

Politics as the Dynamics of Power

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A note to my interlocutors: This is, in fact, a fragment of a paper, not a whole paper unto itself. It might be called a “research note” rather than a paper. I have been working with these ideas for some years, but just finally got around to working them out on paper fairly recently. The most recent paper this is drawn from, *Democracy as a Principle of Social Interaction* was presented at WPSA, IPSA and APSA last year. I am presenting this fragment at this conference because I specifically want feedback on this part of the argument. Someday, perhaps I will expand this into a more substantial paper.

Politics as the Dynamics of Power

There are many ways of understanding politics, and some such understanding is generally implicit in any discussion in political science, although it is rarely discussed in a direct way. In political theory much has been written lately about “the political,” but not so much about “politics.” To be clear, this essay is about the latter, not the former. To be sure, politics has been defined in a number of ways; some of the best-known are those by Lasswell (1936), Easton (1953), and Dahl (1976). I will not engage in any extended critique of these here, except to make the general comment that none are adequate to my purposes for two reasons. First, they generally seek to identify politics in terms of a particular sort of activity or kind of social relation, whereas what I seek to identify is the way politics conditions, or affects, social relations. In other words, I am not trying to identify a particular set of social relations as “political,” but to understand a particular dynamic of social relations. Second, they tend to want to define politics in terms of our general understanding of the term—that is, they seek to capture the meaning of a term as it is commonly in use.¹ What I want to do is offer an analytical definition of politics that is based on what I see as its central concept—power. The reason for this is that I want to be able to observe politics occurring in any social relation. Such a conception of politics is crucial for any radical theory of democracy, because the most fundamental premise of radical democracy is the idea that democracy—a political concept—and democratic practices be extended throughout society and social institutions.² But in order to be able to manifest democracy, it is necessary to recognize the way that politics exists throughout society and social institutions, including in informal settings and institutions that are not normally considered sites for politics.

¹ Frohock cites David Easton as saying that he was “motivated in part to define ‘politics’ in order to define the discipline of political science...by giving systematic shape to what is studied by the profession” (Frohock 1978:859).

² See, e.g., Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

Specifically, I understand politics as *the dynamics of power in relationships, as it pertains to the process of decision-making and its effects, under conditions of inequality*. As will be seen, this is a very robust definition, in that it enables a social scientist to observe politics broadly, while allowing for a clear differentiation between political versus other sorts of phenomena. The definition, then, consists of three parts: the dynamics of power, the process of decision-making, and the conditions of inequality, each of which will be explored separately.

The Dynamics of Power

'Power,' understood as influence,³ is necessarily a social condition: Power is meaningless in isolation, requiring an object on which to operate, and whatever (or whoever) exercises power must have some sort of relation to the object on which it acts. So, power necessarily involves relationships, of which I identify three fundamental kinds. The first kind involves individuals directly with other individuals, regardless of the number involved. Examples of this include a conjugal relationship, a family, a group of friends, or, more formally, the relationship between an employee and her boss (although there are informal elements to their relationship that cannot be altogether isolated from the formal aspects). Then there are institutional relationships—that is, between institutions *qua* institutions—such as those in international relations, or between a corporation and the state. Finally, there are those between individuals and institutions, for example in the relationship between a citizen and the state. Note that these relationships are never simple, but always complex, because individuals always relate to one another from within any number of institutional contexts that condition their relationship in one way or another (for example, an employee and her boss operate within the institution of the particular firm, and within the

³ Pateman separates influence and power, referring to influence as the ability to affect a decision, and power as the ability to make a decision (1970:69). What she calls 'power' I call 'authority.' My position is therefore closer to that of Lukes (2005). Power is itself a rich and complex concept, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper, but the essential aspects of it that are discussed here are, for the most part, common to any sensible account of power.

economic institutions of which it is a part, and within the legal institutions that regulate it, and so on), and institutions always depend on the actions of individuals in order to carry out their functions (companies are made up of employees, armies are made up of soldiers).

Understood in this way, power is all around us, instantiated both formally in systems of power and informally in the structures of social relations themselves. Power exercised according to formal rules is what we call *authority*. This implies a formal institutional structure that conditions and limits power in specific ways. Power exercised informally is often called *domination*.⁴ Similar to authority, domination generally will be exercised from within an institutional structure, but an informal one. This informal institution may similarly condition and limit the domination, although transgression of those limits will generally be easier, since the rules of informal institutions aren't formally articulated. Domination may also come in more subtle forms, as may be recognized from a Foucauldian perspective as operating through various disciplinary or capillary mechanisms.

