Power and resistance

ABSTRACT

Treatments of Weber’s discussion of power have not adequately appreciated that in his analysis power and resistance are distinct but interdependent aspects of power relations. The concept ‘resistance’ is necessary for an understanding of power relations and irreducible to the concept of ‘power’. However this insight cannot be developed from Weberian premises. Through a discussion of accounts of power in Lukes, Giddens, and others, it is shown that the distinction between power and resistance remains obscure for theories which emphasize the formal properties of power and ignore its social context. The exercise of power over others draws upon social resources not available to subordinate agents. Nevertheless, those subject to power can mobilize other social resources in a contribution to power relations through resistance. In limiting power, resistance influences the outcome of power relations.

Power relations imply acceptance on the part of those subject to them. They also imply resistance. This has been regarded as paradoxical, if not contradictory. But acceptance by social actors of the legitimacy of power over them does not imply that they cannot attempt to moderate its effects. That is, an acceptance of power does not preclude resistance. Pragmatic or expedient acceptance of power includes a significant resistive element, either because of an absence of interest in the realization of the goals of power, or because of an overt hindrance of its proper operations. The distinction implicit here between ‘frictional’ and ‘intentional’ resistance raises another matter, namely the idea that resistance to power leads to conflict. Resistance can take different forms, but none are necessarily associated with conflict. What they have in common, rather, is the fact that resistance imposes limits on power. Indeed, it is through its limitation on power that resistance contributes to the outcome of power relations.
The purpose of this paper is not to propose a new definition of power. The literature of conceptual refinement and redefinition needs no additions. Rather it is to demonstrate that there can be no adequate understanding of power and power relations without the concept of ‘resistance’.

II

Practically all social relations and institutions must in some way be regarded as involving power. But the pervasiveness of power in social systems has not led to agreement on how the term ‘power’ is to be understood. The absence of a standardized terminology in sociology may partly account for some differences, but genuine and serious disagreement none the less remains about the conceptualization of power. At the same time there is extensive agreement with Weber’s definition of power as

the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.

It is no doubt the very general nature of Weber’s definition which facilitates its wide acceptance. As Steven Lukes has noted, power as an asymmetrical relation can be conceptualized in terms of control, dependence, or inequality, and ‘Max Weber’s celebrated definition of power’, he says, ‘is compatible with all three’. Thus it is possible that formal statements of power which follow Weber’s prototype of a polar relation in which the realization of a social actor’s capacity achieves a power objective, may differ widely on, say, the imperative of power, the constitution of agency, the context of power relations, and so on.

A general acceptance of Weber’s discussion of power has not led to a full appreciation of his treatment of the concept. In particular, Weber’s distinction between ‘power’ and ‘resistance’, and his statement of their (possible) interdependence within the power relation, have been inadequately explored. It has sometimes been assumed that no significance can be attached to Weber’s use of the term ‘resistance’. Indeed, there are renditions of Weber’s definition of power which contain no reference to ‘resistance’ at all. When its role in Weber’s definition is acknowledged, discussion of resistance has been confined to whether conflict is a necessary aspect of power.

The idea that resistance to power necessarily implies conflict has wide acceptance. So sure is he of the invariable association between power and resistance that Ralf Dahrendorf, for instance, has attempted to construct a universal law of human history on the proposition that power implies resistance and, therefore, conflict.
Dennis Wrong is prepared to acknowledge the relevance of resistance for an understanding of power when he says that the ‘notion of controlling or acting on resistant materials is implicit in the idea of power as skill or capacity’. But because he wishes to avoid any imputation that power necessarily involves conflict, Wrong proposes a definition of power which ‘does not make resistance by the power subject a part of the definition’.

Given the assumption that when power implies resistance it also implies conflict, Weber’s definition of power has been understood to hold that conflict is essential in power relations. Anthony Giddens, on the other hand, has attempted to defend Weber against this interpretation. Giddens does not disagree that the conjunction of power and resistance leads to conflict. On the contrary, he strongly affirms the link between power, defined in terms of resistance, and conflict. His point, rather, is to deny that power only exists when resistance is overcome in Weber’s definition of power as

the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.

