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# Rethinking power and agency through the lens of intersubjectivity

Peter Busch-Jensen

## *Abstract*

This article is about the phenomenon of power and its relationship to human agency. Power is a complex phenomenon. It can be both harmful and helpful; divisive and unifying; tangible or almost spherically relational. This article grapples with this complexity. Not as a problem to be fixed or simply a point worth repeating, but as a quality that needs to be explored, since it holds valuable contributions to our understanding of human agency and current challenges to it. On a foundational level, power pertains to agency, in the sense that power relates to a capacity for action that is also constitutive of agency. To explore the nature of power is therefore, to some extent, to explore the conditions of human agency. This seems particularly relevant today since our agency is threatened by a number of social crises: rapid climate change, and a diminishing trust in democracy, science, and the rule of law. In this article I relate these problems to insufficiencies in our understanding of the phenomenon of power, not least collective powers we have long relied upon when dealing with agentic challenges. Furthermore, I argue that psychology has a key role to play in this drama. Not because these problems are psychological by nature, but because they relate to a failure of psychology to relate human agency to social and political power in a sufficient way.

## *Keywords*

power, agency, democracy, social critique, dialectics, critical social psychology

## **Power and its relation to agency**

Power is usually related to questions of how people can achieve their goals, and how these goals can sometimes exist in competition, sometimes in concert. However, power is also at play in how we pursue and organize our everyday life and what space this leaves us to make, think, and re-imagine goals. There is, therefore, a chain from beliefs to actions (based on those beliefs), which ties knowledge, agency, and power together—a chain that can be forged in both beneficial and problematic ways, since knowledge is a resource that allows us to interpret our environment and, in the process, provides the scope with which we consider and imagine what actions are possible and advantageous. Power, understood as our ability to handle things and act in the world, therefore relates

to our knowledge in ways that require constant attention. This article focuses on our concepts of the phenomenon of power, their relationship to human agency, and how we understand its development and requirements.

Just 50 meters from where I live is a church, where the doors open twice a month for a climate change grief group. The group is a discussion forum where mostly young people come to share thoughts and feelings of despair, grief, and powerlessness. Contrary to traditional ideas of human problems, the frustrations expressed in this group are not caused by restrictions on what we know but rather result from knowing. Neither do they result from immediate restrictions on the group members' freedoms but rather from a failure to direct it or to exert some collective control over it.

Outside the church, a few are still pondering the potential aftereffects of COVID-19, which in yet another way revealed how expanded human powers are not simply a bridge to empowerment but also produce new vulnerabilities. Of course, COVID-19 is mainly a result of biology, but the pandemic was just as surely a disease of the Anthropocene: a result of man-made mobilities that have made virus containment almost impossible, briefly laying bare, in the process, concealed possibilities in our everyday life for a calmer, less hectic, and decelerated form of life, and limitations in the belief that free markets and competition grant us the power to handle anything.

A similar experience seems to roam in yet another pandemic: this one of mental health. A growing number of people with anxieties—maybe the anxieties of a relational being, who are invited, still more intensely, to celebrate meritocratic notions of self-efficiency, self-making, and “Everything is possible if you work hard” (Sandel, 2021, p. 41)—but nevertheless experience autonomy and self-care to be relational achievements riddled with coincidence and social interdependencies (Pols, 2015; Verkerk, 2007; Leget et al., 2011).

Along with several other challenges—e.g., our trust in science, democracy, and its institutions—these experiences point to urgent questions that do not simply stem from a lack of knowledge or immediate restrictions on our agency. Something less simple is at play. A sense of lack, maybe, not in what we know or do, but in alternative ways of knowing or acting. A feeling, perhaps, that we are expanding human powers in ways that somehow also threaten them. A bit, maybe, like how social media technologies were initially embraced for their democratizing potential, but now seem to threaten these very ideals while at the same becoming almost impossible not to use.

In a way, Karl Marx's now almost 200-year-old Communist Manifesto was one long expression of frustration with this paradox: a tribute, on the one hand, to capitalism and how it made visible the human ability to reshape the world and improve human living conditions; and on the other, a corresponding critique of capitalism's translation of this ability into an impersonal force embedded in a socially alienating society (Marx, 1848)

## **Power and our social imagination and differences**

The disconnect between our unique human capacity to change the world and our limited control over it has, until recently, been framed almost exclusively as a political problem: a side-effect of a capitalist way of life, to which there is no alternative, but to embrace a demand for accumulation, deposit influence on production outside of democratic control, and leave social control to impersonal dynamics of competition. Because of the power of our imagination, we easily buy into shared fictions in our everyday life that portray social phenomena as more solid and natural than they really are. As in the fable of the emperor's new clothes, we tend to seek social confirmation and thus believe in the norms that others believe in. In this way, we reinforce the mental inertia that John Stuart Mill called "the deep slumber of decided opinion" (see Mulgan, 2022, p. 37). Marxists described this as "reification": what are in reality social constructs and relationships take on the appearance of natural facts of the world. The theory of false consciousness builds on this idea: we systematically adopt ideologies that can also ensure our own oppression, for example, by believing in the inevitability of markets or the infallibility of billionaire entrepreneurs. The problem with reification relates to its dimension of abstraction and concerns how forms of human life come to assume an independence from the human beings who have created them in the first place. This is the paradox of how human agency can be transformed into enslavement. The theory of false consciousness - although criticized for its implication that human beings are half-wits - remains all too plausible when it comes to our tendency to underestimate human agency and how much can change by use of collective effort. As a result, we tend to underestimate how we, as individuals, may in fact contribute to social transformation. This is one way ideas, for example about what we call power, can restrict us. As Foucault has elegantly explained, power also operates as an action upon our action, for example by how the way we interpret things effects the possibilities we are able to imagine.

## **Theoretical context**

This article is not a typical study of power. It does not focus on specific forms of domination in society or ways in which some get power at the expense of others. Rather, the aim is to examine how our understanding of power impacts our sense of agency and engagement in the world. Therefore, the article is not solely a psychological study either, although I hope it can also shed some light on a question that perplex many students at my University, regarding the nature of critical psychology and how its mundane concepts relate to social critique and the study of social power (for more on Danish-German Critical Psychology, see Dreier, 2008; Holzkamp, 2013; Højholt & Schraube, 2015; Nissen, 2012; Motzkau & Schraube, 2014; Teo, 1999). This article aims to demonstrate how the study of power cannot be understood as only a domain for political science or

sociology. It also firmly belongs to psychology, just as psychological knowledge is indispensable for the study of power.

My starting point is a basic definition of power as a capacity for action, and of *social power* as about human possibilities and capacities for action. From this, I aim to present some further distinctions to examine a simple question: Can the problems discussed in the introduction be linked to an insufficient conception of the phenomenon of power?

At its core, power is related to agency, in that it represents a capacity for action that is also constitutive of agency. However, given the diverse cultural, social, and political characteristics of human agency, power can manifest in different ways and take on various forms, even to the extent that social power does not have a singular normative or ontological quality. To discuss this complexity, I differentiate between power as *power-to*; *power-over*, and *power-with*. The first two concepts are probably familiar terms (Boonstra, 2016; Wartenberg, 1990; Haugaard, 2013, 2015, 2018; Nesbit & Wilson, 2003; Pratto, 2016), while the latter term, *power-with*, is maybe less so and one I will explore further in the article. All three concepts highlight important aspect of social reality. However, as I hope to show, no analysis of just one of them, provides a comprehensive understanding of power in social life.

