Modelling Power in Anarchist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

An adapted version of the taxonomy of power developed by Starhawk and Uri Gordon can help us to construct an integrated model of power that is consistent with anarchist principles. Rather than conceptualising power as a pyramid, in which power emanates from the apex and cascades down the ranks, we should see it as a dynamic matrix within which power is continually shifting both in quantitative and qualitative terms. The overall power (power-to) of individuals and groups is derived from a combination of coercive power (power-against), social power (power-with) and power-from-within. We will only be able to survive as a species if we can find ways to limit the exercise of all forms of coercive power, to unleash the multiplier effect of social power, and to distribute power-to as widely as possible. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to reconceptualise the nature of power itself.

Keywords: *power, hierarchy, domination, resistance, feminism*

Humanity faces a crisis so severe that it is difficult to see any road forward that does not lead to extinction. In order to survive, our species will have to learn how to use our power in ways that are constructive rather than destructive. But to do this we must also understand how power functions in human society. For this reason, debates about the nature of power are of more than purely academic interest; they are of existential significance.

The purpose of this article is to consider the model of power first articulated by the anarchist thinker and activist Starhawk, and subsequently amended by the anarchist political theorist, Uri Gordon. According to Starhawk, power can be subdivided into three categories, which she calls 'power-over', 'power-with', and 'power-from-within'.[1] Gordon argues that this threefold division is useful, but he relabels 'power-from-within' as 'power-to', and argues that both power-over and power-with are generated by power-to (see Figures 1 and 2).[2]

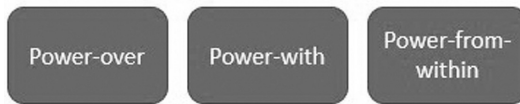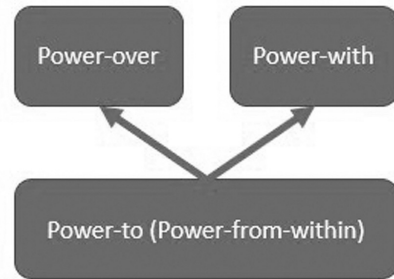*Figure 1. Starhawk's threefold division of power.*

Figure 2. Gordon's threefold division of power.

My argument is that the Starhawk/Gordon model has significant explanatory potential, but it needs to be further refined. 'Power-to' and 'power-from-within' are not, as Gordon claims, the same thing, which means that there are four important kinds of power, not three. More importantly, both Starhawk and Gordon see power as operating either in vertical relationships (power-over), or in horizontal ones (power-with). I believe that it is more useful to see all forms of power as interacting within a horizontal, dynamic matrix, within which the distribution of power is continually shifting.

POWER-OVER/POWER-AGAINST (POWERVIOLENCE)

According to Starhawk, 'power-over' refers to power through domination. 'In its clearest form', she writes, 'power-over is the power of the prison-guard, of the gun, power that is ultimately backed by force'. But power-over can also be exercised 'by controlling the resources we need to live: money, food, medical care; or by controlling more subtle resources: information, approval, love'.[3] Gordon does not dispute this definition, but he points out that power-over does not emerge from thin air. He argues that, in order for A to dominate B, A must first have the capacity to dominate B. Gordon refers to the tools and resources that give A the capacity to dominate B as 'power-to'. From Gordon's point of view: 'Power-over always has its source in the dominant party's power-to'.[4] Power-over is thus a particular kind of application of power-to.

It should be noted that the concept of 'power-over' is by no means restricted to anarchist theorists. Ever since social commentators and political philosophers began systematically to analyse the nature of power, they have tended to emphasise its authoritarian, coercive and conflictual aspects.[5] Max Weber famously defined

power as 'the ability of an actor or actors to realize his/her/their will in a social action, even against the will of others'.[6] In his seminal monograph on power, Steven Lukes argues that 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests'.[7] Most of the other eminent theorists of power, including Talcott Parsons, Anthony Giddens, and Michael Mann, have likewise focused primarily on its coercive character. Even Michel Foucault, whose discussion of power was exceptionally nuanced, emphasised asymmetry, control, and domination.[8] Perhaps the pithiest description of power-as-domination was provided by Lenin, who argued that the central question in politics is 'kto? kogo?' (who? whom?) In other words, who are the subjects and who are the objects of power relationships? Who rules and who is ruled?[9]

Although the phrase 'power over' is almost universally used by theorists – including anarchists – to describe coercive power, I am going to use the term 'power against' instead. There are three reasons for this.

Firstly, the concept of 'power-over' is imprecise. When theorists use the term 'power-over', they usually do so in connection with coercive power, but they also include other, non-coercive variants of 'power-over' in the same category. The feminist philosopher Amy Allen uses the example of a good basketball coach, who exerts significant authority over her players, but who does so only to help them to achieve their full potential both individually and as a team. From Allen's perspective, domination is a sub-category of power-over, and the two terms should not be conflated.[10] In a similar vein, the anarchist activist and writer Randall Amster notes that hierarchy and authority are not the same thing. Authority can be a positive thing if it is voluntary and not institutionalised.[11] For example, I will usually defer to the opinions of my dentist on matters where she has expertise and I have none, but I do so of my own free will, and I can withdraw my deference at any time.

The problem here is that theorists are trying to apply one overarching label (power-over) to variants of power that are so different that for analytical purposes it makes sense to desegregate them. As I argue below, it is more helpful to see the power of both the basketball coach and of the dentist as forms of delegated social power, and thereby decouple it from coercive power entirely.