Giddens’ argument hinges on Weber’s use of the word ‘even’ in the quotation above. The suggestion is that in Weber’s account power can be exercised either in the absence of resistance or ‘even against’ resistance. In this case the link between power and resistance is purely contingent. When resistance has to be overcome then power implies conflict; otherwise power and conflict are not linked. Giddens’ interpretation, then, rejects the view that, for Weber, power is exercised only when resistance is overcome; and thus the idea that Weber’s definition of power necessarily presupposes conflict loses its basis.

The notion that conflict follows from power which is resisted does have a certain appeal. The ‘problem of coping with resistance’, according to Talcott Parsons’ discussion of the common-sense meaning of power, ‘leads into the question of the role of coercive measures, including the use of physical force’. This is an interesting statement of the situation because it specifies the conditions under which power’s coping with resistance unquestionably leads to conflict. The incidence of situations in which power takes the form of physical force is in fact infrequent. Indeed, as the use of force in social relations is always precarious, its use in routine and normal circumstances is unlikely.

One possibility, then, is that power which must overcome resistance does not necessarily lead to conflict; it depends on the form which power takes in coping with resistance. But this formulation is still too open-ended. It is not even clear that antagonism, as opposed
to conflict, is a necessary aspect of power which must overcome resistance. Power about which there is consensus must frequently overcome what might be called ‘frictional’ resistance (as opposed to ‘directed’ or ‘intentional’ resistance) which arises from indifference rather than from conscious and active opposition. Power would hardly be led to take a forceful let alone coercive form in overcoming such resistance. Weber’s own discussion of conflict, competition and struggle suggests that any imputation of ‘conflict’ to power relations cannot be lightly made.\textsuperscript{12} Nor should they be readily accepted.

It was noted above that in his discussion of Weber’s definition of power, Giddens interpreted Weber’s clause ‘even against the resistance of others’ to imply that for Weber the overcoming of resistance is contingent for the existence of power, and thus that it would be erroneous to assume that Weber’s account of power necessarily implies conflict. Once it is clear, though, that resistance to power need not be regarded as necessarily leading to conflict in any case, Giddens’ argument seems somewhat misdirected. Indeed, Giddens fails to understand the place of ‘resistance’ in Weber’s definition of power because he has focused on the contingency of resistance rather than on the significance for power of coping with resistance when it is present.

The implication of Weber’s claim that power is the chance to realize one’s will ‘even against the resistance of others’\textsuperscript{13} is that resistance will not be a part of every power situation. Weber’s use of the term ‘even’ does not imply, however, that the presence or absence of resistance is irrelevant for any understanding of power. When he defines power earlier in \textit{Economy and Society}, Weber is given to use the term ‘despite resistance’\textsuperscript{14} by his translators rather than ‘even against’ resistance. This usage entails not merely that resistance may or may not be empirically present, but provides a further crucial dimension to the argument, namely that (in the presence of resistance) power only exists when the resistance of others is overcome. It is at this point that Giddens’ argument becomes misleading. Power for Weber is not simply the realization of will in the presence or absence of resistance, as Giddens would have it, but the realization of will \textit{notwithstanding} resistance.\textsuperscript{15}

The issue for Weber is not whether resistance is, in fact, present or not, but whether resistance is significant for an understanding of power. Weber’s point is not that resistance must be present in all power situations but that the over-coming of resistance is a necessary feature of power. This is clearly why Weber defines power in terms of ‘probability’ and ‘chance’.\textsuperscript{16} The higher or more widespread the resistance, the lower the probability of realizing one’s will, and the less one’s power. This formulation is, in itself, relatively undistinguished. Nevertheless, it contains a notion which, although hardly acknowledged in sociological discussion, is fundamental for an understanding of social power. In his definition of power Weber
distinguishes ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ as distinct but interdependent aspects of, or phenomena within the power relation.

The significance of Weber’s insight will be elaborated below. At this point it is only necessary to indicate that Weber gives an irreducible role to resistance in the analysis of power. The secondary discussion of his treatment of power and resistance has failed to highlight this contribution of Weber to the theory of power. To this extent it is faithful to the original. In his own discussion Weber neither explicates the concept of resistance nor justifies its inclusion in his definition of power. Indeed, Weber’s overall treatment of power and cognate phenomena is sketchy, contradictory and poorly grounded in general sociological principles.

