FORMS OF POWER

GIANFRANCO POGGI
Forms of Power
In memoriam Luciana Pepa
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Gianfranco Poggi

Polity
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Preface

This book, like others I have written, is an attempt to seek a wider public for a number of themes that I have been discussing in my university lectures for many a year.

As long ago as 1965, having been charged with teaching a course in political sociology at Edinburgh University (together with James Cornford, at the time lecturer in politics there), I turned for advice to Juan Linz, who had often assisted me most generously in my progress as a graduate student at Berkeley and then as an assistant at the University of Florence. I told him that I did not want to focus my teaching on the then fashionable theme of 'political behaviour', and was looking for alternative topics. Juan replied that there were two important themes that most political sociology courses unjustly neglected – one was the modern state, and the other the relations between political power and other forms of social power.

That was, for me, a momentous suggestion, for in due course I was to write two books and various essays on the state, after repeatedly making it the theme of my teaching. I also followed Juan's second piece of advice, and from the late 1960s on, over many years, in numerous English-speaking universities – not just Edinburgh, but in the universities of California (Berkeley), Victoria (British Columbia), Washington, Harvard, Sydney, Virginia – I focused my political sociology teaching on the relations between different forms of social power.

For a variety of reasons, however, I hesitated for some time to write about this theme. I only decided to do so, almost thirty years after I had taken it up in my teaching, in 1993–4, while holding a fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. Thanks to the Wissenschaftskolleg's most supportive hospitality, I was able to complete a book-length manuscript, but then allowed it to lie fallow for a few years. In 1998, however, I drew on that manuscript in producing a much smaller book on the same topic, in Italian – Il gioco dei poteri (Mulino, Bologna, 1998) – and decided to prepare for publication the Berlin manuscript (written in English) as a whole. I completed this task (undertaken after being appointed to a chair at the European University Institute in Fiesole) while holding a fellowship at the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian University (Canberra), for whose hospitality I am most grateful.

The book, I suspect, bears the marks of its origins as a course of lectures
taught for the first time in the now remote 1960s. It defines its topics in what may appear an idiosyncratic manner, and explores them in an essay-like rather than systematic fashion; furthermore, it pays only occasional attention to literature that discusses aspects of its theme, particularly if that literature was the product of the last two decades or so. (I never like expressly to discuss other people's writings when teaching a class, preferring to leave it to students to deal with that themselves). But I hope that the book now presented to readers conveys some sense of the significance of the phenomena on which it touches.

I am grateful to Dr Sebastian Rinken, a former researcher at the European Institute, for his assistance on the draft of this book and to Elizabeth Webb, my secretary at the EUI, who kindly assisted my efforts in finalizing the manuscript.


Gianfranco Poggi
Fiesole (Italy)
Homo Potens

Our subject

This book deals with social power chiefly as it manifests itself in differentiated forms, each embodied in distinctive institutions, that is, in relatively self-standing sets of practices, resources and personnel. It is particularly concerned, on the one hand, with the ways in which such embodiments emerge, and, on the other, with the tendency of those differentiated institutions to bargain or struggle with one another for advantage, to increase each its own autonomy at the others' expense.

I shall explore this theme in a selective and non-systematic manner, examining only some aspects of it. One reason for this preference (among others) is that a systematic approach is not easily adopted in this thematic area. In particular, it would be good to approach our theme starting from a widely shared, generic concept of social power or indeed of power in general. Unfortunately, no such concept exists. What does exist, however, is a largish body of literature - a great number of essays, a sizeable number of books from the disciplines of sociology, political science, social psychology and philosophy - where numerous, overlapping and generally inconclusive attempts are made to generate agreement on a given understanding of the notion of power. Typically, each author recalls some classical presentations of that notion (Hobbes's Leviathan is a favourite beneficiary, or perhaps victim, of such exercises), then reviews the related contemporary controversy, then proposes and variously justifies his or her more or less distinctive contribution to the theme. There even are anthologies assembling a number of such contributions, the more recent of which often remind the reader that the notion of power has been authoritatively characterized as being 'essentially contested' - as if social scientists needed such a fancy justification for squabbling over how to define their terms.