Numerous authors have delved into the phenomenon of power and its various aspects such as politics, law, knowledge, organization, and everyday life. My argumentation draws on several of them. That said, much critical research about power discusses power mainly in terms of its operational qualities and consequences. An explanatory analysis of what power refer to, is much more rarely undertaken. Neither is an explanatory analysis of the mechanisms by which social power not only relates to domination, but also to creation and empowerment, that might challenge domination. As a result, many students struggle to get a tangible sense of what to look for, when trying to analyze power. Although some statements might be familiar, such as late-modern bullet points about power being diffuse rather than concentrated, enacted rather than possessed, productive rather than purely coercive, and constitutive of agency instead of merely being deployed by human agents, their significance is sometimes difficult to fully understand. In this article, I therefore also aim to clarify the meaning behind these statements and their importance beyond academic pursuits. Along the way, I introduce terminology that draws from Foucault's ideas but also aims to challenge them by relating power more closely to human agency and our capacities for social action and participation. This brings the discussion closer to what I would call a dialectical approach to power. Of course, the term "dialectical" is not very helpful either, as it has worked its way through twenty-five centuries of interpretations that range from logical argumentation to philosophical and political concepts of evolution applied to fields of thought, nature, and history. Here, I simply use the term to signal that I am exploring power in a manner inspired by the Hegel-Marx tradition of dialectical thought (drawing also on Cultural-Historical Psychology, Activity Theory, and German/Danish Critical Psychology).

In dialectical thought transformation can mean many things, including the interpenetration of opposites, or even ‘the negation of negation’. However, at its core, dialectics is a way of thinking that grasps tensions and contradictions, not as something to wish away, but as a core quality of all identity and change. To think dialectically about social reality and power requires understanding things as not just what can be immediately observed, but also as potentiality: a manifestation of the past, made real by the present, that is also a seed and a precursor to the future. Thus, a dialectical study starts from the notion that the conflation of social reality with what is immediately observable is an abstraction, that needs to be challenged.

The article is structured in three parts. The first part elaborates on the broader relevance of the topic and demonstrates how the need for critical thinking about power goes beyond science. I aim to show how our understanding of power also defines our understanding of scientific rationality, which in turn affects our ability to handle social problems through democratic, agentic means. The second part highlights that our concepts of power are often vague, leading to fragmented critical thinking. This section consists of two parts. The first focuses on traditional views of power and critiques their inadequacy. It argues against three common misconceptions and structures the argument around each one. The second part investigates the complexity of the concept of power on a theoretical level. It explains why it is difficult to define power once and for all and discusses why power cannot be attributed any clear normative provision, but take different forms that must be distinguished and connected to each other. The third part discusses the methodological and theoretical consequences of the previous explorations and how they spill into broader questions of human agency, social life, and democracy, hopefully in a way that also provides some helpful ideas about how we might understand and address current political challenges.

### **Rationality as an example of how social power never transcends inter-subjectivity**

A key idea within democracy is that, ideally, when people meet in public discourse, matters of social privileges and status are suspended so that a discussion among equals can take place. The notion of ‘equals’ simply refers to an idea of ‘membership in a universal humanity’: a universal human ability to contribute iniquely to the commons based on a universal capacity for rationality, inscribed in the event of political participation and further refined in the practices of science. Since the reference to rationality ideally removes the importance of social particulars (the participant’s title, gender, surname, status, station, wealth, or position etc.) from the social equation of legitimacy and membership, the notion of rationality has historically paved the way for a novel universalism and ongoing processes of social inclusion.

In democratic societies, social life is defined by inter-subjectivity, that is, by a certain level of reciprocity, which obligates us to treat and understand other people not as objects, but as subjects. The notion of citizenship, in fact, requires

this; it requires that all members are seen as possessors of agentic powers—the authority to author their own life—and therefore as ends in themselves. Our belief in this authority was originally thought to spring from logic and have a transcendental moral foundation (as suggested by Kant). However, it should rather be understood as an achievement of democratic social struggles and practices (Honneth, 1995).

Therefore, we are looking at a particular cultural formation, which, as such, maps out not only specific possibilities but also its own potentials for exclusion and self-destruction. Potentials for self-destruction, because the functioning of and access to this authority are never more ‘universal’ than our collective support for its norms and institutions allows them to be. Potentials for exclusion, because what is accepted as a legitimate form of participation and contribution still derives its legitimacy from a particular social distinction. No longer between, on the one hand, people’s social station, position, ethnicity, and gender, and on the other, their right to participate in public discourse, but now between the degrees of conformity to the paradigm of reason we inscribe in the event of being recognized as a legitimate member of rationality. Rationality, including scientific rationality, refers not only to individual capacities but also to collective capacities. The agentic powers that rationality makes possible are therefore about more than just freedoms from social norms and rules; they also require freedoms *provided* by such norms and rules, upheld by people abiding by them. This trivial observation invites two questions regarding our current crisis of rationality.

First, since what we understand by ‘rationality’ turns out to matter quite a bit for who we recognize as a legitimate participant in society, we need to ask how we define rationality and if our definitions are in fact as inclusive as we imagine. Secondly, since rationality is not simply granted by logic but also results from social life, we need to ask what forms of social life our notions of rationality and science are preconditioned by. Do they refer to a use of specific methodologies, procedures, and principles that are oriented towards objectivity and truth, or do they rather spring from messy social processes that generate collective support and engagement by means of reflexivity, transparency, and involvement in honest disclosure of interests and the contextual dimensions of knowledge?

Currently, the preferred public and political answer to this question seems to be the former: ‘specific methodologies and procedures oriented towards truth and objectivity.’ Politically, we see a systematic de-prioritization and underfunding of the humanities, while public discourse is permeated by an increasingly unambiguous fascination with STEM-based knowledge as the answer to all present and future challenges. Mark Zuckerberg demonstrated how intoxicated public opinion has become with this narrative when a few years ago, he was admired for explaining to the world how he would use machine learning to create “the clearest model of everything there is to know about the world” (quoted from Madsbjerg, 2017, p. 9). Faced with a new public sphere of social media (SoMe), which seems to threaten to destroy intellectual debate altogether, it is not difficult to understand why many consider it a bad idea to challenge or even debate public ideals of objectivity, truth, and rationality. Predictably, we

have therefore seen a revival of arguments for science that builds on what Hamilton (2013) terms the 'information deficit' model of classical science: the argument that 'people act irrationally because their knowledge is deficient' (Hamilton, 2013). However, as Hamilton continues to explain, this argument is inherently polarizing and therefore rather part of the problem than the solution. More importantly, it also ignores how 'facts have proven to be no match against deeply held values, the values embedded in personal identity' (as recognized also by more traditional psychologists, see e.g., Haidt, 2012; Kahneman, 2011). In other words, if we fail to understand rationality as something that isn't simply a question of methods and logic, but also of social practices, institutions, and forms of life, we might lose what we call rationality.

