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"Power to" and "Power over"

Two Distinct Concepts of Power?

Pamela Pansardi

University of Pavia

(pamela.pansardi@unipv.it)

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A detailed investigation of the contemporary literature on power suggests the existence not of a single, unified concept of power, but of two distinct concepts, generally labeled *power over* and *power to*[*]. The boundaries of the distinction between *power to* and *power over* are, however, far from clear. In some cases, the two expressions refer to competing views about the very nature of power. Understood in this way, the distinction is employed by scholars proposing, respectively, an *ability-based* definition or a *relational* definition of the concept. In other cases, the two expressions are used to indicate different instances of power, distinguished on the basis of normative criteria. *Power to* and *power over*, in these contexts, are interpreted as opposite concepts, indicating, respectively, morally legitimate and illegitimate facts about power. Some scholars, for example, have used *power over* as a synonym for domination, and *power to* as equivalent to empowerment.

Rather than indicating two well defined *concepts*, then, the two expressions designate two different groups of *conceptions* of power.[1] The first part of this article will therefore be devoted to an introduction of the various usages of the expressions *power to* and *power over*. It will deal, in particular, with the origins of the distinction between the two concepts and with their most widespread interpretations. In this first part of the article, moreover, I shall present two of the most prominent recent attempts to distinguish between *power to* and *power over*, namely the accounts offered by Keith Dowding (1991; 1996) and Amy Allen (1999).

In the second part of this article, however, I shall advance some reasons for doubting the validity of the very distinction between *power to* and *power over*. I shall suggest that *power to*, just like *power over*, should be understood as consisting in social relations. Moreover, I shall argue that the social relations on which *power to* is necessarily based are specifically relations of *power over*. I shall suggest, then, that *power to* and *power over*, despite their different definitions, serve to denote the same category of social facts. On the basis of this argument, I shall produce some reasons to question the very distinction between *power to* and *power over*, as well as the

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[*] Note: paper submitted to the *Journal of Power*. Review stage: revised and resubmitted.

[1] I am endorsing here the distinction between 'concepts' and 'conceptions' as proposed by Rawls (1971, 5).

supposed priority of one of the two concepts over the other. I shall explain, moreover, the reasons why neither Dowding's nor Allen's accounts are resistant to my criticisms.

By way of conclusion, I shall suggest that the notions of *power to* and *power over* should be seen as two aspects of a single, more general concept: that of *social power*.

1. *Power over* and *power to*

A great part of the contemporary literature interprets power as a social relation. Specifically, it defines power as a relation in which one actor is able to cause the behavior of another actor.[2] Notably, the various theoretical perspectives disagree on a number of points: the necessary intentionality of power, its conflictual nature, its relationship with the concept of domination, and the nature of the power-holder. Moreover, they disagree on whether power is to be defined as an *exercise* concept, including within its extension only those instances in which one agent actually affects the behavior of another, or as an *opportunity* concept,[3] including only the mere fact of 'having' power, or, again, as a combination of the two.

Some commentators have labeled power as a social relation '*power over*'.[4] Although the expression *power over* is included in a number of definitions of power, such as the classical definition proposed by Dahl, according to which '*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do' (1957, 202-203), probably its usage for indicating all the approaches focusing on the relational nature of power has been partly misleading, given that a number of scholars have interpreted the expression *power over* as carrying itself an intrinsically negative meaning. Not all the relational interpretations of power, in fact, include normative evaluations. Dahl, for example, proposes a non-evaluative definition of power (*over*), on the basis of which power (*over*) is not to be considered 'good' or 'bad' *per se*, but its moral status is to be established case by case. On the other hand, according to

[2] See, for example, Dahl 1957, 1961; Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Lukes 1974; Wrong 1979; Oppenheim 1981; Stoppino 2007.
[3] The distinction between exercise and opportunity concepts comes from Charles Taylor (1979).
[4] Pitkin 1972; Morriss [1988] 2002; Isaac 1987.