My second reason for rejecting the term 'power-over' is that the concept of vertical power is an obstacle to social change. When people discuss power, the dominant metaphor is that of the social pyramid. The language that almost everybody uses to describe social relations is saturated with words that assign people to ranks within hierarchies. Terms such as 'upper class', 'middle class', 'lower class', 'social climbing', 'upward social mobility', 'social stratification', 'higher ranks',

'lower ranks', 'power over' and so forth are all predicated on the idea that power operates in vertical relationships. In the workplace, we talk of 'superiors' and 'subordinates', of 'career ladders', of 'heads of department', and of 'upper' and 'lower' levels of the workplace organisation. The metaphor of the pyramid is so entrenched in our language that we do not even think of it as a metaphor.

As Lukes points out, the ways in which we conceptualise power are not politically neutral. On the contrary, 'how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them'.[12] From this perspective, the dominance of the pyramid model is no accident, for it serves to reinforce existing power relations. The constant repetition of the metaphor makes it seem normal that some people get to tell other people what to do. If the natural shape of society is a pyramid, it follows that somebody has to sit at the top. For people who conceptualise society as a pyramid, the idea of a society that is flat seems bizarre and nonsensical. This is why most people regard the idea of an anarchist society as hopelessly utopian. Believing radical change to be impossible, they do not seek it.

The third reason why I prefer to use the term 'power-against' instead of 'power-over' is that I want to emphasise the fact that coercive power is inherently aggressive, and constitutes a violation of the sovereignty of the individual or individuals against whom it is exercised. Just as violence is the ultimate form of coercive power, so coercive power is dependent on and shaped by the use or threat of violence. Coercive power and violence are mutually constitutive.

Imagine, for example, an inhabited island on which one small section of the population launches a coup, using violence and terror to establish their dominance. During the initial period of conquest, the violence of the minority is visible to everybody. After a while, however, the new system of power relations settles down and the day-to-day usage of violence becomes unnecessary. Instead, a new society emerges on the island, including a belief system that legitimises the privileges of the ruling caste, a culture that imposes the hegemony of the values of the elite, and a language system that is fine-tuned to allow the elite to articulate its culture. After a couple of generations, a visitor to the island might not see any overt signs of violence whatsoever. Yet all aspects of social, political, economic and cultural life on the island will still be predicated on the violence that created them. In the words of Paolo Freire:

> Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders
> an entire way of life and behaviour for those caught up in it – oppressors and
> oppressed alike. Both are submerged in this situation, and both bear the marks

of oppression. Analysis of existential situations of oppression reveals that their inception lay in an act of violence – initiated by those with power. This violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped by its climate.[13]

The violence that is inherent in systems of coercive power is unstable. If the system is disrupted, for example by conflict between rival factions of rulers, the violence that is stored in the system will be released. Violence, moreover, is the ultimate guarantor of all systems of coercive power, and any resistance that cannot be quelled by threats, lies or concessions will be met with physical force.[14]

So intimately connected are coercive power and violence that they can be regarded as two different states of the same substance, which I shall henceforth refer to as 'powerviolence'. In its physical form, powerviolence is exerted against the bodies of the dominated, who are variously locked up, beaten, tortured, starved, or executed. In its non-corporal form, powerviolence manifests itself in various kinds of power-against, including authoritarian ideologies, exclusionary forms of language and culture, line-management structures, exploitative economic systems, and political hierarchies.

The origins of powerviolence can be traced back to our apelike ancestors, amongst whom the distribution of power was mediated above all by violence or the threat of physical harm.[15] With the Neolithic agricultural revolution and the emergence of more complex societies, coercive violence and inequality became routinised and institutionalised.[16] As James C. Scott has argued persuasively, the very first agricultural civilisations in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China and elsewhere were founded on forced labour, slavery and violence. According to Scott, life for early non-elite agriculturalists was so arduous and unhealthy that it was only through coercion that elites could ensure a supply of labour for the fields of grain.[17] In a similar vein, Siniša Malešević describes how the transition from egalitarian hunter-gatherers to sedentary and hierarchical chiefdoms, and the creation of the first states, was accompanied by a quantum increase in levels of organised brutality.[18]

Powerviolence has always been central to the growth of state power. From the creation of the first states in Mesopotamia 5,000 years ago down to the nineteenth century, the two main preoccupations of the state were warfare against neighbouring states and the economic exploitation of subject populations.[19] From its inception, the main primary business of the state was death and taxes. It is only in the last three centuries that the state has taken an interest in the regulation of the day-to-day social life of its subjects. Even in the modern

period, however, as Michael Mann,[20] Charles Tilly,[21] and others have argued, the primary driver of increasing state intervention has been warfare. As the state became more sophisticated, it gradually shifted, as Giddens puts it, from 'the manifest use of violence to pervasive use of administrative power in sustaining its rule'.[22] Despite this apparent transition to more peaceful modes of governance, there have been numerous occasions in the last 120 years – most notably in the two world wars – when the powerviolence that is stored in the system has been reconverted into actual violence on an unprecedented scale. As Peter Gelderloos has noted, the state can be defined as a millennia-long movement of centralisation through killing.[23]

Powerviolence is now so much a part of our quotidian lives that it is accepted as normal, natural, and inevitable.[24] In the words of Starhawk, we have become so accustomed to coercive power, and we 'are so steeped in its language and its implicit threats, that we often become aware of its functioning only when we see its extreme manifestations'.[25] Powerviolence is the kind of power that is exercised, on a daily basis, in hundreds of banal interactions, by those in authority against those whom they dominate: by masters against their slaves, by feudal lords against their serfs, by officers against their soldiers, by managers against their employees, by school teachers against their pupils, and by professors against their students. Coercive power may change its outward form in different historical contexts, but its essential content remains the same: Person A imposes his or her will on Person B through the threat or the application of a sanction.