The frequently expressed criticism that his definition of power is unsatisfactory because it functions in terms of individual propensities is acknowledged by Weber when he says that the ‘concept of power is sociologically amorphous’.17 He goes on to recommend its replacement with the ‘more precise’ ‘sociological concept of domination’. Weber’s discussion of ‘domination’, though, is far from precise as he shifts back and forth between narrow and broad conceptualizations of it.

When he first introduces the concept Weber defines ‘domination’ as ‘the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons’.18 Thus domination is power as authority. Later in his discussion, however, Weber’s understanding of domination broadens considerably to include not only ‘domination by virtue of authority’ but also ‘domination by virtue of a constellation of interests’ in which possession of goods, say, confers influence over others who nevertheless remain formally free and are motivated by pursuit of their own interests.19 The situation becomes even more confused when a little later the terminology for precisely these two types of action reverts from ‘domination’ to ‘power’ when Weber notes the

clear-cut antithesis between factual power which arises completely out of possession and by way of interest compromises in the market, and, on the other hand, the authoritarian power of a patriarch or monarch with its appeal to the duty of obedience simply as such.20

On the very next page of his discussion Weber again returns to the term ‘domination’, explicitly excluding from its scope domination by virtue of a constellation of interests and identifying only the ‘authoritarian power of command’ as domination.21 Irrespective of the varying scope of ‘domination’, it is to be expected that the notion of ‘domination’ encompass that of ‘power’ as Weber treats domination as ‘a special case of power’.22 Given the focus of the present discussion it is unfortunate that there is no direct
answer in Weber to the question of whether ‘domination’ bears the same relation as ‘power’ does to ‘resistance’. It is interesting, though, that when he distinguishes ‘domination’ and ‘discipline’ Weber says that it is with the latter alone that obedience is ‘uncritical and unresisting’.23 A formulation of domination in terms of resistance similar to the definition of power is readily conceivable. The absence of such a statement in Weber’s writing is really of no significance. He introduces the concept ‘domination’, as a concept with sociological spine, to address the question of the basis on which the realization of will is achieved. Power, for Weber, is the probability that an actor will carry out his will ‘regardless of the basis on which this probability rests’.24 The concept of domination specifies the basis of power as authority, or, possibly, a constellation of interests. The question of resistance is not at issue.

What will be at issue, though, is Weber’s characterization of the bases of domination as authority or market interest. Weber’s construction of the concept of domination is based on what must remain inter-subjective relations. In his terms, authority exists because one commands and one obeys; market domination exists because individuals pursue their own interests. This means that regardless of other considerations authority is to be found in every instance of command and obedience, and market domination in every instance of orientation to interests. Any idea of a structure of social relations is lost in this approach as the basis of domination is conceived by Weber in terms of the relationship between an actor and his act rather than in terms of the institutional and social systemic context of the relation between actors.25

In distinguishing power and resistance as qualitatively distinct contributions to the power relation, it follows that power and resistance are based on different aspects of the social structure of power relations, or of the social system. Weber, of course, does not treat this issue. It simply could not be adequately stated and explored from within his perspective. Nevertheless, Weber’s insight that ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ are distinct aspects of the power relation is of fundamental importance.

III

Weber is not the only writer who has treated the power relation in terms of power and resistance. Conceptualizations of power relations in which resistance is given an explicit and irreducible role can be found in the work of Dahrendorf, for instance, and also Michel Foucault.26 In a wider framework, the idea of resistance has been important to the work of the ‘Birmingham school’ of cultural studies in articulating the class nature of cultural forces and movements.27
These quite different approaches share an implicit assumption that the concept of ‘resistance’ is axiomatic and requires no further specification.

The notion of resistance and its relation to power is also central to Alvin Gouldner’s account of variation in patterns of industrial bureaucracy. In characterizing social processes which lead to different degrees of bureaucratization Gouldner identifies the divergent interests of workers and management. In particular, Gouldner argues that the implementation of bureaucratic measures in an industrial setting is not a consequence of organizational requirements, nor of a capacity inherent in a managerial imperative to bureaucratization, but rather, is a ‘function of their subordinates’ motivation and ability to resist managerial efforts’.28 This formulation is highly suggestive of the importance of ‘resistance’ in conceptualizing the role of those subject to managerial power, and therefore without organizational power themselves, in influencing the outcome of the power relation. The implication here is that resistance is a capacity in its own right germane to an understanding of social relations. The relations Gouldner discusses have an outcome determined not by the dominant group in the relationship, normally described as having ‘power over’ the other, but by the balance of the opposing groups.