Steven Lukes, power (*over*) possesses an intrinsically negative evaluative content. According to his definition: '*A* exercises power over *B* when *A* affects *B* in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests' (1972, 27). In Lukes' conception,[5] then, what characterizes an exercise of power (*over*) is its detrimental effect for the interests of the power-subject.

The divide between *power over* and *power to* was first generated by a dispute over the very meaning of power: what Pitkin (1972) and subsequently, and more sophisticatedly, Morriss ([1988] 2002) contended, in putting forward the notion of *power to*, was the inappropriateness of the prevailing interpretation of power as a form of social causation. According to them, power should be defined by reference to the abilities of individuals, rather than by reference to the consequences of their actions for others. Power, then, under these interpretations, is to be distinguished from 'influence', the former covering the semantic field of 'effecting', the latter that of 'affecting' someone or something (Morriss 2002, 29). The meaning of power, as suggested by these approaches, is to be explicated in terms of what we have the power 'to do', rather than 'over whom' we have power (Morriss 2002, 32).

Other accounts of power do not consider *power to* and *power over* as competing concepts. They suggest, instead, that both should be included in any comprehensive understanding of power. Felix Oppenheim, for example, although couching his whole analysis to power in terms of social causation, recognizes that 'having power' could also be interpreted in terms of an ability to act. He writes: 'the word "power" may refer not only to the three-term relation of social power, "*P* has power over *R*'s doing *x*", but also to the two-term relation, "*P* has power to do *x*"' (1981, 29). Other scholars reached similar conclusions. According to Thomas Wartenberg, most of the confusion in the literature about power has been created by an ignorance of its 'fundamental duality' (1990, 17). Disagreement about the concept of power, in his view, can be explained by accepting the fact that different theories of power 'may be talking of different aspects of social reality' (1990, 17). As a consequence, power cannot be considered a unified concept: 'the phrases "has power

[5] It is worth noting, however, that in the second edition of *Power: A Radical View* Lukes partially revises his interpretation of power, concluding that some cases of *power over* can be beneficial or at least non-detrimental to the interests of the power-subjects (2005, 84).

to" and "has power over" are not, despite their lexical similarity, about the same concept' (1990, 27).

More recently, some scholars have proposed using *power to* and *power over* to indicate different instances of power, making reference to normative criteria. Certain feminist and empowerment theorists, in particular, have distinguished between these two views of power on the basis of what we may call their own conception of legitimacy: while *power over* is thought of as necessarily conflictual and is mostly used as a synonym for domination, *power to* is regarded as a consensual and intrinsically legitimate instance of power (Townsend et al. 1999; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002; Eyben 2004).

1.1 Distinguishing *power over* and *power to*

Two recent contributions to the study of power have tried to shed some light on the distinction between *power over* and *power to*. Although their interpretations of the distinction differ, they both start from the assumption that *power over* and *power to* represent two specifications of a single, more general concept of power.

Keith Dowding, in particular, considers *power to* and *power over* as two analytically distinct parts of the overall definition of power. He refers to *power to* as 'outcome power' and to *power over* as 'social power': 'the first because it is the power to bring about outcomes; the second for it necessarily involves a social relation between at least two people' (1991, 48).

According to Dowding, 'outcome power' is the more basic interpretation of power: having 'power over someone' necessarily includes some kinds of 'power to act' (1996, 4). In these terms, social power can be considered a specific subset of outcome power. As a result, Dowding seems to suggest that *power to* is the very underlying concept of power, since, both logically and substantively, an exercise of *power over* always presupposes some kind of *power to* on the part of the agent: logically, because *power over* always presupposes a '*to*' as well, referring to the production of certain outcomes; substantively, because without a certain *power to* an actor will not be able to exercise her *power over* a second actor.

Dowding's approach underlines that both 'outcome' and 'social power' involve the production of certain effects. While 'outcome power' is defined as 'the ability of an actor to bring about or help to bring about outcomes' (1991, 48), 'social power' consists in 'the ability of an actor deliberately to change the incentive structure of another actor or actors to bring about, or help to bring about outcomes' (1991, 48). The incentive structure of an actor is defined as the full set of costs and benefits attached to certain behaviors, and it determines the choice set of an individual. What characterizes 'social power', then, is the *deliberate* action of the power-holder that aims to change the incentive structure of the power-subject; also in the case in which an actor exercises her 'outcome power', somebody else's incentive structure could be affected, but, in this case, that result will not be deliberately chosen.