Donald Trump's refusal to accept the truth of his loss of the presidency in the 2020 US election might invite us to relate current threats to democracy to an eroding ability to distinguish what is true from what is false and respond to this threat by throwing more facts and truths on the table. What is missing from this reaction, however, is the recognition that Trump not only exemplifies how speaking power to truth can be just as efficient, which doesn't mean, of course, that science should therefore do the same. What it does mean, however, is that science does not start with 'knowing' or 'truth'. It starts with people finding knowing and truth relevant. That is, it starts and ends with a shared commitment to question what we know and seek its qualification. Throwing more 'facts' at this problem is therefore not very helpful since it is not about facts, but about commitment and our social life in common. The failure to understand this adds up to a failure to understand adequately the 'rationality' within modern society and our crisis of science and democracy.

### **The disassociation of the general from the particular**

Perhaps in an attempt to counter a growing anti-scientific sentiment, many journalists, politicians, and even scientists insist on a rationality untouched by particulars and inter-subjective hermeneutics. 'These are the facts. Period!' As a result, current public debate makes social collaboration and understanding even more difficult while at the same time denying a relationship between this public use of 'reason' and social domination and division. I believe the current crisis of science and democracy is founded on this radical dissociation of the general from the particular, to the effect that, as Terry Eagleton put it: "when this dissociation becomes less plausible, (...) the public sphere will begin to crumble" (Eagleton, 1984, p. 17). If science and democracy are in fact not things we have but inter-subjective processes we share, it makes little sense to conceptualize these institutions as phenomena that transcend the relationships they in fact result from. This is precisely why democracy and science require other criteria of legitimacy than 'truth' and 'objectivity.'

The core of scientific rationality is not the reasonableness of knowledge itself but the reasonableness of social events and action; the reasonableness of 'the other.' It is the recognition of knowledge's relevance for and by 'the other'



that is crucial to the functioning of rationality since, without it, human rationality is quite helpless. As argued by Clegg, “self-regarding behavior in the absence of the recognition of the other and by others is of no value in itself” (Clegg et al., 2014, p. 29). “On these criteria, it is not the alleged ‘disinterestedness’ of a position that makes it worthwhile, but the degree of reflexivity that it exhibits in relation to the conditions of its own existence” (Hardy & Clegg, 1996, p. 701).

As simplified empiricist ideals of knowledge have traversed from the natural sciences into not only the social and human sciences but also into public discourse and politics, an alliance between science and politics has been forged that at first seems to offer a non-partisan alternative to moral and ideological disagreement. But disagreement is not a political problem; it is what constitutes politics. Therefore, to govern a democratic society first and foremost requires contending with disagreement, which again requires a deep understanding of how to disagree and why disagreements arise. The assumption that the source of political disagreement is a lack of information spurs the belief that political problems can be solved by inviting experts to enlighten the masses. But this belief is not oriented towards democracy. Rather, it leads towards a technocracy, where an elite of ‘experts’ (the well-educated and successful) eventually govern the rest.

We need to consider the possibility that current dysfunctions in our commitment to social conversation, science, and democracy are not caused by a lack of ‘rationality’ but rather by serious deficiencies in our conceptions of ‘rationality.’ Modernity relies on rationality as the main means for making democracy work. However, as discussed by Taylor (1971) and Flyvbjerg (1998): if we fail to understand that the interrelations between rationality and power are not as clear-cut as we tend to imagine, we end up with a notion of rationality that leaves democracy ignorant of how rationality and power work together, and therefore “open to being dominated by power, rather than rationality” (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p. 231). Given the challenges of our time – environmental, social, cultural, political – this is a problem we need to confront. A first step is to understand how power relates to human rationality and agency. When we examine this, we see that we cannot rely on a notion of rationality that abstracts away from the particulars of social problems, just as we cannot rely on a notion of competition as the primary source of human power or a notion of democracy that focuses mainly on representational democracy.

## **The concept of power**

Power and its relationship to agency is a complicated matter. Our concepts of power are disputed, and not only in a grammatical sense of an unclear use of the term. There is not much agreement either on whether power is a positive (Arendt, 1970) or a negative (Althusser, 1971) phenomenon; on whether questions of power are best addressed empirically (Dahl, 1969; Latour, 2005, 2010) or theoretically (Marx, 1848; Foucault, 1984; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005); and on whether power is a form of violence (Marx, 1848; Bourdieu, 1984) or if violence

is rather an expression of powerlessness (Follett, 1940; Arendt, 1970; Foucault, 1980).

While many critical approaches generally agree on rejecting the in-built atomism, individualism, and universalism of positivist and behaviorist methodology and conceptions of power, and while they also tend to agree on more hermeneutic and/or constructivist understandings of human relationships, consensus quickly fragments into heterogeneity as soon as the discussion moves on to questions of how to study power and, by extension, what ‘being critical’ entails (Ibáñez, 1997). Thus, instead of encountering a strong tradition of critical social psychologies, students find themselves on a stormy sea of disputes about realism versus relativism, humanist ideals versus post-human epistemologies, the ontological status of cultural symbols versus the material world, and the purpose and value of science itself.

As Spears phrases it, “This heterogeneity in itself is a refreshing sign in life to be contrasted with much of the mainstream, where meta-theoretical debates about method, theory, epistemology and ontology have long since been forgotten or repressed” (Spears, 1997, p. 1). I agree. However, if our agreement to disagree translates into fragmentation, it might pose a problem. It is in this context that we need to revisit our concepts of power. Not to provide a consensus about how to define power, but to better understand the problems of defining it. To do so, I argue below for an approach to power that invites us to think of power as grounded, on a foundational level, in reciprocal entanglements of highly different qualities. The term ‘foundation’ points to a ‘solid base of a structure’, usually situated below the ground. It is an unseen structure that helps support the weight of something—a building—or, in this case, a particular theoretical fabric into which other pieces can then be sewn. Foundations are typically unnoticed in everyday functioning since they are regarded as so basic that the way they anchor things also makes them hard to see (Clegg & Cunha, 2019). It is in this way that I will try to unearth the phenomenon of power as grounded in an unnoticed realm of intersubjective and socio-cultural reciprocity and collaboration. If we do not understand the foundation of human agency and power, we cannot secure its continued support and development.

### **A few words about my position**

A dialectical understanding of power invites us to think of power as relational and to examine the material and social-cultural relationships from which social and agentic power emerge. This is relevant because a common denominator in current social, political, and ecological crises seems to pertain to overlooked contributions to our way of life, not only from the communities, we are part of, but also from nature, history, our shared institutions and far-away people and places.

A dialectical conception of power puts a series of social phenomena into a new light. For example, conflict – often viewed as a dangerous outcome of power struggles – can here be seen also as a means of creating groups and novel

resources for collective capacities for action. In general, a connection is engendered which does not divorce psychology from its worldliness, does not divorce the individual from the social and does not divorce social power from the relations its effects.