Gouldner immediately goes on to say, though, that the degree of bureaucratization ‘was explainable only in terms of a balance of power, of the relative strengths of opposing groups’.29 In this statement there is a conflation of ‘power’ and ‘strength’, and a rather mechanistic assumption about the nature of power relations. More serious for the argument that power relations have to be conceptualized in terms of ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ is the fact that here the notion of a ‘balance of power’ explains the outcome of interaction in terms of the unequal power of participants, without recourse to ‘resistance’. A similar statement, in which the concept of resistance appears only to indicate that it is redundant, is Thomas Hobbes’ claim that

because the power of a man resisteth and hindereth the effects of the power of another: power simply is no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another.30

The argument that the outcome of interaction can be understood as a balance of power, or that power relations are two-way, will be treated more fully below. It is necessary to show here that the concept ‘resistance’ is not reducible to that of power and that it conceptualizes a distinct aspect of the power relation not covered by the concept ‘power’.

Gouldner does not contrast the concept ‘resistance’ with ‘power’, but with ‘initiative’. Gouldner says, for instance, that under such circumstances as when safety issues are considered, it may be
‘workers who initiate bureaucratic forms, while on the other hand, the management group may be the barrier resisting them’. Management, as the hierarchically superior group, presumably remains superordinate to workers in power terms. The idea that resistance is opposed to initiative and a function of power is even more clear in T. B. Bottomore’s statement that

the upper class in Britain has been able to resist . . . the attacks upon its economic interests, and that in this sense of having the power to defend its interests it has maintained itself . . . as a ruling class.

In these statements the distinct identities of ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ are not lost. But as ‘resistance’ is presented as a function of ‘power’ the two concepts exist in tandem rather than as separate aspects of the concept ‘power relation’. While this formulation seems to contradict the one obtained from the discussion of Weber above, it is in fact derivable from it.

It is clear in the contrast of the terms that resistance implies the imposition of some limitation on the initiative of others. It is not contradictory to say that power may be used to limit the initiative of others. Ordinarily, though, ‘power’ is understood as an expression of the capacity to initiate. In this sense the connection between ‘power’ and ‘initiative’ is fundamental. In the broadest terms power has to do with getting things done, or with getting others to do them. If it means anything, social power is the generative force through which social relations and institutions are directed. That it has social power in this sense means that the British ruling class discussed by Bottomore above is able to prevent attempts to limit its economic interests from being effective. If power is socially constructive in the way suggested here, and resistance is reactive to the inchoativeness of power and imposes limitations upon it, then it can be expected that in social relations power will attempt to counter or oppose resistance. In general discussion, then, it might be said that power will attempt to resist the limitations imposed upon it. Behind this common-sense statement are the correlative concepts of ‘power’ and ‘resistance’ referring to qualitatively different types of action which together determine the outcome of power relations. A brief consideration of some influential treatments of power will demonstrate the necessity of the concept ‘resistance’ to an understanding of power.

It is possible to define power either in terms of the agent exercising it or the effect or consequence of its being exercised. Most definitions of power incorporate both possibilities with different emphasis on each. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, says that ‘The Power of a Man . . . is his present means, to obtain some future Good’. Although Bertrand Russell does not refer to ‘means’ or the agent’s capacity, his
definition of power 'as the product of intended effects'\textsuperscript{34} entails a reference to the agent's faculties by introducing the requirement of intentionality. This is similar to Edward Lehman's definition of power as the 'chance of obtaining desired outcomes'.\textsuperscript{35} Dennis Wrong mentions both agent and outcome in claiming that power 'is the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others'.\textsuperscript{36} It would be pointless to maintain that these definitions are wrong. Nevertheless it is quite clear that they are incomplete.