It is not my intent to add to this literature, which tends to focus on topics (such as the relation between power, intention and interest, or the roles respectively of force and consensus as the grounds of power, or the question of how to ascertain the existence of a power relationship and of how to measure it) in which I have little interest. As I have already suggested, my concern is much more with diverse institutional embodiments of the power phenomenon, and the relations between such embodi-
ments — a theme that has held my interest for decades, and the significance of which was emphasized, in the mid-1980s, by Michael Mann.\footnote{Homo potens} Unfortunately I cannot arrive at that theme without attempting a preliminary statement, however brief, on what ‘power’ should be taken to mean, and on why there should be power among human beings. Furthermore, while I feel little inclined to deal with such an assignment in the standard fashion — line up the usual suspects and possibly a few unusual ones, sort them out into a few clusters by reference to their similarities, adjudicate their contrasts, present personal answers to the key queries — I find it convenient to signpost my approach to that theme by referring to a few entries from the literature that I mentioned earlier.

I do not claim that my selection of these entries is the outcome of a close, critical examination of that literature, and that the arguments I shall introduce are demonstrably more significant than those I have instead neglected, or fit together into a particularly cogent discourse. I am simply sharing with the reader what seems to me a plausible conceptual itinerary to my main topic, emphasizing the contributions of authors whom, over the years, I have found useful in seeking to establish to my own satisfaction (and that of my students) what one might reasonably mean by ‘power’, and by ‘social power’ in particular.

\textit{Herbert Rosinski’s contribution}

Let me begin with an argument inspired chiefly by Herbert Rosinski’s \textit{Power and Human Destiny}.$^{5}$ This book appeared in 1965; its author, a German scholar long active in the United States, and known chiefly as a specialist in military history, had died three years earlier, leaving the work unfinished and unedited. He had written it largely from within a German intellectual tradition, that of ‘philosophical anthropology’, which at the time had very little resonance in English-speaking countries. (Things have not changed that much, considering the not hugely dissimilar fate, in the 1980s, of the American translation of a masterpiece from the same tradition, Arnold Gehlen’s \textit{Der Mensch}.$^{6}$ At any rate, \textit{Power and Human Destiny} attracted very little notice, and apparently quickly passed into total oblivion. This is an undeserved fate, for, in my view, if what one seeks to articulate is a very broad concept of power (as I am seeking to do in the first instance), the book’s argument appears most relevant.

Rosinski, to begin with, does mean what his title says. That is, he considers power a phenomenon that belongs to the very essence of the human species, which characterizes its very position in the order of nature. In fact, humans — to adopt a noteworthy formulation of Helmuth Plessner, another contributor to the German philosophical anthropology tradition$^{7}$ — are ‘ex-centrically positioned’ in that order. Considered purely as parts of nature, human beings possess biological equipment apparently insufficiently adapted to the rest of nature; humans are unable to sustain their own existence except via a form of activity distinctive to the species, and
grounded of course in its biological equipment, but not completely pro-
grammed by it. In this context, that form of activity — we might call it
‘action’, and propose Homo agens as a kind of primary characterization of
the species — amounts to a kind of self-programming. That is, through
action, the species on the one hand avails itself of the relative indeterminacy
of its position in nature, on the other hand surrenders that indeterminacy
by finding expression, unavoidably, in determinate — that is, limited and of
definite scope — arrangements and preferences.

We may clarify this by considering a few other characterizations of the
species, all of them more usual than Homo agens, but in my view
compatible with it — for instance, Homo sapiens, faber, loquens, ludens, or
videns. They are all enlightening, but each points up only a potentiality,
that is, the capacity to know, make, speak, play or see, and thus leaves
open a very important series of questions — respectively, what does the
human being know, what does it produce, how does it speak, which games
does it play, what does it see. Only the answers given to those queries
settle, for a given human group, the position it takes in nature.

In other terms, in order to survive the human species must make a
difference: make a difference to nature, which will not sustain it unless
intervened upon by the members of that species themselves; and make a
difference to itself, for the manner of that intervention will in turn shape
the mode of existence of those men and women, impart to it a more or less
distinctive bias, and differentiate it from the mode of existence of other
men and women.