> Generally speaking, when we bring about some outcome we thereby affect the incentive structure of other actors. […]. The two definitions [respectively, of outcome and social power] are distinct, for in the first some outcome is brought about because the actor desires it and any change in others' choice situation is a by-product and irrelevant to the actor's scheme. Under the second the choice situation of others is changed in order to bring about some outcome (1991, 53).

In the case of 'outcome power', then, a change in some other actor's incentive structure is to be interpreted as a side-effect, an externality of somebody's exercise of power, while in the case of 'social power' the change in some other actor's incentive structure seems to consist in the means to the obtainment of some other goal or goals. The intentionality of the power-holder's action is, then, the central feature in Dowding's interpretation of the distinction between *power to* and *power over*.

A second prominent analysis of the distinction between *power to* and *power over* has been offered by Amy Allen (1999). Allen's interpretation of power is located specifically within the feminist tradition: her own intention in studying power is to formulate a definition that 'will prove to be useful for feminist theorists who seek to comprehend, critique, and contest the subordination of women', and not to offer a 'generally satisfying definition of power that will be applicable to all cases' (1999, 121).

Allen distinguishes between three aspects of power: *power over*, *power to* and *power with*.[6] She defines *power over* in a way quite similar to Dowding, as 'the ability of an actor or a set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in a nontrivial way' (1999, 123). However, unlike Dowding, she follows Lukes (1974, 21) in claiming that *power over* is not necessarily intentional, since it can be exercised in routine ways by actors who are unaware of their power: according to her, this is so in most cases of male-female power relations.

In her analysis of *power over*, Allen challenges a widespread view in feminist theory, according to which 'having *power over* someone' always consists in an instance of domination. Following Wartenberg (1990, 117), she proposes a distinction between the two concepts: domination is a subfield of the concept of *power over*, referring only to those occurrences of *power over* in which power is explicitly exercised in a way that is detrimental for the power-subjects. Domination, then, is a particular case of *power over*, the one in which the choices of other actors are constrained to their disadvantage. As a result, certain exercises of *power over* can also be beneficial for the power-subject, like in the example she offers of basketball coaching, where 'the power the coach has over the players is exercised for their benefit, and not for their disadvantage' (1999, 125).

While offering a non-evaluative definition of *power over*, Allen's interpretation of *power to* relies on normative criteria. Since the goal of Allen's theory of power is to propose a politically relevant (and specifically feminist) account of the concept, she defines *power to* in relation with the concepts of empowerment and resistance. Although her formal definition of *power to* as 'the ability of an individual actor to attain an end or series of ends' (1999, 126) seems to share the same extension of the one proposed by Dowding, Allen explicitly claims to reserve the expression *power to* to 'the power to act' acquired by individuals in subordinate groups despite their subordination, particularly in the case of women against male domination. According to Allen, then, *power to* can be considered as a synonym of 'empowerment'. Her conception of *power to*, in this sense, has a narrower extension

[6] According to Allen, *power with* consists in 'the ability of a collectivity to act together for the attainment of an agreed-upon end or series of ends' (1999, 127). However, due to matters of pertinence, Allen's conception of *power with* will not be analyzed in detail here.

than Dowding's conception: not all individual's abilities are considered cases of *power to*. Firstly, *power to* is a property to be imputed only to individuals belonging to subordinate groups. Secondly, it consists only in those abilities which allow subordinate individuals to act against their situation of domination.

A second difference with Dowding's account concerns Allen's analysis of the relations between *power to* and the concept of resistance. According to Allen, also in the case in which resistance assumes the form of constraining somebody's options – and then starts to look like a case of *power over* – should it be regarded as a *power to*, because it principally consists in facing up to a situation of domination:

> although particular instances of resistance may take the form of placing constraints on the options of the would-be aggressor, resistance seems fundamentally to involve asserting one's capacity to act in the face of the domination of another agent (1999, 125).