The realization of a capacity and the satisfaction of an intention are never inherent in the capacity and the intention themselves. It is unlikely that the authors mentioned above would deny this. Nevertheless, none of them acknowledge the theoretical significance of the fact that a counter-influence by those subject to power will tend to frustrate the realization of the other's capacities and detract from their intended effects. Barry Hindess has convincingly argued that the securing of outcomes in social relations is always subject to conditions which cannot be reduced to the capacities of those exercising power.\textsuperscript{37} Thus the power of an agent will be less than the capacities he mobilizes in attempting to achieve an intended outcome, and the actual outcome will be different from the one originally intended. The social limitations imposed on power to which Hindess refers can be summarized by the concept 'resistance'. In overcoming the inadequacies of the definition of power as the capacity to achieve intended outcomes, the notion of resistance readily presents itself by conceptualizing those factors which in limiting the exercise of power contribute to the outcome of the power relation.

One exception to the argument, that a proper consideration of power as production of intended effects leads to the notion of resistance, is the conception of power developed by Steven Lukes. 'The point', says Lukes, 'of locating power is to fix responsibility for consequences held to flow from the action, or inaction, of certain specifiable agents'.\textsuperscript{38} 'Responsibility' in this context refers not simply to causal agency but principally to moral agency. Lukes wishes to limit 'power' to those cases of interaction in which those exercising power could have chosen to act differently, and therefore, he continues, to those cases in which the actor knows, should know, or could know the effects of his action.\textsuperscript{39} This requirement confines consideration to the culpability of actors and is indifferent to the general efficacy of their actions. The question of moral responsibility for an event is concerned with how one ought to act, whereas the question of causal responsibility is concerned with an actor's contribution to the actual outcome of an event or relationship. While 'resistance' might be used to account for any difference between an actor's power and the outcome of a relation in which he was involved, an entirely different concept would be required to treat issues raised by Lukes' usage of 'responsibility'.
The suggestion that his account of power fails to raise questions of a social analytic nature seems to be at odds with Lukes’ insistence upon the relevance of ‘socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions’\textsuperscript{40} for an understanding of power. But Lukes’s point is not that ‘power’ should be understood in terms of social forces. Lukes explicitly argues against the ‘conceptual assimilation of power to structural determination’.\textsuperscript{41} Rather, the relevance of social arrangements to his argument is that power should be seen as exercised not only by individuals but, Lukes says, also by groups of individuals, institutions, and other social collectivities.\textsuperscript{42} An example offered by Lukes to illustrate his argument confirms the interpretation of it outlined here.

The idea of power as moral responsibility exercised by institutions is raised when Lukes asks ‘did cigarette companies exercise this power [of life and death] over the public before it was even supposed that cigarette smoking was harmful?’\textsuperscript{43} He immediately goes on to answer ‘Surely not’. This catechism is quite revealing of Lukes’s conceptual and theoretical concerns. The social power of cigarette companies, in the market place, for instance, is of no concern. The question is whether they are morally responsible for the biological power of their product to cause harm. The absence of cigarette companies’ culpability and therefore power in Lukes’ sense derives, according to him, from the absence of knowledge about the effects of smoking. Prior to our present state of medical knowledge, though, it was quite feasible to say that while the cause of lung cancer is not known, whatever is responsible for it holds the power of life and death. In this situation power is hidden and unknown, as well as unknowing. Lukes would discount this as a situation of power and treat it instead as a special case of structural determination, as no (moral) responsibility is possible. This is an excessively narrow perspective, and of little value for social analysis.

The idea that power can be exercised by collective as well as individual actors, which is not confined to Lukes,\textsuperscript{44} encourages the view that power is not only institutionalized but, as Westergaard and Resler put it, ‘anonymous’ and ‘routine’.\textsuperscript{45} Westergaard and Resler go on to say that

In any society, the pattern of people’s lives and their living conditions take the forms which they do, not so much because somebody somewhere makes a series of decisions to that effect; but in large part because certain social mechanisms, principles, assumptions — call them what you will — are taken for granted. Typically, of course, those mechanisms and assumptions favour the interests of this or that group \textit{vis-à-vis} the rest of the population. The favoured group enjoys effective power, even when its members take no active steps to exercise power. They do not need to do so —
for much of the time at least — simply because things work their way in any case.46

The concept of power implicit in this statement, unlike those already discussed, defines power in terms of the structural properties of systems. A variant of this, mentioned above, is Weber’s notion of ‘factual power which arises completely out of possession and by way of interest compromises in the market’.47 The idea that power is a generative force in social relations and institutions is common to both the definition of power as structure and the definition of power in terms of actor’s capacities and intentions. The concept of ‘resistance’ is equally complementary to each understanding of power. In both cases ‘resistance’ refers to the factors which limit the effects of power. Structural power, the power implicit in the social system, whether it is based on the means of material production or the hegemony of tradition or something else, is never unbridled and no account of social processes can operate in terms of it alone.