In the anarchist literature on the topic, power-against is usually described as a negative thing. However, power-against is not only used as a form of domination; it is also regularly deployed as a means of resisting domination. The most obvious example of power-against as a form of resistance is insurrection or revolution. Power-against is also deployed in (mostly) non-violent forms by workers who strike against their employers, by demonstrators against police, and by recalcitrant students against their teachers. Anarchists, of course, are no strangers to the idea of resistance, but the question at issue here is how to incorporate power-against into a model of power that is consistent with anarchist principles. The answer is to be honest about the fact that resistance is also a form of power-against. When they bite us, we bite back.

POWER-WITH (SOCIAL POWER)

A second variant of power that Starhawk identifies, which she refers to as 'power-with', is social power. She defines power-with as 'the power not to command,

but to suggest and be listened to', resulting in collective but voluntary action of some kind.[26] Gordon agrees with Starhawk, but adds that power-with 'is clearly generated by power-to, just as power-over is. The less one is able to do things (to communicate and to mobilise capabilities, skills and resources) the less one can influence others'.[27]

The defining characteristic of social power is that it is generated by the free co-operation of human beings who realise that they can achieve more together than they can individually. Sometimes social power arises from feelings of solidarity. Sometimes it is the result of enlightened self-interest. Sometimes, social power is transactional. In any of its various guises, it is never the result of aggression. According to Hannah Arendt, social power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert ' ... [It] is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together'.[28] Amy Allen, building explicitly on Arendt, defines power-with as the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of a common or shared end or series of ends.[29]

Like coercive power, social power is phylogenetically ancient and can be found in all species of higher primates, including humans.[30] It is worth remembering that anatomically modern humans have been on this planet for around 200,000 years, and for 95 per cent of that time they lived in small groups of hunter-gatherers. The available evidence suggests that hunter-gatherer societies tended to be highly egalitarian, relatively non-violent and co-operative. Indeed, according to the anthropologist Christopher Boehm, one of the primary functions of social power amongst ancient hunter-gatherers was to prevent bossy individuals from becoming too dominant.[31] It is here that the concept of power-against intersects with social power. When weaker parties use power against those who dominate them, they usually do so collectively for the obvious reason that the weak can only resist effectively when they combine their efforts. Power-against and social-power are thus often intertwined.

Indeed, power-against and power-with share important features in common, a fact which is often missed in the literature. For instance, both forms of power can be delegated. The managing directors of companies, the vice-chancellors of universities, and the rulers of countries, all appoint officials to execute their policies. The power of these officials derives from the central authority and can if necessary be repatriated to the centre. Social power can work in much the same way except in the opposite direction. For example, when members of a trade union elect their representatives, they voluntarily cede a degree of their collective power to specific individuals, who are thereby empowered to speak and to act on behalf

of the membership. If the union representatives fail to fulfil that function to the satisfaction of their members, that authority can be revoked in favour of new representatives. When Allen writes about the authority of the benevolent basketball coach, what she is in fact describing is not a form of power-over, but an example of delegated social power. The players are not compelled to follow the directions of the coach; they do so of their own free will, and they do so collectively, because they recognise that they thereby increase their chances of securing victory for all.

Another shared characteristic of coercive and social power is that both can be subdivided into formal and informal power relationships. The coercive relationship between a manager and a worker, for example, or that between a professor and a student, is explicit, codified and predictable. Everyone in these relationships knows how the dominant party will behave and what is expected of the dominated party. The bonds between trade unionists, though based on voluntary collaboration and mutual interest, are likewise written down in rule books and enshrined in norms and traditions that are understood by all (for example, that trade unionists do not cross picket lines). By contrast, the relationship between a sexist bully and his female victim is informal, fluid, and often unpredictable. The victim finds herself in a position where she never quite knows how far the bullying will go. At the opposite extreme, ties of friendship and emotional solidarity are also unwritten, and we can never be sure how secure those bonds really are until they are tested by necessity. All these kinds of power relationship are entwined, often in complex ways. A degree of genuine affection and co-operation may exist between a manager and an employee, or between a professor and a student, even though there is a clear imbalance of power between the two agents, and even though the threat of sanctions is always lurking in the background.

One crucial distinction between power-against and power-with is that, whereas the former is a zero-sum game, the latter is cumulative.[32] Tyrants and bullies are only powerful to the degree that they have disempowered other people. By contrast, when two or more people freely collaborate, they are able to achieve more together than the sum of what they could achieve individually. Moreover, the larger the number of people who are involved in a collaborative relationship with each other, the greater the potential for creative achievement. This is the basic reason why democratic societies are more efficient and innovative than authoritarian ones. Authoritarianism stifles the multiplier effect of social power, whereas social power unleashes it.[33] In other words, the more solidarity (power-with) that members of a social organisation demonstrate with each other, the greater the total amount of power-to that can be shared between its members. The point was well put by Mikhail Bakunin:

I am free only when all human beings surrounding me – men and women alike – are equally free. The freedom of others, far from limiting or negating my liberty, is on the contrary its necessary condition and confirmation. I become free in the true sense only by virtue of the liberty of others, so much so that the greater the number of free people surrounding me the deeper and greater and more extensive their liberty, the deeper and larger becomes my liberty.[34]

POWER-FROM-WITHIN

The third kind of power in the Starhawk/Gordon paradigm is 'power-from-within'. This kind of power derives from our own characteristics, abilities and skills, and the confidence with which we are willing to use them. For Starhawk, power-from-within is the joyful, exuberant power that comes from inside us: 'Power-from-within is akin to the sense of mastery we develop as young children with each new unfolding ability: the exhilaration of standing erect, of walking, of speaking the magic words that convey our needs and thoughts'.[35] The concept of 'power-from-within' has also been widely embraced by certain strands within the feminist movement, and in particular by empowerment feminists.[36] Sarah Lucia Hoagland, for instance, defines 'power-from-within' as 'the power of ability, of choice and engagement. It is creative; and hence it is an affecting and transforming power, but not a controlling power'.[37] Similarly, in their study of women's empowerment groups in rural areas of Mexico, Janet Townsend and her colleagues describe how collective action can empower all the members of the group, bringing a new awareness of the power that each individual carries inside herself.[38]

'Power-from-within' adds a crucial component to our understanding of power, but in my view there are some problems with the ways in which it has so far been described in the anarchist and feminist literature. To begin with, all of the above theorists describe power-from-within as a relational power which derives from feelings of solidarity and connectedness. According to Starhawk, it something that we can feel 'in acting together with others'.[39] In fact, power-from-within is also highly individual in a way that the other two kinds of power are not. Both power-against and power-with are relational by definition. They can only exist when at least two people are in relationship with each other. Power-from-within, by contrast, is located inside the individual person, and it continues to exist even when a person is isolated. Moreover, whereas power-to and power-against can be delegated, power-from-within is inalienable. I cannot voluntarily cede my knowledge, skills or confidence to other people. I can only help them to gain these things

for themselves. Having done so, I cannot then repatriate the knowledge and skills that I have imparted, for these characteristics now exist independently of me in the other person.

For Starhawk, Hoagland, and Townsend et al., power-from-within is unambiguously positive. Hoagland describes it as a positive, life-affirming, and empowering force that stands in stark contrast to power understood as domination, control or imposing one's will on another.[40] Sadly, however, solidarity can also be found in the ranks of elites, managers, robbers, and terrorists, who through the collective exercise of power against their enemies and victims can also gain in confidence and skills.

It is Gordon who comes closest to recognising the ambiguous character of power-from-within. As we have seen, Gordon describes 'power-from-within' as 'power-to', and he defines it as a capacity that derives from our resources, knowledge, and skills. He argues that power-from-within/power-to is the source of the other kinds of power. It is therefore a force that can either be used for good (power-with) or for bad (power-against). From this perspective, power-to is potential power, whereas power-against and power-with are two different forms of applied power.[41]

There are two problems with Gordon's theory. Firstly, though he recognises that power-from-within can be used either to dominate or to resist, his understanding of power-against and power-with relies on a simple binary that sees the former as negative and the latter as positive. In fact, all three forms of power that we have so far discussed can be used for the purpose of oppression as well as of resistance, of conquest as well as of emancipation. Secondly, Gordon does not emphasise sufficiently the degree to which the relationship between power-from-within and the other two kinds of power is dialectical. He describes power-against and power-with as derivatives of power-from-within and, to a degree, he is correct. But the relationship works in both directions. Power-from-within can also be generated, or eroded, by people's experiences of the other two kinds of power. It can be increased by education or by collective experiences which build people's skills and self-confidence. It can be diminished in environments where people's self-confidence is undermined, or where their skills rust away because people are denied the opportunity to practise them.

I don't want to push my critique too far. At the core of the analysis of Starhawk, Gordon, Hoagland, and Townsend et al., there is an insight of profound significance, namely, that power-from-within can never truly flourish in environments where coercive power is predominant. Threats and violence can be used to inculcate lower-order skills, but not higher ones. For example,

authoritarian teachers can bully their students into learning by rote, but they will never be able to help them to think independently or creatively. Officers in the army can train their soldiers to kill, but they will never intentionally promote the capacity of soldiers to question established authority. The sociological literature on group behaviour strongly suggests that there is an inverse correlation between the distribution of power and creativity. Groups that are more unequal tend to be less creative than groups that are more egalitarian. Where power-inequality is high, individuals focus on 'impression management' rather than on the task in hand. Those who have power in the group express their opinions, and everybody else defers.[42] Everybody who participates in the ritualistic assertion of, or deference to, coercive power, comes away from the interaction diminished as human beings.

The highest and most important form of power-from-within is critical thinking. Almost by definition, critical thinking is antithetical to any authority that bases itself on coercive power. The greater the degree that people are able to think for themselves, the less willing they are to let others do their thinking for them. Though critical thinking can emerge even in the most hostile of environments, it can only thrive when it is possible for individuals to exchange their ideas freely, and when arguments are decided, not by who has most coercive power, but by the superior explanatory power of the arguments themselves. Jürgen Habermas calls this an 'ideal speech situation', in which people's ability to think critically is sharpened by a 'ritualised competition for the better arguments'.[43] This, in turn, results in the emergence of a kind of communication which Habermas calls 'communicative reason'. It is of the utmost importance to recognise the symbiotic nature of the relationship between social power and communicative reason. Only social power, which is untainted by coercive power, can create the environment in which communicative reason can flourish. Yet communicative reason is also a precondition of social power because effective collaboration requires a high level of mutual understanding. In other words, just as violence and power-against are mutually constitutive, so social power and critical thinking promote each other and cannot exist without each other.