To see power as a property of relationships, rather than individual agents, is not new (see e.g. Fiske & Berdahl, 2007; Hogg, 2001; Pratto, 2016). Nor, however, is it uncontested. The social psychologist Felicia Pratto, for example, critiques relational understandings of power because they do not allow a measurement of individual powers unless they have a relationship (Pratto, 2016). The premise for Pratto's and many others critiques of relational understandings of power is that we should also be able to measure power and compare 'who has more' of it without necessarily referring to the relationship among subjects. In short, in order to be properly defined, power needs to have a quality that allows acontextual measurement and singular ownership. Yet in order to relate power to agency, we first need to ask how subjects are constituted in the first place since, if we ignore this question, we actually miss out on where most of the action relating to power takes place (Reicher, 2016). Furthermore, the relevance of studying power does not derive from questions of who has more or less of it. It derives from a need to understand better how to change and better people's lives, opportunities, and social coexistence.

Since there is no social world in which relationality is not crucial to human agency and self-enactment, a scientific approach to power should engage social life, not separate itself from it. Socio-material relations are not 'one factor' amongst many others that impact human agency. Rather, they are the medium in which 'factors' as such emerge. Insisting on a relational approach to human psychology is therefore not simply to place oneself in a certain corner of a theoretical map, but a way of pointing out what is necessary to study, if we want to understand human agency and social power.

### **Three traditional misconceptions of power**

Rather than discuss power in all its forms, I wish to focus on forms of power that, resulting from human activity, belong to the realm of the social. I will begin by connecting the relational nature of social power to three misconceptions in traditional conceptualizations of power and discuss along the way the blind spots they leave us with, which we need to pay more attention to. These critiques are not new. They build on known critiques of empiricist notions of epistemology, subjectivity and science. I repeat them simply to clarify something that, while familiar, easily drifts into a misty fog in which power is not a thing but rather everywhere and nowhere in particular. I hope to clear away some of this fog.

First, power is often conceptualized within a realist empiricist ontology, which views it as either a possession or an effect of individual abilities (the will, wants, talents, interests and intentions of individuals or groups) or human-made constructs (laws, credentials, money etc.). As a result, power (as demonstrated by Pratto) tends to be understood and examined as something that some may or may

not possess in some measurable quantities, and that can be described and measured independently of its context and lived social reality. We observe this line of thinking reflected in everyday notions like “Once alcohol has you in its power, it’s difficult to stop drinking”, or in power-studies that identify the most influential people in society (often inspired by C. Wright Mill, 1956).

A well-described, albeit basic, issue with this conception is that it overlooks how individual abilities and capacities for action are always intertwined with situational dimensions. For instance, people’s possibilities, wants, interests, and intentions are shaped and transformed (in enabling and restrictive ways) by their understanding of the situation and how others perceive it. A non-relational ontology prompts us to interpret people’s actions, wants, and needs as simply reflections of personal traits, needs, or capabilities. This occurs when, for example, problems such as growing obesity are reduced to issues of individual willpower or biology, which can supposedly be understood and addressed independently of wider socio-cultural dynamics.

Second, power *relations* are usually depicted as a dyad between person A and person B, as exemplified by the political scientist Robert A. Dahl’s frequently cited definition of power: “*A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.*” (Dahl 1969, p. 80). Here, power relations are perceived as fundamentally dyadic, with a hierarchical structure between distinct entities - a relationship between one who dominates (a person or group) and one who is dominated. This dyadic model of power, as described by Wartenberg (1990), leads us to conceptualize power as a zero-sum game, thus overlooking the potential for social power relations to be mutually beneficial and plus-sum additive. Moreover, it discourages us from recognizing the dynamic nature of power relations, and how power relations could also have emergent qualities that can lead to significant transformations, as they frequently involve collaboration. To disregard this aspect of power is to overlook not only how adopting the position of a victim can also be a strategic exertion of power, and how individuals who were formerly oppressed may sometimes wield power, but also to overlook how we can effectively work to alter power relations. It’s crucial to remember that domination, hierarchy, and asymmetry are not inherently problematic, as power is not always a zero-sum game. Even instances of social domination may be driven by intentions to empower the non-dominant party, thus potentially resulting in transformative outcomes (Wartenberg, 1990), aimed at dissolving the power imbalance itself. This aspect is pivotal in various relationships, such as those between parents and children, doctors and patients, and teachers and students.

Third, in the quest for acceptance as a legitimate and scientific concept, power is often construed as empirically tangible and observable. Robert Dahl’s attempt to define power serves as a prime example of this approach. His endeavor involved critiquing prior definitions that he deemed unscientific, primarily because they did not align sufficiently with a behaviorist framework. As Dahl contends, “The behaviorist approach is an attempt to improve our understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life through methods, theories, and criteria of proof that are acceptable according

to the canons, conventions, and assumptions of modern empirical science” (Dahl, 1961, p. 767). Dahl's renowned definition necessitates that all operational facets of social power be observable (Wartenberg, 1990, pp. 56-57). Consequently, any instance of social power lacking such empirical grounding is either disregarded or dismissed. However, this model overlooks the fact that *keeping* certain actions from occurring (such as resistance, critique, or complaint) can often be an outcome of social power. Hence, the model fails to acknowledge the intricate structural forms that power can assume in everyday life, thereby hindering a clear conceptualization of how power relations actually operate (Foucault, 1980, 1982). According to a strictly empiricist notion of power, the power dynamics within, for instance, academic grading practices are perceived to stem solely from the actions of teachers and students. Consequently, they are also regarded as the parties capable of changing them. However, this perspective overlooks the interconnectedness and alignment of grading practices with various other practices, such as securing employment, forming relationships, attaining social status, or satisfying parental expectations. These ‘alignments’ significantly shape the perceptions of teachers and students and constrain their potential responses. To ignore this, not only fosters unrealistic expectations among students and teachers but also creates an artificial conceptual gap between human interactions and their broader socio-historical context.

### Summary discussion

Earlier, I discussed various insufficiencies in our everyday notions of power, many of which stem from a general familiarity with empiricist notions of reality. I point out problems with this framework and argue that it leads us to overlook important dimensions of the worldliness and intersubjectivity of power dynamics. To underscore the main issue at stake in my own terms, we should note what is systematically placed outside our field of vision: namely, that social life exhibits emergent properties that render power relations productive in ways that traditional empiricist ontologies and cause-and-effect logic fail to capture. One of Michel Foucault's many contributions is to highlight this aspect by conceptualizing power not just as a form of action upon actions ("conduire des conduites"), but more precisely as the way in which actions condition the possibilities of other actions (Foucault, 1982, 1984). While empiricist notions of power attempt to safeguard the authority of knowledge by removing it from a hermeneutical circle of intersubjectivity, Foucault's work demonstrates the futility of this ambition by revealing it as itself a hermeneutical maneuver.

The attempt to argue for a domain of knowledge that functions independently of intersubjective processes of interpretation and meaning creates blind spots in empiricist scientific rationality that also affect our political thinking about human agency, social reality, power, and problems. To fulfill its requirements, the empiricist tradition reconstructs social reality as consisting solely of brute data. The idea of an intersubjective reality that might contradict this data-reality is wholly opaque to this epistemology (as explained in more

detail by Taylor (1971). Therefore, very little room is left to consider the possibility, for example, that “the power men have over women might not simply be constituted by the actions of particular men, women, or institutions, but that power could also manifest in a greater difficulty for a woman in making her fellow workers stand up for her in a conflict, or in differences in the ways we spontaneously interpret the likelihood of success for some people (women, ethnic minorities, people of color, or specific sexual orientations) in comparison to how we interpret it for others” (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 150).