The view that power is founded on the capacities and intentions of actors, and even the view of power as moral responsibility, are not strictly speaking alternatives to the view that power is a structural property of the social system. Opportunities to exercise capacities and choices presuppose some favourable disposition in the bias of the system. Such a bias can slant in only one direction, and only certain social actors will be able to enjoy the benefits of its shadow. This characterization can serve to amplify the statement of Westergaard and Resler that the ‘favoured group enjoys effective power, even when its members take no active steps to exercise power’. The suggestion is that when active steps are taken to exercise power, when motivated by intentions and responsibilities, members of the favoured group will have access to resources for action which simply are not available to those for whom the bias of the system is not favourable. To put the point quite differently, those disadvantaged by a system of power may count their powerlessness in terms of the day-to-day outcomes of the capitalist system in general, say, or the actions of a particular employer. In either case the power to which he is subject is based on social resources which are equally unavailable to the ordinary employee. His attempts to modify their effect through resistance will require the use of quite different types of social resources.

Power relations can be characterized as being both asymmetrical and reciprocal. So far the discussion has emphasized their asymmetrical aspects. Mention of reciprocity could be taken to indicate that the asymmetrical structure of power relations results from an imbalance
between agents who differ only in how much power they each have. This conclusion is clear in Anthony Giddens’s understanding of power as a two-way relation. While Giddens’s argument about power is part of a much wider theory of ‘structuration’ it is nevertheless fairly representative of an approach which regards all social actors as having some power, and which understands the outcome of power relations to be the result of a balance of power between social agents. In this approach the concept of ‘resistance’, as outlined above, is wholly redundant.

Giddens says that

Power relations are always two-way; that is to say however subordinate an actor may be in a social relationship, the very fact of involvement in that relationship gives him or her a certain amount of power over the other. Those in subordinate positions in social systems are frequently adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction of those social systems.

There is no quarrel with Giddens’s second sentence above, that those subordinate in a power relation have some influence over its outcome. The question, though, is how statements of the asymmetry of power and the reciprocity of influence are to be integrated. For Giddens the asymmetry of power relations derives simply from an inequality of influence between agents. But this formulation permits Giddens to propose that

however subordinate an actor may be in a social relationship, the very fact of involvement . . . gives him or her a certain amount of power over the other.

If power relations are asymmetrical it is simply contradictory to say that those who have subordinate positions in them have a ‘certain amount of power over the other’. Otherwise the relation is not asymmetrical, and there is no subordination. Giddens’s reluctance to recognize ‘powerlessness’ as a social category derives from his assumption that the only form of influence in a power relation is power. A non-contradictory statement about the influence of subordinates over the outcome of a power relation accepts that influence can take a non-power form.

The efficacious influence of those subordinate to power is resistance. The influence on social relationships exerted by powerless agents derives precisely from their resistance to power. Resistance limits the effects of power and in doing so materially influences the ‘conditions of reproduction of those social systems’ in which those resisting power have subordinate positions. As with Giddens’s notion, that power
relations are two-way and therefore that the subordinate has a certain amount of power over the superordinate, subordinate resistance to power is essentially interactional, is based upon social resources, and influences the outcome of social relationships. But as we have seen, resistance is logically distinct from and unlike power.

For Giddens, power 'is not a type of act; rather power is instantiated in action, as a regular and routine phenomenon'.

'Action' and 'power', then, are logically tied together. This idea is elaborated when Giddens says that

Action intrinsically involves the application of 'means' to achieve outcomes, brought about through the direct intervention of an actor in a course of events... power represents the capacity of the agent to mobilize resources to constitute those 'means'. In this most general sense, 'power' refers to the transformative capacity of human action.

The idea that power is the transformative capacity of action is continued in Giddens's treatment of interaction as a power relation. Those situations in which some agents have power 'over' others are those, Giddens says, in which power is domination.