Specifically, resistance is to be considered a subfield of *power to*: 'in the same way that domination represents a particular way of exercising power over, resistance seems to represent a particular way of exercising power to or empowerment' (1999, 126). Allen's account of *power to*, then, in this second sense, has a wider extension than the one proposed by Dowding, including as it does cases in which power is exercised relationally. What seems to be the most relevant feature that differentiates cases of *power over* and cases of *power to*, in Allen's interpretation, is their *political* value.

As already mentioned, Allen agrees with Dowding in claiming that *power over* and *power to* consist in different aspects of power, and that they can be interpreted on the basis of a more general and abstract concept. *Power over* and *power to* (together with *power with*) 'are not best understood as distinct types or forms of power; rather, they represent analytically distinguishable features of a situation' (1999, 129). For Allen, the more general definition of 'power' consists in the 'ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act' (1999, 127): similarly to Pitkin (1972, 276-277), Morriss ([1988] 2002, 13), and Dowding (1996, 4), then, Allen describes 'power' as 'being able to'. However, while these other scholars

expressly refer to their interpretation of power as *power to*, she endorses a different position, reserving the usage of the expression *power to* only to a normatively defined subfield of 'being able': specifically, to the power acquired by a subordinate individual or group through the process of empowerment.

2. *Power to*: another relational concept of power?

I now aim to provide a critical discussion of the very distinction between *power over* and *power to*. Leaving aside for the moment the implications of the normative account, I shall concentrate on the discussion of the main criterion for distinguishing between the two, i.e. the relational nature of *power over* as opposed to the dispositional nature of *power to*.

Since *power over* always implies a social relation, specifically, a relation of social causation, and *power to* consists in an individual's ability, they are claimed to refer to different categories of social facts. However, in this section I shall argue that this distinction is weaker than it appears to be at first sight. I shall claim, specifically, that also the concept of *power to* should be seen as dependent upon social relations.[7] I shall base my analysis on a detailed investigation of the notion of ability: since the abilities that we commonly consider as *power to* are indeed constituted by social relations with others (and, specifically, by relations of *power over*), I shall argue that no good reason remains for distinguishing between *power over* and *power to* on the basis of their supposed different extension.

The starting point for my analysis is Morriss' distinction between the concepts of *ability* and *ableness* (2002, 80). In Morriss' account, ability is the capacity to do something under certain hypothetical external conditions, while ableness is the capacity one has when such conditions actually occur. These two concepts correspond to two different ways of interpreting possibility statements (Kenny 1975, 131, quoted in Morriss 2002, 81): while Morriss' notion of ability refers to the 'can' of ability as analytically distinguished from the 'can' of opportunity, the notion of ableness indicates the 'all-in can', i.e. the concurrent obtainment of both the ability and the opportunity to do something. It is easy to recognize that while the concept of

[7] Arguments in favor of a relational interpretation of *power to* have been already proposed, though based on a critical realist epistemology, by Isaac (1987).

ability does not say anything about the actual possibilities of an individual to do something or to produce some outcomes, the concept of ableness refers specifically to what an individual is able to do at some present time.[8] As a consequence, when we are interested in ascertaining the *power to* of an individual in our societies, we focus on her ablenesses, not merely on her abilities (Morriss 2002, 83). Morriss writes:

> The rich are able to feed off caviar and champagne; the poor have to restrict themselves to beer and pickles, and are unable to eat more expensive food. This is not because of any lack of masticatory ability on their part, but because on the social and economic environment they inhabit. […] this environmental difference is something we should wish to take into account – particularly because it may not be due to differences in individual abilities (2002, 81).