Human activity weaves activities together into clusters of social practices that, through different forms of alignment and coordination, produce wider structural dimensions in social life (Wartenberg, 1990). In fact, this is one way we can understand power as productive, but also why power relations can sometimes seem difficult to change. Precisely because social alignments are ‘productive’ and provide opportunities and stability in social life, they also offer the benefits and rationale through which they are sometimes defended and reproduced. As when defenders of slavery in America argued how ending slavery would have a devastating economic impact, since reliance on slave labor was the foundation of the economy. Power also relates to human preferences. However, human preferences are complicated because they are adaptive; they respond to social circumstances. If society puts certain things out of reach for some people, they typically learn not to desire those things. This observation, made famous by Jon Elster in his book *Sour Grapes* (Elster, 1983), points to a significant difficulty in critical power studies: processes like exploitation and marginalization can be internalized to such an extent that they are perceived as natural and defensible. A worker brought up on images that equate ‘being skilled’ with someone who heroically suffers and does what he is told might not necessarily develop an appetite for workplace democracy, just as a woman, raised to find ‘proper’ femininity incompatible with work outside the home, might never develop an appetite for formal education. Since power relations have emergent properties that also make them productive, we tend to sometimes defend them even when we should perhaps try to change them.

### **Getting to active human agency**

The fact that power relations take numerous forms illuminates a multitude of social engagements and reasons that motivate people to engage in them. For example, a student might participate in grading practices for educational, vocational, romantic, or social reasons, which pertain to relations that can simultaneously be exploitative, empowering, positional, or affiliative (See Pratto, 2016), as well as oriented towards both general and specific ‘orientational guidelines’ (See Marvakis, 2024). They are general because, as just mentioned, in the process of social development, more generalized action-environments also emerge from social coordination and alignment, which then serve as guides for individual orientation. This may take the form of career counseling, as well as institutions in a more common sense, or generalized discourses about expected

preferences and choices in life. They are specific because the variety and complexity of social alignments and connectivity necessitate subjective orientation and evaluation. Questions such as 'But what forms of social participation are relevant to *me*?' and 'Do grades actually matter to *me* and people important to *me*?'.

Since we participate in power relations not only for general but also for personal reasons, we cannot fully understand or study social power if we simply take the individual subject and its preferences and goals for granted, or reduce them to mere reflections of structural forces. Rather, we need to examine how such goals and preferences come about, how they might vary, conflict, and change, since human agency does not simply exist but emerges precisely from a parallel formation and co-production of the societal and the subjective. Therefore, the way and extent to which these dimensions overlap, collide, create friction, and change actually constitute the core of the productive relationship of social power relations. Studying social power without including a situated interest in people's first-person perspectives, and their social engagements and activities, is therefore just as problematic as providing a decontextualized report of people's preferences.

## **A dialectical concept of power**

### **One word for different phenomena**

Bertrand Russell once wrote that “the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics” (Russell, 1938, p. 10). In other words, Russell describes what we might term *force* or *energy* as power's primordial form, since power, at its most general level, describes a capacity for making something happen, which, in a sense, is fundamental to any sense of agency, human or non-human. When an agent of any sort makes a difference in the world, this agent manifests *power*, as in: a *power to* do something, to be a causal agent. This *power-to* definition precedes *power-over* relations, and refers to the simple fact that anything can be a force in the world if it brings something new—a change—into existence. This meaning is also reflected in our everyday language when we, for example, talk about 'solar power' or 'power cables' or 'the power of positive thinking'. Yet a different definition of power has become dominant within the social sciences and the humanities, namely an understanding of power as *power-over*; as a relational aspect of social life that poses questions of social justice and equality, and points to problems of polarization, exploitation, and marginalization. In lexical descriptions we therefore encounter at least two overarching definitions of power: one describes power as 'power-to', the other describes power as 'power-over' (Pansardi, 2012, Wartenberg, 1990; Haugaard, 2015).

At first glance, the difference between these definitions seems mainly one of hierarchy since power-over can be understood as a subset of power-to: some people's power-to do things is exercised by getting others to do them for them.

Nevertheless, the difference is greater, since it also marks a qualitative shift. In the first definition, we are talking about a potential for 'power' and 'action,' which makes us think of power as a resource, an ability, skill, or a kind of capital a person might have. In the second sense, however, we are talking about a relationship; a realization of power as constituting a relational effect. This duality, if not addressed, can result in unnecessary disagreements. As Wartenberg phrases it: "By acknowledging the fact that theories of power-to and power-over conceptualize different, though related, aspects of society, we see that these theories do not necessarily compete, as they would if power were an *essentially* contested concept." (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 31).

To take a recent example: When the first reports of local cases of COVID-19 (accompanied by images of scary scenes from Spanish hospitals) began emerging in the Danish media in 2020, the Danish public quickly and frantically began clamoring for scientific knowledge and political action. New regulations governing social behavior were announced, and in short order, public support for them mobilized on an unprecedented scale. First came face masks and social distancing, then closed theaters, restaurants, and bars, and later, of course, vaccinations. In close collaboration with doctors, public health officials, and other experts, the Danish government worked hard to establish a culture of social behaviors and expectations, which soon created an environment of intense self-disciplinary action and social monitoring. In no time, expectations of regular testing, self-quarantine, and support for full-scale vaccination programs became the norm.

These events, on the one hand, demonstrate a development of power-to: society as a whole handled a serious social problem through a collective ability to adapt and respond, which in itself is a positive thing. On the other hand, the development of this resource at the same time fits like a hand in glove with what can be described as a late-modern form of governmentality. It demonstrates an expansion of power-over: an increased political domination achieved through the disciplinary techniques of a well-oiled assemblage of knowledge-power strategies. In effect, the pandemic in Denmark constitutes a dual process: it developed a collective power-to (in the sense of 'being able to') handle a serious problem, while simultaneously expanding the political sphere's power-over and domination. We cannot determine, once and for all, how power is at play in these developments, since both interpretations are somehow valid. Therefore, the difference between them easily translates into a disagreement about how to understand our shared reality, even though the differing interpretations actually refer to an indeterminacy in the subject matter—namely, that the word power does not point to just one thing, but to a phenomenon that folds two dimensions of social life together. As 'substance,' power is a capacity to do, and as such, relates to questions of resources (skills, abilities, capital, etc.) and empowerment. As process, power is a relation and as such refers to questions of how we distribute and organize resources in our life-in-common; to questions of social dominance and justice, and empowerment for whom. We can ignore this duality and choose to focus solely on people's development of a collective capacity for action, and be puzzled by how something we think we should celebrate (the



empowerment of people through collective effort) can pose a problem for some critics. Likewise, we might focus solely on power-over relations and be puzzled by how people consciously and willingly participate in their own exploitation and domination.

