynamic nature of these alignments prevents extrapolation to different situations. On a dynamic conception, power lacks explanatory unity. Michel Foucault, who has a similar conception of power, has gone so far as to suggest that power does not exist at all:

Power in the substantive sense, '*le pouvoir*', doesn't exist. What I mean is this. The idea that there is either located at – or emanating from – a given point something which is a 'power' seems to me to be based on a misguided analysis, one which at all events fails to account for a considerable number of phenomena. In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations. (1980: 198)

But Foucault is not denying the existence of social constraints and asymmetrical relations between agents. Rather, he is challenging our tendency to reify power as a unified causal factor. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss what positive role a dynamic

conception of power is playing in Wartenberg's and Foucault's projects, but it is not the role of a causal factor with general explanatory utility.

My discussion of a number of promising candidates has shown that the prospects for developing a general theory of power are slim. It suggests that nothing general and informative can be said about the structures in virtue of which agents have an ability to affect other agents' actions. Morriss (2002) is right to suggest that the concept fails to play a broad explanatory role in social science. However, the reason is not power's dispositional character as such. In each particular case, there will be a complex combination of factors that underlies an agent's power over others. To explain social interactions and their outcomes, the maintenance of social structures, or their change, we need to refer to these particular factors and their relations. The term 'power' can be used to summarize, in each case, the overall effect of these factors and express our counterfactual knowledge about particular situations. The reason why power does not have general explanatory utility is that the effects of agents' actions on the actions of others are highly sensitive to changes in social background conditions. This means that we cannot use the concept of power to extrapolate or generalize from particular social situations.

Lukes has claimed that 'power is real and effective in a remarkable variety of ways' (2005: 64). This is right insofar as agents *do* have social abilities that allow them to affect the actions of others, and these abilities help to explain the constraints and opportunities that agents experience. But there seems to be no warrant for claiming that power is a unified causal factor that expresses itself in a wide variety of ways and that can play a general role in social explanation.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Ruth Groff, Rebecca Kukla, Mark Lance, Joseph Rouse, and this journal's reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank audiences at the 2015 Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, the 2013 MANCEPT Workshops in Political Theory, and the 2013 International Social Philosophy Conference for discussing earlier versions of this article with me.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. As Morriss (2002) and Guzzini (2013) point out, the concept plays a number of other roles, but my focus in this article will be on its explanatory role.
2. While I define power here as a power over other agents, I take this to be compatible with understanding power as a power to do something, following Pansardi's (2012) persuasive

- argument. Boss's power to fire his employees, for example, is based on his power to affect the actions of others.
3. For the distinction between single-track and multi-track dispositions, see Ryle (2009).
  4. Even if it lacks this unity, power can be used as an explanation indicator, indicating where a full explanation can be found (see Morriss, 2002: xxvii–xxxii).
  5. The idea that different causal factors provide varying degrees of explanatory depth is, I assume, one that should be shared by different philosophical accounts of causality and causal explanation. In this article, I will not pursue the question further how well different accounts can accommodate this point; for a helpful discussion, see Guzzini (2016). As I explain further below, the question whether power is a factor with broad explanatory scope is primarily an empirical question: Are there social structures or mechanisms that have characteristic effects in a wide range of cases? I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.
  6. Reiss (2008) argues that most methods in the social sciences provide only evidence for singular causal claims, but do not allow for extrapolation to cases that are significantly different.
  7. One might object that the coerced only needs to believe that the coercer's threat is credible (French and Raven, 1962). But to explain why the coerced reliably believes a threat to be credible, we need to refer to the actual powers of the coercer. If it is merely a matter of luck that one person takes another's threat to be credible, we do not have the necessary robustness to attribute power to the coercer, even if a particular coercion attempt is successful.
  8. For an explicit statement of this idea, see, for example, David Wrong's discussion of coercive power as 'the final persuader' (1995: 26).

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## Author biography

**Torsten Menge** is currently Visiting Assistant Professor in Philosophy at the University of Arkansas. Starting in August 2017, he will be Assistant Professor in Residence in the Liberal Arts Program at Northwestern University in Qatar. He holds a PhD in philosophy from Georgetown University. His main research interests lie in social and political philosophy, social ontology, and social theory, with a focus on conceptions of power and philosophical genealogies.