Power in this sense, according to Giddens, refers to

interaction where transformative capacity is harnessed to actors' attempts to get others to comply with their wants. Power, in this relational sense, concerns the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realisation of these outcomes depends upon the agency of others.

Thus all agents in power relations exercise transformative capacities. The difference between agents with power over others and agents subject to the power of others is centred around who complies with whose wants. This depends on the difference in resources mobilized by agents; that is, on the differences in transformative capacities between them. As Giddens says, 'structures of domination involve asymmetries of resources employed in the sustaining of power relations in and between systems of interaction'.

In his discussion of 'power' in the writings of Talcott Parsons, Giddens comments that 'what slips away from sight almost completely in the Parsonian analysis is the very fact that power, even as Parsons defines it, is always exercised over someone! It is ironic, then, that the exercise of power over someone is quite contingent in Giddens's own analysis of power. The conception of power as a social relation, as a relation by virtue of the relationship between social agents rather than between an actor and his environment, means that power is not reducible to the attributes of agents themselves. It also follows that an
agent’s capability of influencing events, of exercising power to achieve some goal, is ultimately derivable from the relations of social power in which the agent is implicated. As Wrong has put it, a ‘system of “power over”’ is a prerequisite for “power to” in the broadest sense.\footnote{56} By defining interactional power in terms of the instantiation of power in action, Giddens reverses Wrong’s statement above and in effect rejects the idea that social power is non-reducible. For Giddens, ‘power to’, or in his terms, ‘transformative capacity’, is a prerequisite for ‘power over’ or interactional power.

One implication of the definition of interactional power in terms of transformative capacities is an ambiguity in Giddens’ understanding of interactional power, of power ‘over’. There are two possible bases of subordination in interactional power or domination. The domination of one agent by another might derive from a direct relation between them. This is the obvious sense of one having power over another. It is also possible, though, that an agent’s subordination derives from relations which do not directly involve the actor whose wants are satisfied by it. In this case involvement by actors in a social system in which the domination of one and the subordination of another are reproduced allows us to say that one has power over another, but in a weaker sense than when the relations are direct. Both types of social power can be understood in terms of asymmetries of transformative capacities. The difficulty, though, is that as the utilization of another’s transformative capacity can occur directly or indirectly, there is no way of distinguishing between them in Giddens’ analysis.

The ambiguity of Giddens’ conception of the structure of interactional power is connected with a more fundamental problem. Because domination is reducible to inequalities of transformative capacity, and as no social actor is by definition without transformative capacity or power, interactional power is always between agents who possess power to a greater or lesser degree. This conceptualization ensures that power be understood as a two-way relation. It also ensures that the notion of power as always exercised over someone be relatively vacuous. This is because a corollary of Giddens’ conception of power as transformative capacity means that no social agent can be powerless in relation to an agent who has power over him. The contradictory nature of this proposition has already been indicated, and a solution to it suggested. It is mentioned again to draw attention to its ideological character.

As Giovanni Sartori has put it, democratic ideology espouses ‘equal power for everybody’.\footnote{57} Under less than perfect democratic conditions everybody has power, but in less than equal amounts. The disparities of power are never chronic in democracy, however. Thus the pluralist tradition holds that power in social and political systems has a number of nodal points and that an individual’s or a collective’s exclusion from one source of power does not necessarily entail
exclusion from others.\textsuperscript{58} Against the Marxist, Weberian and Elitist traditions this view assumes that the structure of power extends to all sectors of society. The democratic ideology of power, in which power is held to be widely but unevenly distributed through social systems, is entirely congruent with Giddens’s analysis of power as predicated on the conception of transformative capacity. For all such formulations there is no place for an understanding of resistance as an irreducible factor in the analysis of power relations.

The democratic ideology of power, including Giddens’s version of it, offers no possibility of identifying the qualitatively different contributions to the outcome of power relations made by those who exercise power over others, on the one hand, and those subject to that power, on the other. In his discussion of ‘the dialectic of control’ Giddens does come close to a realization at a descriptive level that those who exercise power apply different types of social resources and capacities than those subject to it and reacting against it.\textsuperscript{59} But his treatment of power in the theory of structuration is incapable of conceptualizing these differences because of the form of abstraction Giddens employs for categories such as ‘resources’ and ‘transformative capacity’. In this regard Giddens’ account of power is far from exceptional. Indeed, the theoretical discussion of power in general has tended to direct attention away from the social and societal context of power relations and has focussed upon formal statements of power \textit{sui generis}.