In our world, of course, the outcome of disputation has almost nothing to do with the inherent quality of the ideas. Instead, political and social questions – including those that bear directly on the future of our species – are decided by brute economic and military power, and by the application of powerviolence by the strong against the weak. Discourse in the public sphere is thoroughly distorted by the impact of coercive power relations. This is also true of academic discourse, which has been thoroughly corrupted by managerialism, careerism, and commer-

cialisation.[44] With our critical faculties dulled by our continued exposure to powerviolence, we stumble glumly towards impending extinction.

POWER-TO

As I noted above, the mainstream literature on power has largely focused on coercive power. Since the 1960s, however, a number of scholars – and especially anarchist and feminist scholars – have sought to redress the imbalance by exploring other categories of power relationship. An important contribution was made by Hanna Pitkin who, in a study of Wittgenstein published in 1972, made a distinction between 'power-over' and 'power-to'.[45] In the decades that followed Pitkin's intervention, the concepts of power-over and power-to have become staples of academic discussion. There is now an extensive literature which attempts to define both power-over and power-to, and to establish the relationship between the two.[46] As we have seen, Gordon argues that power-to is the same thing as power-from-within but, for the reasons that I have already discussed, this is not a helpful conflation.

More useful definitions of power-to have been supplied by Amy Allen and Peter Morriss. According to Allen, power-to is the 'ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends'.[47] Morriss, meanwhile, has defined power-to as 'the ability to affect outcomes'.[48] From this perspective, power-to can be seen as an umbrella category beneath which all the other kinds of power can be nested. If, for example, I find myself stranded on a desert island, but lack power to produce food by myself, I can either steal food from other castaways or compel them to produce it on my behalf (power-against), or I can pool whatever skills I possess with other castaways in order to produce collaboratively the food that is needed by all (power-with), or I can learn the skills that I need to grow food on my own account (power-from-within). Most probably, I will try to adopt a range of tactics in order to feed myself. In the real world, people rarely rely on single strategy to try and get what they want. They almost always combine with others in order more effectively to achieve their objectives. In the process they can acquire new skills and gain (or lose) confidence. All these kinds of power are bundled up together and the relationships between the various strands are sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory.

If we now bring together all four of the categories of power that we have discussed, we can begin to see the contours of integrated model of power that builds on the insights of Starhawk, Gordon, and others (see Figure 3). As Starhawk argues, there are three core kinds of power: power-over (which I call

power-against), power-with, and power-from-within. Starhawk correctly points out that power-against is grounded in the application, or threat, of physical violence. For this reason, the concept of 'powerviolence' is helpful because it emphasises the degree to which violence and non-violent forms of coercion are mutually constitutive. Gordon's important insight is that the various forms of power do not exist independently of each other. Power-against and power-with are derivative of power-from-within. The relationship, however, works in the other direction as well. The degree to which individuals possess power-from-within is both a cause and a consequence of their experiences of social and coercive power. Nonetheless, there is a particularly close connection between power-with and power-from-within. This is because social power requires a much higher degree of mutual understanding, creativity and critical thinking than powerviolence. The final category, power-to, is not (as Gordon argues) the same thing as power-from-within. Instead, power-to is the final result of the combination of all the other kinds of power to which we have access. Power-to is our ability to shape our environment – and ourselves – according to our wishes. It is the end to which all of the other categories of power are means.

Figure 3. The interaction of the various categories of power.
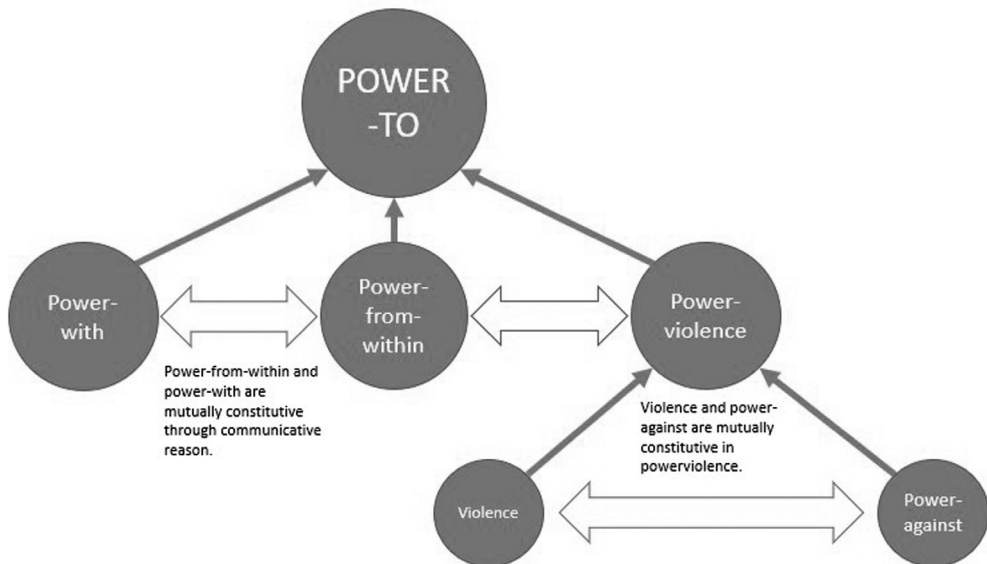
POWER AS A DYNAMIC MATRIX

Theorising power has long been a central concern, not just of anarchists such as Starhawk or Gordon, but of political philosophers and social theorists of all backgrounds and orientations. Any bibliography on this topic would include works by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Marx, Weber, Arendt, Robert Dahl, C. Wright Mills, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Foucault, Lukes, and many others. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Catharine MacKinnon, Judith Butler, and Luce Irigaray have also made a huge contribution to the literature. Although these authors have articulated a wide range of theories, many of which are mutually incompatible, they all have one important characteristic in common: they all demonstrate a strong tendency to describe power using metaphors of verticality. The underlying assumption, which is almost universal, is that society is pyramid-shaped.