But power is both of these dimensions. We develop resources and capacities for action, by applying them in *social* practices, that are organized around and thus contribute to develop and reproduce both: collective capacities as well as *power-over* relations: processes of social collaboration, selection, hierarchy, and inequality (Bourdieu, 1984; Honneth, 1995; Sandel, 2022). Therefore, no analysis of just one of these dimensions provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how power is at play in social life. Instead, the duality of power brings attention to social power as constituted in reciprocal dialectical relations between the individual and the societal.

In *The Forms of Power*, Thomas Wartenberg (1990) unfolds the history of the Western European concept of power. I wish to draw attention to a particular aspect of his account: the historical shift from a dialectical understanding of power to a dualistic understanding of power as measurable force embedded in cause-and-effect relations.

Plato defined power in the following way: "I suggest that anything has real being, that is so constituted as to possess any sort of power (*dynamis*) either to effect anything else or to be effected" (Plato, 1961, p. 992, in Wartenberg, 1990, p. 20). This definition, like Russell's, describes power as an ability to become a causal agent by enabling something to come into existence. However, Plato relates this 'power' to two separate but inseparable dimensions: one of qualities, which could allow something to happen, and one of reciprocal relations between such qualities, that allow them manifest. Since power is both a power to 'effect' or 'be effected', and one cannot manifest without the other, power takes the form both of *potentials* "either to effect anything else or to be effected" and of realization. Plato insisted on this duality, since any *manifestation* of power requires an encounter *between* capacities. Therefore, power is always *interactional* and capacities merely *potentials* until activated in some interactional form. To affect the world, we must engage the world just as it must engage with us. Otherwise, no effect, can be recorded. On the other hand, no change or effect is possible either, without its necessary potentials. The term *power* is therefore both a word for separate *potentials* (for agency) and a word for *realization* of relationships (between agency). The essence of power is thus described as double-sided: Power is a dialectical relationship between separate capacities and reciprocal relationships, with both cause and affect each other. As such, power, does not have a singular form, but constitutes a dialectical formation with emergent properties. Furthermore - and this is important - no agentic power is stronger than what is afforded by the foundational realm of relationships, that constitutes its actualization.

With the advent and success of a modern science, and its celebrated triumphs of physics and mathematics, the messy business of dialectic ontology

has long gone been re-arranged in more “appropriate” mechanistic terms<sup>1</sup>. Also, the idea that power is a reciprocal phenomenon might seem counterintuitive. If someone hits me or a strong wind blows me over, it is difficult to see the reciprocity: exactly what ‘capacities for agency’ am I contributing to this situation?

Obviously, social life also confronts subject-object relations of power. Hannah Arendt’s distinction between power and violence confront this observation. Political power, she argues, relates to relations among *subjects*. Violence and coercion are therefore not power but refer to a lack thereof; precisely because brute force and coercion abolish the social world of intersubjectivity. According to Arendt, the frustrated father who forces his protesting child into the car seat operates in the same way as the wind. He acts not with power, but out of *powerlessness*, and therefore, for a moment, dissolves their shared social world by placing his child in a world of objects with no room for agency.

In democratic societies social life is defined by inter-subjectivity, that is: by a certain level of reciprocity, which obligates us to understand and treat other people not as objects, but as subjects. The notion of citizenship rests on this point; no citizen is seen as an object, but as the author of their own life, an end in themselves. We can discuss if this authority, as suggested by Kant, constitute the foundation of all moral systems. We don’t need to discuss if its social manifestation is primarily an achievement of collective social struggles and intersubjective practices and relationships (Honneth, 1995). Certainly, brute force, violence and coercion still exist, but not as useful forms of *social* power. Simply because the potential for being a human *subject*, cannot manifest in subject-object relations (As also explained by Hegel, 1969).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This development can be observed for example in the movement from Hobbes’s interpretation of power as “[a person’s] present means to obtain some future apparent Good” (Hobbes, 1985 [1641]: 150), to Bertrand Russell’s definition of power as “the ability to produce intended effects” (Russell, 1938: 35). Due to a preoccupation with autonomy, formulated not least by liberalist thinkers, we see a shift in focus from a focus on reciprocity to a focus on singular causal agency. John Locke (1632-1704), for example, spoke of power in somewhat similar terms as Plato, when, in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he maintained that power was an ability both to influence the world and to be influenced (Locke, 1959: vol 2, Cp 7). However, Locke described the relational dimensions of power as a meeting between an *active* and a *passive* form, and thereby paved the way for a shift towards a cause-and-effect approach to power. As soon as attention is focused on the active part - and little attention is provided to the ‘passive’ - the road is not long to defining power as something that relates to an ability of individual agents to obtain *specific* goals and benefits for themselves by constraining the choices available to others. Hence, the split from here on between power as a capacity ‘to make something happen’, and power as a certain way of obtaining this power through social domination and exploitation.

<sup>2</sup> One might say that what distinguishes human agency from other forms of agency, is that even when it is annulled, it still acts as a *potential* for resistance, thus requiring constant attention and a dedication of resources by the dominant party (for control, domination etc.). Agency thus in itself holds a potential for social development towards forms of domination, that are not based on threats or coercion, but on authority and collaboration.

### **Power as productive - the emergent properties of human agency**

A dialectical conceptualization of social power brings attention to the fact, that power is productive because human activities have emergent properties. These properties do not refer to something emerging from thin air, but rather to an ability of relational compositions to bring about qualitatively new things that demonstrate hidden possibilities via novel relations (Hegel, 1969). We can think of new metals, but some better examples include language, friendship, money, or nations. Just as there is no such thing as a 'private language' (Wittgenstein, 1953), a friendship or a nation cannot be said to belong to any one individual or individual contribution, even though it cannot either exist without individuals. Consequently, emergent properties are not tangible objects we can simply point to, akin to physical objects. Nevertheless, they indisputably exist and function both as causes and effects of human activity, as they are both results of human action and provide reasons for it. Consider a simple activity like playing tennis: one player serves, and the receiving player deflects the server's shot with a return. This new shot, in turn, is negated by the first player's attempt to deflect the return shot with an additional shot, and so forth (Engelsted, 2019, p. 40).

While the tennis duel showcases the players' individual abilities, it simultaneously demonstrates how these abilities only manifest through an intersubjective interaction, resulting in something we cannot simply reduce to its parts. The impact of the first shot persists in the second, and continues into the third, which is again present in the fourth, and so forth. In fact, all the shots remain relevant throughout the rally, which then evolves into a set, the set into a match, and the match into an event. None of these stages can be attributed to any particular agent; rather, they all belong to a broader foundational intersubjective realm of reciprocity from which new realities and opportunities emerge: a social world that eventually encompasses new places (tennis clubs), professions (coaches, professionals), industries, and events (Wimbledon, etc.).

As a metaphor, the tennis example allows for a number of interesting observations. First, it portrays human agency and its results as something that invites a more shared sense of ownership. Second, it points to an understanding of social power as potentially also a constructive means of collectively controlling the social-material relationships that constitute social life and activity. Third, it invites an understanding of human rationality as an engagement in reciprocity between causes and effects, rather than as an engagement in their separation. Fourth, it depicts differences and frictions not simply as problems to be overcome, but also as potentials for new opportunities. And lastly, it hints at a conception of social reality that affirms collective human agency and activity as its conscious, creative principle.