The widest meaning of ‘power’, then, is the ability to make such a
difference; and this ability must be seen as belonging to the very essence
of the species. Homo potens, indeed, is an expression that might appropriately
be added to more usual species listed above. It focuses on the fact that, by
its very constitution, the human being is uniquely enabled, or condemned,
to self-determination, in the etymological sense of assigning boundaries
(termini) to itself and locating itself in the world. If power is thus under-
stood, the human being is implicated in power through and through; and
the phenomenon of power turns out to be closely associated with that of
liberty, although on the face of it liberty and power may appear to be
intrinsically at loggerheads with one another.

In his opening chapter, Rosinski emphasizes a somewhat narrower
meaning of ‘power’, bearing again on the human species’s relation to the
rest of nature, and I shall follow him in this preference. This meaning
focuses on the fact that from very early on (see for instance the myth of
Prometheus, the hero who stole fire from the gods of Olympus) the human
intervention in nature takes the form of gathering, controlling and deploy-
ing natural energies; here, power in a sense becomes the human ability to
turn nature against itself (by burning bits of it, in Prometheus’s case) in
order to make it serve human interests. The energies in question are to
begin with those built into the human skeleton and musculature by nature;
but they go on to encompass the calorific energy of plants and trees, the
motorial energy of animals, and so forth. This energy-focused concept of power has been developed by Richard Adams. It is apparently straightforward, but it has some interesting implications, bearing on a broad theme I shall repeatedly emphasize in this book—the contradictions and dilemmas attendant upon power, in all its manifestations.

Gehlen, for instance, points out that over the millennia, as the prime energy forms stored and deployed by humans developed from their own muscular energy all the way to nuclear energy, this progression in the absolute amount of natural power at the service of human beings was accompanied by their increasing intellectual and emotional estrangement from the sources of such power. The more the progression advances, the less we understand its successive objects, at any rate in the sense of being empathetically aware of what is going on as we put each new energy source to use, and the less we can plausibly take a caring and nurturing attitude toward it. Thus, for instance, we have a less keen sense of what goes on when we burn fossil fuels than when we burn wood; and our ability to comprehend, and thus to control, nuclear energy rests on exceedingly sophisticated and abstract knowledge of natural processes very remote from intuitive understanding, which relatively few people can master intellectually, and with which probably nobody can empathize.

Rosinski, whose sustained concern with what I have called the dilemmas and contradictions of the power phenomenon largely inspires my own, focuses it specifically on power as a critical feature of the relationship between human beings and nature, and particularly, again, on the storage and deployment of natural energies. Integrated by additional considerations, his treatment of this topic can be summarized as follows.

**Dilemmas and contradictions of power in general**

In the first place, the accumulation of power tends to become an end to itself. For a familiar example, let me invite the reader to look at me right now, at work (using the term loosely). The computer I am using is a superb machine, into which the makers have built what is by any standards a lot of power—the speed of the processor, the size of the memory, the complexity and sophistication of the operating system, the quantity and variety of the software it gives me access to. As it happens, however, I use the machine almost exclusively for word processing, and for this I need at most 20 per cent of its speed (I know this because that was the processor speed in the first computer I used, which performed quite efficiently exactly the same operations); besides, I never have any use for most of the bells and whistles of my fancy word processing package, let alone the rest of the available applications. Thus a lot of the machine’s power is useless to me, as I suspect it would be to the great majority of other users; yet I long nursed a passionate desire for this machine, having previously learned to despise and to feel humiliated by my previous one, despite its adequacy for my needs; and I am desperate to acquire a still more powerful one, which I
will buy as soon as I can afford it. I have, in other terms, become hooked on power. The design of my car, the number of electrical plugs around my house and of the attendant gadgets, my yearly expense for fuels of various kinds, testify to the same fact; and the same things can probably be said, quite plausibly, of my reader.

In the second place, in most cases the accumulation of power (still meaning here the storing of deployable natural energy) entails dangers, many of them directly related and (at least) proportionate to its uses. Consider here the case of a character from one of James Thurber's stories, which I read long ago and which unfortunately I have been unable to locate. The character is one of Thurber's numerous eccentric relatives, an uncle - a total recluse, but obviously a man of genius, for during his years of isolation, thinking and tinkering away in his attic, without any communication with the outside world, he has invented all manner of wondrous things, beginning with the wheel. As the uncle's lonely, relentless search for scientific and technical advance veers in the direction of chemistry, his admiring and devoted relatives become very anxious; and rightly so, because at the end of the story he turns his hand to developing explosives, and blows himself up.