Domination may as easily complement as undermine authority. A famous example will suffice: FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's ability to effectively dominate the presidents he served. There is no question that those presidents formally had authority over Hoover, but there is also little question that Hoover was able to exercise power over those presidents on important matters because of his knowledge of their peccadillos. That power did not come from the formal structure of the executive branch, but from the informal rules of conduct that affect the behavior of presidents.

Finally, this relational understanding of power means that it cannot be understood in binary terms, such that there are those who are powerful while others are powerless. In fact, power is dispersed. As long as a party to a relationship can affect its dynamics, they have power. This is at

⁴ Domination can also be understood as a broader term than authority, as authority can be understood as domination enacted from within a formal system of power. But for the purposes of this essay, I will use the term to distinguish the informal exercise of power.

the heart, after all, of collective action, when people who individually have little power act together. This point will be discussed in greater detail below.

The Process of Decision-making

Understanding power as influence orients this definition away from an understanding of decision-making as a particular act, but understands it as a process. The function of power within this process is two-fold: One, to define both the object of decision-making (itself a kind of decision⁵) and the process itself, and secondly to influence the participants in the process so as to affect the result. The process of decision-making itself is relevant because what happens in that process affects the decisions that get made, and those decisions are assumed to have consequences.

Decision-making processes may be explicit (i.e., visible) or implicit (i.e., hidden, invisible, and only the result—either textual or performative—is explicit). A meeting is an example of an explicit (institutional) decision-making process, while that of any member (individual) of the meeting may be implicit. Perspective matters, too: the meeting itself might be closed or secret, so it is only explicit for those who participate in it. Virtually any action, short of autonomic responses, can be understood as being the product of a decision-making process, and in some cases we may make decisions without even being aware of it.⁶ For example, we generally believe that, within a structure of authority, the commands of authority are to be followed. But to take a fairly benign case, imagine that a manager tells an employee to do something the employee immediately understands would be either stupid, dangerous, or illegal. Suddenly the employee is faced with a

⁵ I recognize the danger here of setting up some kind of infinite regress: one must decide to decide what it is one is deciding about, and must decide to decide to decide.... To paraphrase the astronomer Carl Sagan, in order to make a sandwich, one must first make the universe. But this is not really a problem, because what it does is firmly point to the fact that what is in question here is the *process*, not the result.

⁶ I recognize that there are fine lines and grey areas all over the place here, and this could easily devolve into the realm of absurdity. But it is important to recognize that not all decision-making involves power dynamics. For example, I don't believe that my decision to write this particular sentence involves power (although a Foucauldian critic might point to the disciplinary mechanisms at work in the effort to persuade a reader within the social construction of "science" represents a kind of power that could be understood as political).

choice: Do what they are told, or risk getting fired or reprimanded. Once a choice has been presented, there is no choice but to choose—in other words, a decision must be made (Locke 1975:246). The political question then becomes, what are the forces influencing the decision that gets made? We might imagine, in this case, that the boss has a certain degree of power. But if the employee has a family to feed, that will also influence his or her decision. In each case, we can tie both of these into larger questions, understood as more explicitly “political,” for example about the structure of socioeconomic institutions such as the workplace and the family, the distribution of wealth, the rights of capital vs. the rights of labor, and so on. Part of the value of this understanding of politics, then, is that it allows us to trace out the constellation of influences—the exercise of power, understood as authority or dominance—coming to bear on a particular situation.

Inequality

Politics necessarily occurs under conditions of inequality. The effect of any one actor in a relationship conditioned by power vis à vis any other actor with regard to any particular subject or process of decision-making, depends on the relative degree of power (or influence) they hold, to the extent to which that degree of power determines the extent of the effect on the outcome. Inequality should not be confused with difference, which is a characteristic of the inescapably pluralistic nature of society, but difference can be understood as political—as inequality—when it has an effect on the dynamics of power in a relationship. This point will be discussed further below.

It may seem unnecessary to even specify the condition of inequality as part of the definition, since it is a necessary element of both authority and domination; indeed, it is implicit in the use of those terms. Nevertheless, the presence of inequality is a common feature of discussions of politics. This is obviously the case then discussing anything having to do with majorities and minorities, coalitions and opposition. And politically salient differences—that is, inequalities—take many

forms, including such formally political objects as votes, money, status and position, as well as informal, culturally-determined factors as race, sex, age, and so on.