With these observations, we return to the initial questions of this article regarding our inability to tackle looming social problems of climate change, anti-science sentiments, and weakened trust in democracy and its institutions. The question posed was whether these challenges might relate to our concepts of power, here expanded upon as a problem of unrecognized contributions to the

powers we celebrate, potentially resulting in a failure to secure, defend, and develop them.

### **Democratic power and agency**

When discussing community and shared social life, we often imagine a consensus of beliefs and values that belongs to its members. However, intersubjective meanings and powers can never be a property of individuals, as they are rooted in social practice - belonging inherently to communal interaction. This is why social reality cannot be simplified to its immediate manifestations: its institutions, laws, technologies, or even conflicts and disputes. Rather, the strength of these manifestations converges with the strength of their foundation of intersubjective meaning, without which even the most bitter lack of consensus could not exist.

This observation suggests that the agentic powers and opportunities we celebrate are built upon a foundation that remains largely unseen. One reason for this is that, as argued by Taylor, "Common meanings, as well as intersubjective ones, fall through the net of mainstream social science" (Taylor, 1971, p. 31). To delve deeper into this issue, we must address another misconception regarding power—this time in our understanding of political power.

### **Political power as competition or as collaboration**

The modern state has evolved from governance based primarily on brute force to forms of governance that rely less on coercion and more on so-called soft powers associated with authority. While brute force remains a foundational premise of democratic state governance (defined by a monopoly on the legitimate use of force), its transition to 'soft powers' raises questions about authority and legitimacy—terms that define our understanding of the state's right to our allegiance. In essence, democracy hinges on collective support for its authoritative institutions. However, whether discussing power as force or authority, political power in Western liberal societies is almost exclusively viewed as adversarial. Our political systems are structured around the principles of representative democracy, where power - whether in the form of force or authority - is seen as inherently risky and is restrained through mechanisms such as 'checks and balances' (e.g., the separation of powers into legislative, executive, and judicial branches, as envisioned by Montesquieu). Consequently, like many of our other institutions, politics is framed within the context of civilized competition, deemed the optimal approach for societal progress and efficiency. This conceptualization of power, while undeniably valuable, inherently views power and politics as a zero-sum game, perpetuating an imagery of winners and losers, warfare, and struggle. Fully embracing this depiction of power and, by extension, politics, poses significant challenges.

Obviously, social power sometimes approximates a battle zone divided by fair competition at best, domination at worst. However, as noted by Lakoff and Johnson: “when we are preoccupied with the battle aspects, we often lose sight of the cooperative aspects” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 10). As many feminist theorists argue (Allan, 1998, 2008; Arendt, 1958, 1970; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Benhabib et al., 1995; Brown, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991), and as much community psychology demonstrates (Fisher et al., 2007; hooks, 1994; Hope et al., 2018; Kloos et al., 2012; Rappoport, 1987; Macías-Gómez-Estern, 2021; Serrano-Garcia, 1984, Thai & Lian, 2019), there is more to be said about power (see also notably Foucault, 1980, 1984, 1997; Lukes, 1994; Clegg, 1989; Nesbit & Wilson, 2003; Haugaard, 2015, 2018; Wartenberg, 1990).

Issues of dominance, control, competition, and inequality are central aspects of power, but they do not encompass its entirety. While individuals or groups may expand their capacity for action by exerting power over others, it is also possible—and indeed a common occurrence in everyday life—for individuals to enhance their capabilities by cooperating and seeking mutual empowerment *with* others, rather than just separate power. This process typically involves an ongoing, sometimes subtly evolving integration of perspectives and differences, resulting in new and more mutually informed modes of action. Through this, what was once perceived as the needs or perspectives of others may become intertwined with one's own, as individuals gain deeper insights into collaborative interdependencies. Thus, power is not solely about conflict, domination, or opposition; it also emerges from social collaboration and collective action.

### **Power-to, power-over, and power-with**

When viewed through the lens of power, the agentic dimensions are emphasized, as power-to can be described as a 'capacity for action constitutive of agency' (Haugaard, 2018, p. 113). However, as this agentic power-to is rooted in reciprocal relations, it's important to recognize that human agency cannot be simply understood as the development of individual abilities or resources optimized for success within a hierarchical system of winners and losers. While this definition of agency may align well with a society that prioritizes competition, much of our agentic power-to—our ability to act and participate in social life—results from collaborative efforts and is thus also acquired through the imposition of restraints, limits, commitments, and restrictions on our agency. In everyday life, we are bound by numerous concerted human powers. I get annoyed if I am pulled over by a police officer, and when my son tested positive with COVID 19, I self-quarantined and then complained about it constantly.

Also, I might find it quite appealing if, by some strange cosmic event, I didn't have to pay any taxes. However, while various factors like this may seem to constrain my ability to act freely, I also recognize that they ultimately contribute to enhancing it. Therefore, I don't adhere to these constraints simply out of obligation or fear of consequences; I comply because I genuinely desire to

do so. Just as I appreciate the benefits of police officers fulfilling their duties and individuals fulfilling their tax obligations, I willingly adhere to societal norms and regulations. It is for the same reason that a political party should gracefully concede defeat in a democratic election—not out of fear of retribution, but out of respect and appreciation for the social institution that simultaneously empowers them by offering the opportunity to participate again and maybe win the election next time around.

As argued by Haugaard (2013): at the level of human practice, social rules, norms, and restraint are not necessarily opposed to individual powers and agency because their constraining qualities are at the same time enabling. The power at play here results from *concerted* powers, a socially developed form of *power-with*, that is neither simply zero sum, nor simply rooted in competition, since it does not belong to any particular participant but rather endows everyone with the capacity for future action. In *this* form, social power isn't simply a means to an end, but a goal in itself. Because constraints enable *generalized* capacities, this kind of power can be seen to provide a democratic form of agentic 'powers-to, that does not necessarily contribute to social power-over. Instead, it reflects and supports a shared intersubjective realm of meaning and power. We can name this power: *power-with*<sup>3</sup>

### **Power-with and the development of the common good**

Social power is a product of a unique human capacity for cooperation. Cooperation can be defined as an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter, and through which one can accomplish something that one cannot accomplish alone. Of course, collaboration exists on a spectrum. It can be combined with competition (as in electoral politics or when children collaborate on rules for fair play), or it can take the form of a goal in itself, as in friendship or romance. Cooperation stretches from collusion (which might be destructive to others) to mutual pleasure (which potentially has no negative consequences for anyone). The main task of social co-existence, however, is to respond to others on their own terms, and here cooperation can help individuals and groups grasp the consequences of their own actions. Which is to say, that we can gain both insight and new capacities from collaboration, not least demanding forms of collaboration: new insights into ourselves, others and our shared social world, along with new possibilities for action that match these insights.