Let me stop playing with homely examples - real or fictional - and remind readers of the wreck of the Torrey Canyon tanker and the ensuing ecological disaster of 1967, or the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. What is at work is in each case a redoubtable 'fix' which, with reference to social power arrangements, Cicero sharply pointed out in a discussion of a Roman magistracy, the tribunate. He wrote: 'I would say that there is something evil inherent in this magistracy; however, without such evil it would not be possible for us to benefit from what is good about it.'

Possibly echoing this source, Rosinski writes, in a passage encompassing both power over nature and social power: 'All power, all capacity to exercise effort and to influence the course of events, is by nature ambiguous, "open", and neutral or indeterminate in its implications. Were it not equally potent for good or for evil, it would not be power at all.'

A closely related point is that power accumulations, whatever their positive significance, have negative side-effects. Our awareness of this third aspect of the power phenomenon has been much increased over the last few decades, but the intensity and visibility of the damage inflicted on the environment by human artefacts tended to increase our hold upon natural resources. Over the last few decades, the Three Mile Island incident, for instance, or the wreck of the Exxon Valdez tanker, have made this point most dramatically; but this same point is implicit also in the slower, more insidious impact that (as we have become aware) large dams have upon their natural settings, by destroying the habitats of animal and vegetable species, and sometimes by unbalancing irreversibly the geological structure itself of the environment. In 1963 both this point and the previous one were evidenced by what happened in a locality in the Italian Alps. Over the years, the building and subsequently the existence itself of a big hydroelec-
tric dam had set in motion slow, hidden geological shifts which suddenly resulted in a huge landslide down the side of a mountain. As a gigantic mass of rock toppled into the artificial lake formed by the dam, a large quantity of the lake’s water overflowed the dam’s rim and instantly poured into the valley below, where it destroyed a village, Longarone. The dam in fact held (if it had not, the damage would have been immeasurably more severe) but both the environmental danger represented by the power accumulation upstream and the irreversible erosion of the dam’s setting were strikingly demonstrated. The current Chinese plans for damming up the Yangtze river hold promise of further such damages, multiplied tenfold.

A further point barely needs mention. Power over nature generates dependency; the more a human group invests in mastering the resources of its natural environment, and the more it counts on them to satisfy its needs, the greater the stake it acquires in the maintenance of those arrangements and the greater the damage it can suffer from their disruption. The American historian McNeill makes this point in an essay where he notes that during the twentieth century American agriculture reached spectacular levels of mechanization that made it outstandingly productive by world standards.12 This productivity, in turn, allowed most of the settled rural population in the US to escape from the position of social and economic inferiority and of cultural isolation in which almost everywhere, even in the late twentieth century, country-dwellers stood in relation to town-dwellers. McNeill rounds up the essay, however, by noting that this American success story is largely based on the lavish employment of gas- and diesel oil-fuelled engines and machines, and for the same reason it could be instantly jeopardized – to the disadvantage, of course, not just of the rural population but also that of the cities – if those fuels became unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

Finally, the natural capacities of human individuals became fixed into a stable biological template many thousands of years ago, whereas over the same span our power (in the sense of the term assumed so far) has accumulated enormously. As a result, there is often an increasingly poor correlation between, say, our basically unchanging perceptual and motor skills and that power build-up; the former can no longer reliably control and direct the latter. Consider the following trite example. Some forty years ago, a number of countries allowed individuals to drive without a licence motorcycles, scooters or mopeds whose engine displacement was no more than, say, 75 cubic centimetres; the reason was that at that date a two-wheeler with an engine below that capacity could not exceed a speed considered safe. Since that time, however, those small engines have been technically improved, and can now easily exceed such a speed. As a consequence, in countries where appropriate changes were not made in the rules, untrained, often very young drivers can legally put themselves in charge (but alas not necessarily in command!) of increasingly powerful and dangerous machines.

This example may be misleading, for sometimes the human capacity to
learn new skills does, to a mystifying extent, keep up with new technology. For instance, people of my generation are baffled by the ease with which their grandchildren master the demanding motor and perceptual skills and the intellectual competences required, say, to handle electronic devices, from video recorders to computers and video games. For all that, the title of a book by Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur* (which I would translate somewhat freely as 'Immature man and overripe culture') seems to me to convey a plausible (though not universally valid) intuition, which of course other authors have formulated otherwise. In the context of our argument, that intuition may perhaps be phrased, in the old-fashioned, 'sexist' way, as 'man empowered is man endangered'. (This, it occurs to me, may be the deeper message of an apparently shallow Italian proverb 'Uomo a cavallo, sepoltura aperta', that is, 'man on horse, grave agape'.)