As a model of how power functions, the pyramid is attractive because it is simple. It focuses our attention on a fundamental feature of social organisation, namely, the asymmetrical distribution of power.[49] However, the pyramid is also of limited value. I have already explained my political objections to the idea that power operates in vertical relationships. But there are also analytical reasons for rejecting the pyramid model. Firstly, it represents only formal coercive power relations. As we have seen, informal coercive power, formal and informal social power, and power-from-within, can also have a major influence on the behaviour of individuals and groups. Secondly, the pyramid model is static. For example, if workers join a trade union and thereby improve their ability to assert their collective interests, the formal line-management structure does not change. If a government introduces anti-trade union legislation, which tips the balance of power back in favour of management, there is no room in the pyramid model for representing this diagrammatically. Thirdly, the pyramid model is monocratic. It locates the apex of the pyramid as the source of all power, and the power that is held by individuals or groups at 'lower levels' is derivative of the power that descends 'from above'. In reality, as Foucault pointed out, 'power is everywhere' and it 'comes from everywhere'.[50] Even the so-called 'totalitarian' states of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Soviet Bloc were in fact polycratic, and contained numerous overlapping and often competing centres of power. No matter how much power was concentrated in the hands of the dictator, plans that were initiated 'from above' were often frustrated 'from below' by administrative inertia, bureaucratic infighting, popular resistance, or misunderstanding.[51]

An alternative way of conceptualising power is to represent it as an integrated

but horizontal matrix that comprises all the various kinds of power relationships that I have described. There is no 'above' and 'below' in the matrix. Nobody is superior or inferior to anybody else. The matrix is simply a group of people in relationship with one other. Some people in the matrix are power-holders because they have disproportionate influence over outcomes. They may derive their power-to from formalised power relations (for example, they are line managers or elected trade union officials) or from informal relationships (for example, networks of patronage, kinship, alliances and friendships), or from their specific skills and abilities. Other people in the matrix are 'power-donors'. These are people who have relatively little influence over outcomes, either because they have voluntarily yielded a degree of autonomy to others, or because they are lacking in confidence and skills, or because they have been induced to obey the power-holders through the threat of punishment.

It is worthwhile to compare the matrix approach with traditional methods of depicting power relationships. Figure 4 is an illustration of how the line-management structure of a company is typically represented. The various people in an organisation are arranged in a pyramid, and the relative power of individuals is indicated by their position in the hierarchy. Person A, who is the manager, is the font of all authority and is therefore placed at the top of the diagram. Person B, who is located at the second tier of the structure, has more power than Persons C and D, who are located at the third. Because D is line-managed by B, whereas C is line-managed by somebody else, B would normally exercise more power over D on a day-to-day basis than over C. Everything in the diagram is neatly organised and rational. This is the world as it appears to human resources managers and the authors of management science textbooks.

Figure 5 illustrates the same line-management structure, but laid out horizontally. In this diagram, the overall power-to of individuals is represented by the size of the dots. Although there is a strong correlation between the power of individuals and their place in the line-management structure, there are also clear anomalies. Persons C and D, who appear to be relatively powerless in Figure 4, can now be seen to be amongst the more powerful members of the community. The reason for this becomes clear in Figure 6, in which other kinds of power relationships have been mapped onto the formal line-management structure. Person C, who is a trade-union representative, derives significant power over outcomes (power-to) as a result of the delegated social power that has been bestowed on her by her members. Person D is a workplace bully whose manipulative skills give him more real power over outcomes than his ostensible line manager.

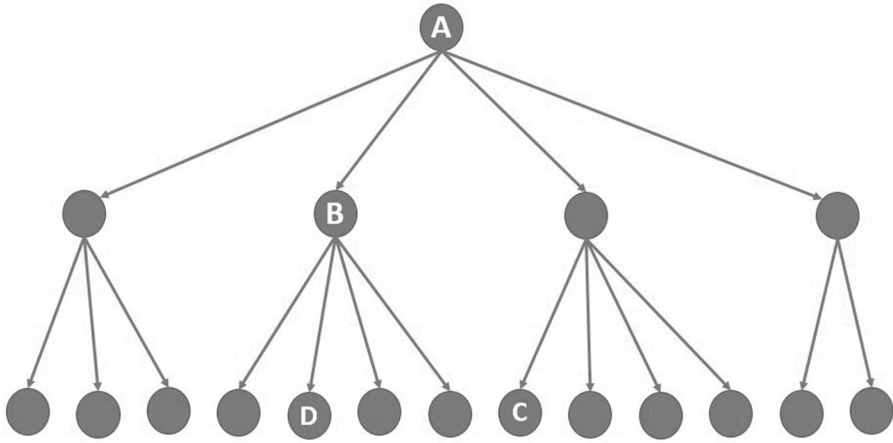*Figure 4. Traditional representation of a line-management structure.*