Since social cooperation and intersubjectivity are rooted in differences, it entails a risk of social conflict and warfare. The development of *power-with*

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<sup>3</sup> Attention to this aspect of power is often associated with Hannah Arendt's work and, in extension, Jurgen Habermas's *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1987). It was also elaborated on earlier, by, for one, the organizational theorist, Mary Parker Follett (1868-1933), who coined the term *power-with*, to draw attention to an additional dimension of power. "So far as my observation has gone, it seems to me that whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with" (Follett, 1940: 78-79). "Power is not a pre-existing thing which can be handed out to someone or wrenched from someone. The division of power is not the thing to be considered, but that method of organization which will generate power" (Follett, 1995: 113).

therefore raises difficult questions about how to handle competing interests, needs, perspectives and knowledge. In formal collaborations, this conflictive dimension of social life is often given a specific *political* form of 'representation,' where differences between social parties are negotiated in a strategic fashion without necessarily exchanging or altering people's perspectives and positions. This strategic presentation and negotiation of differences within representational systems can sometimes make it difficult for participants to actually come to learn about and understand each other's interests and concerns, leading the participants to understand the collaboration as a collaboration between opponents rather than partners. The tendency of each party to keep their real interests and insight hidden, in pursuit of an advantage in negotiations, is one reason why representative democracy is maybe sufficient for the development of democratic institutions and powers, but may still turn out insufficient to sustain their foundation of inter-subjective support and meaning.

Democratic power-with pertains to transformative processes of both individual and social development and self-transcendence. It involves developing shared perspectives of cross-contextual insight that invite participants to reconceptualize problems. Such insights are poorly, if at all, nurtured by strategic orientations, and for this reason, they are a rare sight in today's political life. Nevertheless, they are not unfamiliar in everyday life, often growing out of people's activities of working together on a problem from a shared engagement. This aspect of human agency and power, however, is under-conceptualized and often reduced to a somewhat mundane and naive aspect of everyday life; rarely examined in detail and frequently reduced to a trivial element of 'conviviality' (Neal et al., 2019, p. 70), which refers to the social skills deployed in everyday life such as good listening, being humble, curious, informative, and honest, finding common ground and managing disagreement, and avoiding frustration and fear when encountering differences and otherness. Often, these habits or skills are not considered worthy of translation into broader political discourse (with exceptions noted by Sennett, 2013; and Flyvbjerg, 2006). And if they are acknowledged, it is usually as a subset or derived effect of real politics, ignoring—again—the possibility that the foundation of political power may not reside in its formal institutions, strategic practices, and systems of representation, but rather in the hermeneutics of intersubjective practices and meaning that take place in everyday life. (Axel, 2020; Gidley, 2013; Højholt & Larsen, 2021; Lapina 2016; Schwartz & Nissen, 2023; Nissen, 2012; Samanani, 2022, Sargent et al., 2011; Wise & Velayutham, 2009; Watson & Anamik, 2013).

Power-with is not about formal representation or political projects that aim to empower and co-create by inviting people to respectfully engage in predefined activities or communities deemed to serve "the common good." Power-with doesn't emerge from having a consensus or common goals. Instead, it arises from social processes in which the common is produced in common, intertwining the development of power-with and the development of communities. Power-with is therefore not an epistemological project (as argued by Habermas, 1987) or simply a political pedagogy (as discussed by Arendt, 1958). Since power-with is always about something, it is not merely hermeneutics, but a worldly activity that

involves the joint creation of a shared social reality and practice, built on differences of perspectives and interests. Power-with can therefore be seen as a transformative social-worldly activity in which a transformative creation of intersubjective meaning and reality takes place.

### **Final thoughts - the long and short of it**

There are at least two mayor approaches to the study of power. In one approach, power is facilitative; it refers to a “power to”, that is mainly seen as positive. The other approach to power is more widely known and stresses that power operates largely as domination and “power over”. This approach sees power as less of a facilitative capacity and more of a prohibitive one. This article disputes the notion that these approaches are mutually exclusive and incompatible. Instead, it proposes a dialectical concept of power that recognizes power as a dual quality that reflect and arise from reciprocal relationships between agentic potentials and their actualization; that mediate reciprocal connections between the particular and the general, past and future.

The normative quality of social power is not fixed. It is a both positive and negative productive force for agency. Relationships of power-over can be both domineering and transformative, making hierarchy and asymmetry not inherently problematic from a normative perspective. Additionally, agentic power-to can exist in both individual and collective forms and relate to a range of both competitive and collaborative processes, that create both division and unity. Therefore, we cannot determine the normative quality of a specific use of social power without considering its subjective, situational, and socio-material context.

The word ‘Power’ encompasses a dual meaning. Although such an understanding does not satisfy traditional criteria of clarity, it sheds light on why power is productive and not a topic psychology can just leave for other disciplines to study. The study of power also belongs to psychology. This article argues for a critical social psychology. Implicitly it also aims to explain, how the subject-scientific approach of German-Danish critical psychology and its framework of concepts and situated practice research can be seen to reflect an attention also to power relations and how to study power. This brings the discussion back to psychology in yet another way - as an important provider of interpretive frameworks for understanding not only human agency but also social power.

Just as there is no such thing as a fully private language, there is no individual power that is not indebted to uncountable contributions from others, from nature, and from human history. Current popular practices of attributing all the glory or blame to a single individual contributor thus simplify social reality in a way that not only allows for a false internalization of gains and externalization of costs but also for a misinterpretation of symptoms of social problems as their causes.

It is easy to imagine that what distinguishes agentic mastery—for example the experienced painter from the amateur—lies in a higher degree of control over



and independence from the materials used and the resources applied. However, I have tried to present a dialectical understanding of power that offers a different perspective, suggesting that what distinguishes human mastery and sets the experienced painter or theorist apart from the amateur is a more advanced form of collaboration. Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737), widely considered Italy's greatest violin maker, didn't attain excellence by imposing his will on his materials, but by working with them in unique ways. He knew and appreciated the qualities and strengths of different types of wood and their distinct reactions to moisture, heat, and sunlight, and he worked with, rather than against, the friction of its knots, twists, and movements. In other words, he approached friction in the world not just as a barrier to his agency but also as a potential resource for exploring more sophisticated forms of action, agency and "power". The same approach can be applied to social power and agency, and we can consider its potential relevance for understanding our current political problems.

I began this article with the following sentence: "Power is usually related to questions of how people can achieve their goals." I wish to end by returning to the notion of goals. Social practices and institutions, like scientific experiments, always include a more or less conscious framing of what we might call an opportunity space; a more or less set list of potential outcomes, similar to the result of rolling dice. The fact that power is productive means that our agentic powers expand and contract with the scope of the opportunity spaces we allow in social life and in our institutions. Since democracy is not defined by predefined goals, but is rather a practice that is a goal in itself, democratic power constitutes a form of power-with in which differences are put to work for, rather than against, the common good, so that the opportunity space—the space for possible outcomes—is never fully determined. Current issues of climate change, declining trust in democratic institutions, the rise of anti-science attitudes, and a pandemic of burnout and mental health problems collectively point to a deeper problem. I have argued that this problem might stem from a failure of our democratic institutions to secure, in a sufficient manner, the social foundation that is required to sustain them. If this is, in fact, the problem, these issues cannot be resolved by our institutions unless we change the way they currently operate. A more expanded opportunity space needs to be allowed for, both within and outside of them, that experiment with alternative forms of power. The concept of power-with aims to provide guidance for such experimentation and expansion.

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