Let us return to Rosinski, from whose argument the one above has to some extent distanced itself. According to him, the vagaries and pitfalls of the human species's inescapable recourse to power in dealing with nature bespeak a more general quandary. That is, power has a *subjective* aspect, represented by the extent to which it assists the effort of individuals to realize their interests, the most general and compelling of which is nothing less than their physical survival; but unavoidably it has also an *objective* aspect.

The unique character of reality as the realisation of subjective powers of every kind is not its only aspect. . . . Reality – and power – also have another side. Reality at any given time is not simply the end product of a process of realisation. . . . In addition . . . power stands as realised, established, objectified power, ready to exert its own influence. . . . As a unique part of reality, [such an] 'established fact' exercises an influence. . . . [It] can offer resistance to any effort to dislodge it. . . . The things that man creates become objectified as established facts which thereupon begin to exercise a power of their own.14

Ordinarily, Rosinski suggests, this is an unintended process. 'In the overwhelming majority of cases, man simply creates the things he needs and desires without giving any thought to the objective power they are bound to exercise.'15 In advanced industrial society, however, that objective power becomes overwhelming, due to the complexity of human products and arrangements and the extent to which these are saturated with energy. At this point it increasingly frustrates purposeful human activity, and comes to represent, from the human standpoint, not so much power as 'counter-power'. It may also begin to threaten the very survival of the human species. In the face of this development,

[w]e cannot continue to increase our power blindly and still hope to escape, somehow, the inevitable consequences of our own blindness. We must come to recognise . . . that all creation of power must henceforth become a two-sided process . . . in which the responsible recognition and control of power goes hand in hand with its creation.16
Social power

This argument does not apply only to the particular manifestation of power constituted by the storage and deployment of natural energies by humans. In fact, as Rosinski formulates it, the argument also addresses another phenomenon with which this book is much more closely concerned – social power. This is power pertaining not to the relationship between human beings and nature, but to that between human beings: power implicated in the arrangements through which human groups constitute themselves, structure the relations between their constituent parts, deal with one another.

*Why* is there such a phenomenon as social power? Recall our preliminary understanding of power in the broadest sense, as the distinctive human ability to make a difference to natural circumstances of the species. In the light of that understanding, social power should be thought of as the ability to make a difference to the making of differences; were it not a poor pun, one might say that social power is power to the power of two. Luhmann phrases this point as follows, in a text where *'power' means what is meant here by 'social power':* ‘The person subject to power is envisaged as someone who selects his own action and to that extent is capable of self-determination. On this very account [someone else] employs against him means of power – threats, for instance – in order to control the choice he makes.’

By the same token, those *'dilemmas and contradictions' of power we have considered previously (with some assistance from Rosinski’s book) in our discussion of a primordial manifestation of it – power as accumulated and deployable natural energy – reappear compounded in any serious analysis of social power. In so far as power relations necessarily throw upon one another primary and secondary difference-makers (as it were), some tough problems unavoidably emerge: *who gets what?* whose interests are chiefly served by the power connection existing between the two parties? to what extent does the organizational machinery establishing that connection become an end in itself? Long ago Robert Michels’s masterpiece, *Political Parties*, demonstrated how serious these problems are, even (paradoxically) in voluntary organizations purportedly expressly constructed to benefit their rank and file.

We may rephrase these and related dilemmas by applying Rosinski’s vocabulary to social power relations in general. Here, one party’s ‘subjective’ power becomes embodied and objectified in institutional arrangements allowing it to activate and control the other’s activities. But this particular form of ‘objective’ power does not only display the same inherent dangerousness and the same inertial qualities as *natural power;* it may also come to reflect the subjective strategies of the *other* party. For the latter may seek to resist too large an intrusion upon its own freedom of action and what appears to it an abuse of its own capacity for action and a neglect of its own interests. It may even attempt to subvert the power relationship to its
own advantage: ‘Ôte-toi que je m’y mette!’ 19 What appears to one end of the relationship as the inertia of objective power may express the recalcitrance and cussedness of the other end, and thus represent for it a quantum of subjective power. This is perhaps an application to the realm of social power of the so-called ‘double contingency’ characterizing all social interaction according to Parsons. Max Weber’s view that resistance is at least potentially inherent in power relations, according to a definition I shall recall later, may also point to that possibility.