Application and Discussion

Our ideas of government and the state obviously conform to this way of defining politics. The dynamics of power within the halls of government are complex; much of our “political” discourse is concerned with divining the ever-shifting landscape of the dynamics of power among political elites. Important here are relationships between institutional actors—branches of government, parties, etc.—as well as between individuals, such as elected officials, and between individuals and institutional actors of all different types. Much of the work of the legislative branch revolves around the process of decision-making, which is at least nominally open, and the decisions made have broad effects. Majorities, minorities, fundraising, votes—considerations of inequalities abound. So far so good.

As has already been seen in some of the above examples, this notion of politics can also be extended easily to other settings commonly understood as political in some way, such as the workplace. But it provides powerful tools for analyzing the politics of almost any social relation. Take, for example, something as banal as a group of friends deciding where to go to lunch. The group discusses their options, and each member has an opportunity to express their preferences. One member is fond of reading restaurant reviews and offers that information to the group. Some are vegetarians, others hard-core meat eaters. But everyone can participate, and each person’s voice counts more or less the same—except maybe the person with the car gets a little more say. Eventually they make their choice—everyone is satisfied with it, even if it is no one’s first choice—and off they go. This is clearly a participatory democratic group functioning on consensus. Using these political terms (“participatory democratic” and “consensus”) gives us some insight into the power dynamics of the group. This example can be given a bit more clarity if we place it in contrast

with another group, where one member says, “Today we go to McDonalds or I break your legs!”—clearly dictatorial. Again, the use of this explicitly political term gives us insight into the power dynamics of the group, even though context is far from what most would consider “political.”

My view of politics can be contrasted with ways of defining politics that seek to identify it as a particular sort of activity that occurs under particular circumstances, an approach that is fairly common in certain strands of radical democratic theory. Rancière (1999) provides a particularly clear example of this. Drawing from ancient Greek texts, he explicitly states that “politics is not a matter of ties between individuals or of relationships between individuals and the community.” Rather, politics arises out of a failure of accounting for all of the elements (or “parts,” as he puts it) of a community (p. 6). But politics is not the counting. Politics is what happens when “the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone” confronts the existence of a contingent political order premised on inequality, or the miscounting of the community (p. 17). The ordinary functions of governing—the “system of distribution and legitimization”—Rancière calls “the police” (p. 28), which he means not in a pejorative sense, but to distinguish the regular functions of the state from the condition of politics. Politics is not something that occurs regularly; indeed, it is not even what obtains in common situations of conflict. For Rancière, “politics doesn’t always happen—it actually happens very little or rarely” (p. 17).

In contrast, my definition of politics⁷ makes it possible to apply political concepts in a wide variety of contexts. It opens up various dynamics of power to political analysis, and offers a more complex way of understanding those dynamics. The potential of collective action and the assertion of power from below gain force from this way of understanding politics, because when power is recognized as relational, it carries the implication that as long as a party has the capacity to alter the nature of a relationship, it has power, whatever its position. Consider, once again, the workplace, a

⁷ Note that this is a definition of politics, not of “the political”. Compare Wolin (1994), where he expressly differentiates between the two.

site saturated with power-relations. Employees in a traditional, hierarchical enterprise are generally understood to be virtually powerless. Certainly, considered by themselves, they are—those at the top in a hierarchical workplace (or any hierarchy) have a greater concentration of power than any single individual lower down. But by the same token, collectively (for example, organized into a union), those at the bottom can alter the power dynamics and affect the decision-making of those at the top. In other words, individually, they have little ability to affect the dynamics of power. Collectively, they can. To say that the workers are not completely powerless is not to deny the importance of the inequalities that exist between, say, the CEO of Wal-Mart and the grossly under-compensated front-line employees of that company; if anything, it highlights the significance of the problem of the company's denial of employees' rights to organize. At the same time, however, it also suggests that employees might have ways of affecting company decision-making outside of the traditional structure of union representation.⁸