The situation in which power relations have tended to be understood in their own terms, without reference to a wider background of social relations and the social system, can in part be traced to reactions to C. Wright Mills’s \textit{The Power Elite}.\textsuperscript{60} The ensuing literature on power has been concerned less with Mills’s account of the social system of power than it has with formal statements of the power relation itself. Robert Dahl, for instance, while acknowledging that groups and classes, as well as individuals, can be involved in power relations, requires that a consideration of power be confined to ‘the careful examination of a series of concrete decisions’.\textsuperscript{61} In this case the social context and character of those involved in power relations is of secondary importance. In their criticisms of Dahl, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz extend the understanding of power to include ‘non-decisions’,\textsuperscript{62} but do not return attention to the social constitution of power relationships and of the agents within them. Talcott Parsons’s alternative to Mills’ conception of power, unlike Dahl’s, emphasizes the importance of the societal context for an analysis of power.\textsuperscript{63} But precisely because Parsons treats power as a collective resource for the satisfaction of societal functions, considerations of structured inequality and power disparity between social agents are regarded by him as inconsequential for an understanding of power. Giddens’s conception of power, which was developed partly
in response to Parsons, reasserts the centrality of domination and therefore power inequality. But because Giddens defines power in terms of ‘transformative capacity’ agents in power relations become qualitatively indistinguishable.

Social relations cannot be understood in purely formal terms, and those who participate in them cannot be regarded as simply interchangeable. An institutional and systemic context are necessary in social relations; without them social relations cannot exist. As Marx put it

[social] relations are not relations between individual and individual, but between worker and capitalist, between farmer and landlord, etc. Wipe out these relations and you annihilate all society, and your Prometheus is nothing but a ghost without arms or legs.64

Relations of power in particular can be properly understood only when the social context is specified. The significance of the distinction between power and resistance becomes fully evident when the social characteristics or social location of agents feature in the analysis of power relations.

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In summary, it has been argued that the conception of power and resistance as distinct aspects of power relations leads to an understanding of ‘resistance’ as an irreducible concept in any adequate theory of power. Also, as power and resistance can be understood to function through different types of social bases or resources, drawing upon or associated with different aspects of the social system, any adequate theory of power must incorporate statements of the systemic context and not simply the formal properties of power relations. These general statements can be applied to power relations in the class structure, in the age structure, in organizational settings, and in social institutions such as marriage, for instance, to mention only the most obvious.

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NOTES

1. One summary of this is the typology of three dimensions of power in S. Lukes, Power: A Radical View, London, Macmillan, 1974.
7. Ibid., p. 130.
13. Ibid., p. 926.
15. While the English translation of Weber (ibid., pp. 53, 926) uses the terms ‘despite resistance’ and ‘even against resistance’ respectively, the original German has a single phrase, ‘auch gegen Widerstreben’, in both passages (see *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tubingen, J. C. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1947, pp. 28, 631). This translates as ‘also against resistance’, for which both of the English renditions are acceptable.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 943.
20. Ibid., p. 945.
21. Ibid., p. 946.
22. Ibid., p. 941.
23. Ibid., p. 53.
24. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
38. Lukes, 1974, op. cit., p. 56.
39. Ibid., p. 51.
40. Ibid., p. 22.
41. Ibid., p. 55.
42. Ibid., pp. 22, 39.
43. Ibid., p. 52.
46. Ibid., pp. 142–3.
48. Giddens, 1979, op. cit., pp. 6, 93, 149.
49. Ibid., p. 6.
50. Ibid., p. 91.
52. Ibid., p. 111.
53. Giddens, 1979, op. cit., p. 93; emphasis in original.
54. Ibid.
58. The ideological assumptions noted here are given expression in Wrong’s, 1979, p. 10, discussion of reversals of power inequality between actors in different spheres of conduct. It is ironic that the democratic ideology of power offers no challenge and some support to the ‘prevailing climate of intellectual accommodation to disparities of power’ mentioned by J. Wakeford ‘Conclusion’ in Urry and Wakeford, Power in Britain: Sociological Readings, London, Heinemann, 1973, p. 321.