A further complication of social power relations, present only marginally in the context of human power over nature, lies in the fact that such relations can be ‘reflexively applied to themselves’, to use Luhmann’s formulation. 20 That is: if the social power holder is in the business of making a difference to the differences another party makes, then a further party yet may in turn make a difference to how the first party conducts its business, and so on. This happens in a particularly elaborate fashion within multilayered political and administrative systems, which for that very reason we often visualize as pyramidal in shape. Needless to say, this arrangement does not necessarily add to the quantity of power actually available in the system (however you measure that quantity); for it may also multiply the opportunities for power dispersion, resistance, even subversion. 21

What most distinguishes social power from natural power, however, is the former’s intrinsic artificiality, which engenders specific problems. Social power does not manifest itself with the same necessity as does power over nature. Above, we have construed power over nature as an unavoidable response to the poor correlation between the natural equipment of the human species and the requirements of its physical survival. To that extent, in spite of the hubris it betrays, the Cartesian view that ‘l’homme est maître et possesseur de la nature’ is a tenable (though contestable) contribution to philosophical anthropology. It constitutes a plausible elaboration of the apparent fact that man and nature do not lie on the same plane, for the former is structured differently from all other parts of nature, and can seemingly sustain his own existence only by ‘mastering and possessing’ those. But we would hardly consider it plausible for someone to define ‘man’ as ‘maître et possesseur de l’homme’. True, on the face of it Hobbes’s ghastly formula, ‘Homo homini lupus’ (‘Man is a wolf to man’), may seem to come close to such a characterization. In fact, even that formula implies instead a primary equality between its referents – Person 1, as it were, and Person 2 are equal in constituting a deathly threat to one another. (Leave aside the fact that the formula is defamatory to the reputation of the wolf.)

Against the background of such equality, the emergence of social power becomes something of an ethical contradiction. In a social power relation, I have suggested, an individual avails himself of the ability that that individual possesses to make a difference qua human, in order to control the ability to make a difference that another individual possesses qua human. As Simmel says, the typical power holder does not want to suppress
the power subject’s subjectivity and freedom, but rather wants them to ‘act back upon himself’.

The well-known Jesuit and Prussian formulas according to which the superior demands the subordinate to obey ‘like a cadaver’ are both, on the face of them, nonsensical; you want the person subject to your power to be very much unlike a cadaver – to be a sentient, active human much like yourself. In other words, as Person 1 considers Person 2, Person 1 is bound to see in Person 2 first and foremost ‘son semblable, son frère’; yet for that very reason Person 1 seeks to treat Person 2 as inferior. Thus, the establishment of a power relation between the two is tantamount to Person 1 excluding Person 2 from the reciprocity to which Person 2 is obviously entitled. While discussing political power, we shall consider some ways in which this ethical contradiction is confronted.

The grounding of social power in asymmetries

Let us return to the nature of social power. The characterization of it that I have suggested so far (power as someone’s ability to make a difference to the differences others make) is excessively generic, for it can be achieved in too many different ways: for instance by sharing one’s knowledge (or for that matter ignorance!) with others; by evoking their admiration; by performing feats that others will spontaneously imitate because they consider them exemplary; by exchanging the product of one’s own autonomous activities for the product of the activities others carry out according to one’s directions; and so forth.

According to a majority of the less generic conceptions of power, a social power relationship between two parties involves a particular asymmetry between them: one party has the upper hand, for it is able to make the other’s resistance to its own directives too costly, and can thus dissuade the other from resistance or compel it to desist from it. In other terms, a social power relationship requires that one of the two parties be in a better position to punish and deprive the other – if necessary.

According to this last statement – ‘if necessary’ – relations of social power always entail an explicit or implicit ‘or else . . .’; but optimally this clause has its effects on the party under power without the ‘else’ having actually to take place. The officers of the Holy Roman Inquisition, for instance, were not supposed to put the accused to the torture without previously threatening them, first by describing to them the nature of the torture in question (territio verbalis), then – if necessary – by showing them the relative instruments (territio realis). Other systems of power generally have more delicate ways of hinting at what risks the power subject incurs by persisting in his or her recalcitrance – among other reasons, perhaps, because on the whole the risks involved are not quite as extreme.