However, the reference to the analytical divide between the 'can' of ability and the 'can' of opportunity in the definition of power constitutes a problematic point. While we can describe as abilities all the basic actions or strings of basic actions an individual can perform, the concept of opportunity is much more difficult to define. With the exception of those few situations in which an individual is really able to carry out something by herself – for example, in the case in which we talk of her ability to move her arm – most of an individual's abilities depend on some external factors. Even more significantly, it seems reasonable to claim that the opportunity context plays a larger role in constituting an individual's ableness than the one played by her 'mere' abilities. This, for two main reasons. Firstly, individual's abilities, due to their hypothetical nature, can be thought of as constituting an almost infinite set. In the absence of any knowledge about the opportunity context in which the individual's action would take place, we cannot say anything about what she 'is able to do', nor can we make comparisons between different individuals. Secondly, even if we accept that different individuals possess different abilities, the different opportunity contexts in which their actions would take

[8] The distinction between ability and ableness has nothing to do with the traditional distinction between *potential* and *actual* power (Wrong 1968, 677), although it may recall it. It identifies two distinct meanings of potential power: the first referring to all the possible outcomes we could bring about if certain conditions occurred, the second referring to the narrower set of outcomes we are actually able to bring about under actual conditions.

place can operate in such a way as to mitigate those differences or to make them irrelevant to the assessment of what they are actually able to do.

Since the opportunity context of an individual's action seems to be the most significant factor in attributing to her a *power to*, we need to investigate what makes up such an 'opportunity context'. Some conjectures can be made about the possibility of explaining the idea of opportunity by reference to the social relations in which the individual finds herself. In order to better explain the role of the opportunity context in the definition of *power to*, I shall propose some examples, which differ from one another in some major respects. I shall proceed by tracing a continuum on which to place different cases of *power to*, assuming an increasing degree of complexity.

Case 1. *Robinson Crusoe's power to build a shack on a desert island*.[9] Robinson Crusoe, alone on the island, is able to build a shack for himself. Here, the power of Crusoe is based on both his physical strength and the natural resources – like wood, stones or straw – available to him.

Case 2. *Robinson Crusoe's power to build a shack despite Friday*. Crusoe has the same internal and external resources as in the preceding example. But Friday is against the construction of the shack. Under such circumstances, in order for Crusoe to build his shack he needs to obtain the non-interference of Friday.

Case 3. *John's power to build a house in England*. We can assume that John has the capacity, in terms of practical skills and physical strength, to build a house. Unfortunately, he cannot collect stones and the other materials in the natural environment as Crusoe does. Under the condition of private property and scarce resources, his ability to build the house depends on his possibility to buy the materials he needs. Moreover, his possibility to build the house depends on the legal system, which may either grant or deny him the right to do so.

Case 4. *The Prime Minister's power to dissolve Parliament*.[10] The British Prime Minister has the power to dissolve the Parliament because of her institutional resources. Although not officially in possession of that right, which is formally a prerogative of the Queen, the institutional setting in which the Prime Minister

[9] Example proposed by Dowding (1991, 50).
[10] Example proposed by Morriss (2002, 32).

operates enables her to dissolve the British Parliament. Her ability, thus, is specifically constituted by her role.

As emerges from the previous examples, the passage from *power to* as *ability* to *power to* as *ableness* requires an analysis of external and social conditions. Moreover, in most cases, the opportunity context seems to play a larger role in the definition of somebody's *power to* than a mere reference to 'abilities' would seem to capture. The introduction of the different examples, then, offers us the opportunity to assess the importance of social others in attributions of power.

In the case of the Prime Minister's *power to* dissolve the Parliament, for example, it seems very difficult to make effective use of the analytical distinction between ability and ableness. Since the Prime Minister's power depends on the institutional arrangements of a society in a specific time and place, it exists only as kind of ableness: there is no specific ability correspondent to the Prime Minister's power. Of course, there are some (mental and physical) abilities an individual must have in order to be a Prime Minister, but they are completely different from what we understand as the Prime Minister's *power to* dissolve the Parliament. The Prime Minister's power, unlike Crusoe's ability to build his shack on the desert island, and like John's *power to* build his house in England, depends entirely on social interactions with others. The test is easy to carry out: if nobody in the society complies with the Prime Minister's will, her power – together with the Prime Minister's role itself – ceases to exist.