This understanding of politics also opens up a different way of understanding the political salience of identity, difference, and the pluralism Mouffe finds as the inescapable condition of modern democracy (Mouffe 1993). In and of itself, difference is politically neutral. It is, after all, inescapable: We are all unique human beings in one way or another. We are different in our biological (genetic) composition, in our personal histories, in our social relations, and so on. For various political reasons and at different times or in different contexts we may wish to either celebrate or to obscure difference; we may want to focus on similarities or emphasize diversity. But difference in and of itself has no political salience—unless and until for some reason or other it has an effect on the dynamics of power. In that case, the color of a person's skin, heritage, language, etc., may become a kind of marker or indicator for a particular position in a social hierarchy. Those dynamics are themselves historically and socially constructed. But what establishes the political

⁸ For example, see OUR Walmart: Organization United for Respect at WalMart, <<http://forrespect.org>>. Accessed April 8, 2012.

salience of that difference is not the difference itself, but the effect that difference has on the relevant power dynamics. In that case, identifying those differences and the relevant power dynamics, and seeking to address them in some way, becomes a political task.⁹

Another implication of this definition is that politics occurs in both formal and informal settings, and that power itself can be expressed in both formal and informal ways. Indeed, within a formal structure of power there may be any variety of informal power dynamics that affect the operations of the formal structure. Understanding the relationship between these may be crucial to understanding any kind of democratic practice. Even under conditions of absolute authority, informal dynamics of power may condition that authority, such that the views of the *demos* must be taken into account, whether it is given the space to do so or not. A dictator may issue commands, but that does not guarantee that their commands will be fulfilled. If, as Franklin Douglass noted, the “limit of tyrants is the endurance of those whom they oppress,” then it may be said that the limit of authority is the willingness of those subject to it to go along. If a dictator wants to reduce the costs of enforcement, he will need to consider the views of the people in his edicts.

This understanding of politics makes impossible the reduction of rule to a single point of decision that isolates it from the process that led to the decision.¹⁰ Power is always historically and socially conditioned, and to assert that it is otherwise is to deny the political significance of the historical and social conditions and processes that lead to its exercise. Further, while anyone might be free to make decisions about all sorts of things with respect to themselves at any particular time,

⁹ Some differences inherently involve politically relevant power dynamics, such as age in the case of children, but it is the power dynamic, not the difference itself, that makes it *politically* relevant. And there are cases in which the usual positions may, to some degree, be reversed, for example, in the choice of toys to bring on a family outing.

¹⁰ Schmitt famously defines the *sovereign* as “he who decides on the exception” (1985/1934:5-6), however politics, or, “the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced” is defined as a kind of antithesis, that between friend and enemy, which is analogous to other antitheses, such as those between good and evil and beautiful and ugly (2007:26). Thus, Schmitt understands that politics occurs outside of the context of the state (although, obviously, the state is also a site for politics), and as a kind of relationship that involves dynamics of power. In this, we agree.

what distinguishes rule (the decision of a ruler) is the effects that follow from it. Decisions that do not lead to subsequent action (not to be confused with decisions not to take action, like those involved in Lukes' third dimension of power (2005:77)) or that have no effect, are meaningless.¹¹

Unlike Wolin, who defines it specifically with respect to the "public authorities of the collectivity" (1994:11), I do not consider politics to be constrained to a "public" sphere, nor is it necessarily bounded by particular rules and procedures. Rather, politics—the dynamics of power—conditions social relations. In other words, it isn't a matter of whether a given relation or institutional arrangement is "political" or not, but of the character of its politics. This then opens up some questions: How do we identify the membership of any given relationship or institutional context (whether they are considered "citizens" or "partners" or "employees" or even "friends")? Within democratic theory, this is the age-old question of who constitutes the *demos*, or "the people." Second, what distinguishes democracy from other kinds of politics? How do we distinguish "democracy" from "autocracy," or "tyranny," or "slavery"?

These questions have particular relevance in the domain where democracy is most generally assumed to be absent: the workplace. Indeed, in traditionally-structured, investor-controlled businesses, the politics of the workplace are quite strange. Ultimate control is vested, at least theoretically, in people whose only connection to the firm is financial (that is, its owners or shareholders), and the primacy of this financial relationship is such that all of those who are directly involved in the activity of the enterprise, from the CEO on down, are considered subordinate to the owners. What might democracy mean in this context?

I do not intend to answer these questions here, but perhaps provide a basis for considering them.

¹¹ This does not mean that symbolic action is meaningless, but it is only meaningful to the extent to which it produces some demonstrable effect—which may be subtle and difficult to discern, but to be difficult to detect is not the same as to be nonexistent.

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