Specifying the nature of social power by reference to processes such as threats, dissuasion, the blocking or overcoming of resistance, and the like,
narrow down considerably the broader meaning of the concept, and attunes it to some of the resonances it has in everyday talk. More clearly when we speak of ‘power politics’ between states, somewhat less clearly when we call someone ‘power-mad’ or suggest that someone is engaged in ‘power games’, the expression ‘power’ generally suggests a situation where characteristically one party is able and willing, if necessary, to hurt and deprive the other in order to have its way with it. Whether the other party, assuming that it finds the current situation irksome, seeks to modify it to its own advantage or indeed to subvert it, depends largely on how it assesses the present and future costs and benefits of it, on whether it has experienced or can plausibly project alternative circumstances, on what it expects to happen if it challenged the existing ones.

The common use of ‘power’ also implies an aspect of the phenomenon I have tried to convey by using frequently, above, the expression ‘ability’. This aspect is conveyed particularly clearly in some Romance languages, where the expressions potere (Italian), pouvoir (French), poder (Spanish) refer both to a noun (meaning ‘power’) and to a verb (meaning ‘to be able to’). What this correspondence suggests is that to have power is tantamount to being in a position to do something. As Coser writes: ‘Power refers to the capacity to exercise control over others. The power of a superior in an organisation rests on his ability to hire and fire employees, even though he may not have done so over a long period of time.’ (This reminds me of a story concerning Time magazine. During one presidential election a number of liberal-minded journalists were beginning to oppose the pro-Republican line pushed by the chief editor, Henry Luce. The latter called a meeting at which he introduced himself as follows: ‘I am Henry Luce. I hire and fire around here. Any questions?’ There were none.)

We may express this point by speaking, as has been done, of power’s intrinsic ‘potentiality’, an expression that in turn makes more explicit a noteworthy aspect of the phenomenon than the expression ‘power’ itself does. That is: power has to do with the future, with expectations, with hopes and fears. In this sense, too, it has ‘anthropological’ significance, at any rate if Hobbes was right in saying that humans alone, among animals, can feel tomorrow’s hunger today. We can think of power (both power in general and social power in particular) as a way of confronting and controlling the inexorable sense of contingency and insecurity generated by our awareness of the future. This awareness – we have learned in the last few decades from scholarship on the social dimensions of time – is once more a generic property, which expresses itself in very varied forms from culture to culture. However, no matter how it expresses itself, it adds significance, as I have just suggested, to the potentiality intrinsic in the notion of power. One gains some purchase on the vagaries of unfolding time in so far as one is blessed now with the ability to do something in the future.

What the power holder can do, in turn, encompasses the issuing of credible threats toward its counterpart and if necessary the inflicting of
pain or deprivation upon it, but normally does not limit itself to that. The playground bully who continually boasts about his ability to hurt other children does so in order to exact various acts of compliance from them: handing over their sweets, speaking respectfully to him, and so forth. The state’s distinctive ability to have people gaoled or executed on its officials’ say-so empowers it to do any manner of things, from imposing taxes to recruiting soldiers, monopolizing lucrative trades or establishing literary academies.

In any case, social power should not be thought of as a substance one has, but as a more abstract matter, a facility of which one can avail oneself. This view (which one may contrast both with Hobbes’s definition of power as ‘a man’s present means to any future apparent good’ or with Bertrand Russell’s as ‘the production of intended effects’) is sometimes fancily expressed by categorizing power as ‘a dispositional concept’. A concept of this kind, for instance ‘combustibility’, applies to an entity by virtue not of properties it continually exhibits but of contingent effects it can be expected to produce under certain circumstances. ‘Keep your powder dry’ suggests that if you do it will, when sparked, propel your bullet; if you do not, it will not cease to be powder, but it will very likely fizzle out. Both the potentiality of power, and the dispositional nature of its concept, suggest that power has to do with the future.