A detailed analysis of certain attributions of *power to* allow us to make a further claim: not only is the opportunity context which constitutes *power to* made up of social relations, but the social relations it implies are specifically relations of *power over*. If we endorse, for example, Dowding's definition of *power over* as 'the ability of an actor deliberately to change the incentive structure of another actor or actors to bring about, or help to bring about outcomes' (1991, 48)[11] we can see how the 'Prime Minister's *power to* dissolve Parliament' is identical to her *power over* the Parliament. The postulation of a case in which the Prime Minister, though being by custom (and not legally) entitled to the *power to* dissolve the parliament, is not able to

[11] But this would be true also in reference to other non-evaluative definitions of *power over*, such as Dahl's (1957, 202-203), and Allen's (1999, 123).

do so, gives us further reason to underline the necessarily relational nature of her power: it is the opposition of the majority of the MPs which renders the PM unable to dissolve Parliament, meaning that she has no *power over* the Parliament and, conjunctively, no *power to* dissolve it.

A similar reasoning could be applied in order to explain the third and the second examples. As already suggested, John's *power to* build his house depends on the possibility of buying the materials to work with and on the related legal norms. Unlike Crusoe's island, in England material resources are not freely available to everyone. John needs the capacity to obtain them from somebody else. Economic exchanges are often themselves described in terms of power: in order to have the *power to* build his house, John needs some sort of purchasing power *over* the brick seller. Moreover, his *power to* build his house depends on the British legal system. Although he has the physical ability and the resources to build his house, John can be impeded to build it close to the sea or on a particular terrain because of a legislative norm against doing so. Only in the case in which he has, together with the material resources and related skills, the legal right to build his house, can he be properly claimed to have the *power to* do it. Also in this example, then, the intrinsic relationality of attributions of *power to* emerges: as the concept of right is intrinsically dyadic,[12] correlative to John's right there is a duty of non-interference with his action of everybody else in England. In this sense, we can claim that John's legal entitlement to build his house is also a power *over* others, enforced by the legal system which binds everybody else to not interfere with his activity.

In the case of Crusoe's *power to* build a shack despite Friday's opposition, the intrinsic relationality of certain instances of *power to* emerges even more clearly. Crusoe's possibility to build his shack, in this case, undoubtedly corresponds to a social relation. Friday's preferences could be against the building of the shack by Crusoe for several reasons: he may be interested in the usage of that wood and straw for other purposes, he may want to set up his own shack in the place chosen by Crusoe, he just doesn't want Crusoe to have a shack, etc.. In such circumstances, in order to build his shack Crusoe needs to obtain Friday's non-interference. He can

[12] On this point see Hohfeld 1919.

implement numerous strategies – from coercion to manipulation to remuneration – according to his will and abilities. Nonetheless, if we want to talk of Crusoe's *power to* build his shack in this situation, we have to include a reference to his *power over* Friday.

As a consequence, unless we are talking about what an individual is able to do in a social vacuum, which can correctly be defined in terms of capacities or abilities, we should recognize that the *power to* of actors in a society is always structured by social relations, and, specifically, by relations of *power over*.

2.1 The extension of the concepts: a qualified equivalence thesis

Given the analysis I have proposed, *power to* turns out to be another relational concept: to ascribe *power to* to an individual is to make implicit reference to the social relations in which she finds herself. Following this perspective, the main difference that was supposed to exist between *power to* and *power over* seems to dissolve: if we interpret the *power to* theorists' notion of 'ability' as a relational concept, no difference seems to be left between a supposed relational (*power over*) and ability-based (*power to*) understanding of power.

At the extensional level, however, the relations between *power over* and *power to* range from a perfect equivalence to a mere correspondence. Certain attributions of *power to* are, indeed, completely co-extensive with attributions of *power over*. In the case of political power, for example, the *power* of an actor *over* the political community to which political decisions are directed is a necessary and sufficient condition for her *power to* make political decisions. Political decision-making power consists both in a *power over* and a *power to*. Undoubtedly, then, in this case, *power to* and *power over* refer entirely to the same social facts. Certain other cases of *power to* might just as well be considered equivalent to instances of *power over*. Take the case in which an individual is claimed to have the *power to* buy a car. Her *power to* finalize the purchase consists in the offering of a specific amount of money to the car seller in order to induce the latter to yield her the car. Also in this case, *power to* is completely co-extensive with *power over*: the same actor is able to buy the car if and only if she is able to induce the vendor to sell it to her.