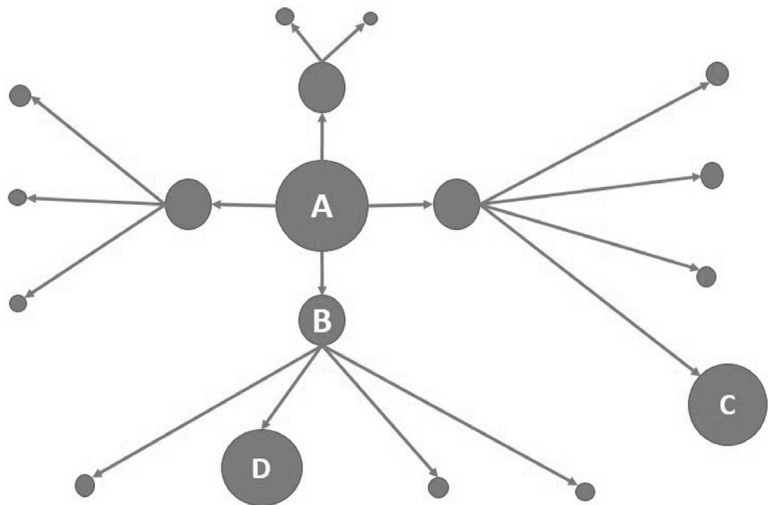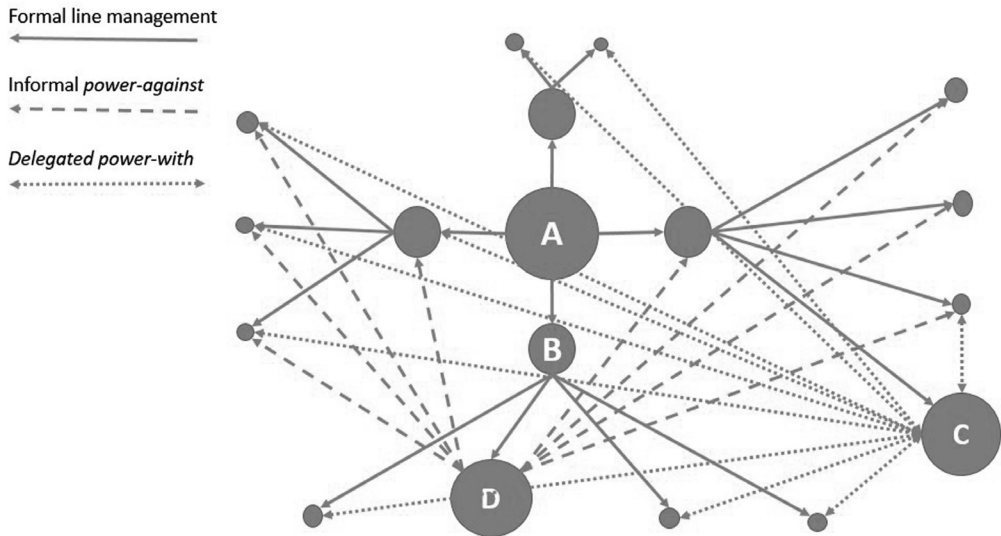*Figure 5. The same line-management structure displayed horizontally.*

Figure 6. The same structure with other power relationships

Formal line management

Informal *power-against*

Delegated *power-with*

A number of points about the way that power behaves within the matrix are worth noting because they help us to understand historical change and peoples' lived experience of power. Of crucial importance is the fact that the matrix is all-encompassing. There is no outside of power.[52] Everybody in society is inextricably enmeshed in the web. Every workplace, voluntary body, family unit and every other kind of social organisation has its own power network, similar to the one I that have depicted above. But all are connected in the global matrix that is generated by the interactions of billions of people. This matrix penetrates every aspect of our lives, including the most intimate. As Moisés Naím points out, 'power has a social function. Its role is not just to enforce domination or to create winners and losers: it also organises communities, societies, marketplaces, and the world'.[53]

The all-encompassing nature of power has significant implications for how we study it. The distinctions that are normally made between 'high politics', 'popular politics', 'social life' and so forth are predicated on the idea of the social pyramid. In the words of Saul Newman, such categories 'tend to obscure the more intricate, capillary workings of power'.[54] Similarly, the study of power as a total system requires an interdisciplinary approach. According to Kenneth Boulding: 'The various forms of power act and interact on each other so significantly that if the study of power were confined to a single aspect of it, such as political or economic

or social power, much would be lost in the understanding of the overall dynamics of the system'.[55]

The point here is not that we need to study everything simultaneously, but that we should always be aware that all human behaviours are enmeshed in an ecosystem of power. All biological organisms in the sea – from phytoplankton to great white sharks – are connected in a single web of energy transfers that take place when sea creatures consume each other. In the same way, power is a system that includes every social, economic and political interaction, from Foucault's 'fine mesh' of power in everyday life through to the weightiest decisions of political leaders.[56]

Parsons likened the circulation of power in the social system to the circulation of money in the economy.[57] The simile is useful because it highlights the transactional nature of power, and the degree to which these transactions are asymmetrical. Power, like money, accumulates at specific locations in the system. In order to preserve inequalities, and especially those inequalities that result from the deployment of power-against, barriers are created that regulate the circulation of power.[58] These barriers act like dams, for they create the reservoirs of power in which the privileged swim. Some of these barriers are informal, unspoken or even unconscious, such as prejudice against people on account of their gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, class background and so forth. Other barriers are explicit and codified. In any workplace, for instance, a formal system of titles and job specifications is used to regulate the flow of power and restrict the ability to affect outcomes. Specific workplace castes are created, to which entry is regulated by the paraphernalia of rituals, ceremonies, apparel, examinations, qualifications, and designations.