Max Weber’s understanding of social power reaffirmed

The abstractness of the concept results also from the consideration that social power exists in so far as two parties stand in a certain relationship to one another; it is, indeed, an aspect of that relationship, not something that either party possesses (or is deprived of) in isolation from the other. Two famous, overlapping definitions of power formulated by Max Weber a few years apart both convey (in the passages below) this ‘relational’ nature of the phenomenon. Note, furthermore, that in both definitions the term ‘chance’, which I translate as ‘probability’, suggests its ‘dispositional’ nature:

By ‘power’ we mean, quite generally, an individual’s or a group’s probability of realizing its will in the context of collective activity even against the resistance of others involved in it.

Power is the probability, within a social relationship, of realizing one’s own will even against resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.24

Both of Weber’s definitions are somewhat bloody-minded, and on that account too narrow. From the standpoint of the power holder, ‘others’ appear exclusively in the capacity of potential resisters. It is not indicated (except somewhat implicitly in the expressions I have emphasized) that
often their activities are expected positively to assist in the implementation of the power holder’s will, rather than being relevant to it only as potential obstacles. Put otherwise, social power should be thought of as the capacity for one party to cause another to act in certain ways, which include abstaining or desisting from opposing the former party’s preferences but may go beyond such abstaining and desisting. Weber himself, at one point, cursorily characterizes power as ‘the possibility of imposing one’s will upon the conduct of others’. The bloody-minded tone remains, but there is implicit recognition that you may get others to do otherwise than ‘ceasing and desisting’ from opposing you.

On the other hand, even when it does occur that the second party positively assists in fulfilling the first party’s preferences, this does not mean that the resultant action necessarily corresponds with the interests of both parties, much less that it corresponds with those interests to the same extent. As I have already indicated, even in well-established power relations ‘who gets what’, or to what extent the interests of both parties are served, is intrinsically an open issue, not to be settled by definition, as Parsons tried to settle it in a statement about power we shall consider later.

Whereas Parsons sought to improve on Weber’s definition ‘from the right’, as it were, by de-emphasizing the asymmetry that the power phenomenon in my view necessarily involves, later writers have criticized it ‘from the left’. By emphasizing the actual or potential clash between opposing preferences as the issue the resolution of which points up who is in power, Weber allegedly had neglected the extent to which power relations are embodied in apparently unproblematical, unchallengeable structures. Power works primarily through the muted, routine workings of such structures, which systematically favour the interests of one party, not by that party’s assertion of its superiority in episodic confrontations. The other party’s perceptions and understandings, its preferences themselves, are largely the products of such workings of power, and to that extent offer no grounds on which resistance may be realistically expected to arise. One may see a sophisticated variant of such a broad view of power in Michel Foucault’s construction of it, which overlaps power widely with such phenomena as ‘knowledge’ and ‘discourse’, though it does not necessarily confuse it with either.

My chief objection to this critique of Weber and related definitions of power is that by detaching conceptually ‘power’ from ‘agency’, by merging the former into ‘structure’, it impoverishes the conceptual resources of social theory. Let me introduce a grammatical parallel. Ancient Greek had two very distinct forms of past tense: the perfect, referring to something that had happened in the past but which in a sense continued in the present; and the aorist, describing one-off actions which occurred in the past but broke its continuity. (Archimedes, on this account, must have forgotten his grammar in the excitement of his great discovery, for in announcing it he should have used the aoristic form euron rather than the perfective form eureka). Now, modern social theory has a deterministic bias which
expresses itself through the preponderance of conceptual aids to description and explanation of a *perfective* nature – such as ‘situation’, ‘structure’, ‘role’, ‘institution’, ‘norm’. Whatever the flaws of Weber’s definitions, they present us with a concept of (social) power which has instead an *aoristic* bias; it focuses on the unblocking of situations and the constituting of new situations, rather than the unperturbed continuation of established arrangements. It thus suits my own preference, indicated from the beginning of this chapter, for seeing the making of differences as the core of the power phenomenon.

I shall close the chapter by reluctantly attempting a definition. Social power relations exist wherever some human subjects (individual or collective) are able to lay routine, enforceable boundaries upon the activities of other human subjects (individual or collective), in so far as that ability rests on the former subjects’ control over resources allowing them, if they so choose, to deprive the latter subjects of salient human values. The chief among such values are bodily integrity; freedom from restraint, danger or pain; reliable access to nourishment, shelter or other primary material goods; the enjoyment of a degree of assurance of one’s worth and significance.

The next chapter elaborates this last statement.