The distribution of power in the matrix is never static. It constantly shifts as a result of technological innovation, the arrival of new ideologies, and the formation and dissolution of social coalitions. The 1920s and 1930s were generally a period of increasing political and social inequality, especially in countries like Germany, Italy, and the USSR, where power became highly centralised in dictatorial political parties. By contrast, in the three decades that followed the end of World War II, at least in North America and Western Europe, power spread itself more evenly across the system and social inequalities were reduced. Since the 1980s, we have been living through a period in which power is becoming more centralised again. This, in turn, has led to increasing inequality and a rise of all the social, political and environmental problems that are associated with inequality.[59] So the ebb and flow of power in the human system continues over years, decades, centuries, and millennia. The story of the cyclical centralisation and decentralisation of power is the story of our species.

Underlying these shifts are two contradictory forces which pull the distribution of power, first in one direction, and then in the other, in an endless tug-of-war. The mechanisms that operate here are succinctly described in Boehm's study of the ancient origins of equality and inequality. On the one hand, those who already have power almost always seek to use it to gain more power. According to Boehm, 'if a little authority is permitted to develop, then a normal human leader is likely to want more. He may want more authority because he enjoys bossing people around, or he may simply wish to make his job as a leader less complicated'. The countervailing force is the potential or actual resistance of those who dislike being dominated. Like everybody else who writes about power, Boehm uses the misleading language of hierarchy and verticality. Nonetheless, in the following passage he neatly identifies one of the mainsprings of human history:

> Every human group arrives at a political ethos that legitimates whatever degree of governance is deemed acceptable, and in doing so the group defines the abuse of power ... These universals operate at the level of normative ideology, but they affect behaviour profoundly. There is always a point, variable in its expression, at which desperate subordinates may rise to remedy a situation that has become intolerable by local standards of legitimacy. It is powerful dispositions to dominance and submission that oblige us to live always in hierarchies of one type or another, and it is our antiauthoritarian tendencies that lead us to limit the power of leaders and other dominants, and that make politically illegitimate despots wary of popular rebellion. This dynamic appears to be universal.[60]

Under normal circumstances, the shifting of power within the system takes place very slowly. For most people, most of the time, power is highly predictable. For example, an employee's experience of power in the workplace does not vary much from one day to the next. Over time, however, the employee will certainly notice changes. Shifts of power in a workplace may result from exogenous factors (for example, economic conditions, the state of the labour market, new legislation, and the rise or fall of the power of trade unions and political parties) or endogenous factors (such as personnel changes, promotions and demotions, internal restructuring). Similar gradual shifts in the distribution of power take place over time in any community, family, circle of friends, or social organisation. Yet there are also occasions in history when the system of power relations is radically destabilised, for example by economic collapse, revolution, or war.

A common criticism of distributive models of power – which is what I am developing here – is that they treat power as an unchanging commodity that people

either possess or fail to possess. Distributive models, it is claimed, do not take account of the fact that power can exist in a wide variety of forms. According to Irigaray, if feminists 'aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are re-subjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallocratic order'.[61] I accept the validity of this criticism, which is why I want to emphasise that power in the matrix shifts over time, not just in quantitative terms, but also qualitatively. However, these quantitative and qualitative shifts are closely related. When power is centralised in the hands of a small number of people, coercive power becomes far more important as a mechanism of social cohesion, and power-from-within is diminished. Nazi Germany or contemporary North Korea are extreme examples of this phenomenon. By contrast, when power is more evenly distributed across members of a community, social power tends to come to the forefront, which in turn promotes the growth of power-from-within. As Arendt argued, where civil society is strong, the coercive power of the state is curtailed, and vice versa.[62]

The matrix is also dynamic in the sense that the aggregate amount of power in the system varies over time. In part this depends on the relative balance between coercive and social power. When a small number of people use powerviolence to disempower everybody else, they can thereby concentrate enormous quantities of power in their own hands. However, dictators and power elites are also parasitic because, as I have already argued, coercive power invariably corrodes social power and the relationships of trust on which social power is based. Authoritarian systems thus diminish the overall capacity of a community to achieve constructive objectives. This is another reason why the decentralisation of power is so important if we are to survive the current crisis. Only social power can generate the energy that is necessary to resolve the enormous problems that confront us.

There is one other important vector which can change the overall amount of power in a social system, namely, technology. The technological innovations of the last two centuries – and in particular of the last two decades – have given humanity the capacity to achieve things that were beyond the imagination of our ancestors. In the decades to come, the development of technological power will proceed at a pace that has no precedent in human history. The existential question is: will this power be used in ways that allow humanity to explore its full potential in creative and sustainable ways, or will it be used to widen inequality and destroy the planet? Only if we can discover how to combine technological power with social power will we be able to empty the seas of plastic and fill them with fish, to halt and if possible reverse climate change, to feed the world's population in a sustainable fashion, and to ensure that information technology empowers everybody and not just govern-

ment and big business. By contrast, the combination of technological power and powerviolence produces a cocktail so toxic that it will probably kill us all.

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