Certain instances of *power to*, however, cannot be claimed to be perfectly co-extensive with instances of *power over*. In the case of John's *power to* build a house in England, for example, many instances of *power over* are involved; however, neither a single one of them can be seen as having the same extension as the power referred to by the phrase 'having the power to build a house in England'. As already highlighted, John's *power to* build a house is based on a number of different social relations. Hypothetically, his *power to* build a house can be defined as depending on John's possibility to buy bricks, cement, and other materials; on his possibility to hire skilled workers which will perform the job; in his legal right to build the house. It is easy to see that all the different components of 'John's *power to* build a house in England' can be described as cases of both *power to* and *power over*, supporting the thesis of a co-extensivity of the two concepts: they refer to what John is able to do on the basis of the social relations in which he finds himself. However, none of these components totally provides John with the *power to build a house*, even though each of them constitutes a necessary condition for the possession of that power.

The extensional relations between *power over* and *power to*, then, cannot be described as a perfect logical equivalence. However, also when a specific *power to* does not immediately correspond to a single *power over*, it always corresponds to a number of instances of *power over*. As a result, a qualified thesis of the equivalence of *power to* and *power over* can be proposed: although the two concepts do not stand in a relation of perfect logical equivalence, they have an extremely high degree of correspondence.

It is worth noting that the thesis about a qualified equivalence of *power to* and *power over* does not apply to those cases in which we use *power to* to refer to those individual's abilities which an individual enjoys in the absence of social others. In the next section, however, I shall propose some reasons to exclude such cases from an understanding of power relevant from a social science perspective.

2.2 A social notion of power

In the preceding sections, I have suggested that the concept of *power to* can explain power within societies only if it makes reference to a relational interpretation of

‘being able to’. On the basis of the continuum which I have proposed as representing the increasing complexity of the idea of ‘being able to’, starting from what we are able to do by ourselves, then moving to a situation in which what we are able to do is based on our relations with others, and finally to the most extreme point in which it is based on institutional agreements, I have claimed that, when we are interested in is ascertaining the *power to* of different individuals in a society, we need to focus on their social relations with others. On the basis of this, I suggest that the most appropriate way of understanding ‘power’ from a social sciences standpoint is to consider it as an intrinsically relational concept.

I propose, accordingly, to distinguish between ‘ability’ and ‘power’. Since ability is widely used to refer only to the individual’s internal resources, it is often thought of as indicating her possibilities to act in the absence of others. An individual’s power, by contrast, is defined as her possibilities to act within a social context. I find it useful to maintain here the distinction between ‘ability’ and ‘power’, using the first term to indicate the possibilities of action of an individual on the basis of her internal resources and reserving the latter for an intrinsically social understanding of ‘being able to’ – given, that is, an individual’s possibilities to act on the basis of the opportunity context. The abilities of an individual are to be seen as constituting a *basis* for her power, but are not equivalent to her power, since her power is specifically shaped by her opportunity context. No need remains, in my view, to talk of Robison Crusoe’s ability to build a shack in a desert island in terms of *power*. Crusoe’s ability to build a shack is something totally different from John’s ‘ability’ to build a house, and this difference specifically consists in the fact that John’s ‘ability’ to do so is defined by the social relations which constitute his opportunity context. Accordingly, we can use the term *ability* to refer to Crusoe’s case, while reserving the term *power* for what individuals are able to do in a social context. Accordingly, I propose abandoning Morriss’ notion of ‘ableness’: as ableness corresponds entirely to the definition of power just proposed, no need remains to introduce a different term to indicate the same concept.

In line with these reasonings, we can further clarify the relations between *power to* and *power over*. Reserving the proper use of the expression *power to* to

those cases in which the individual's possibilities to act are considered in a social context allows us to exclude from the label *power* those cases in which her abilities are not determined by the interaction with others, like in the case of Robinson Crusoe's abilities on a desert island. It is now possible to propose a further reconciliation between *power to* and *power over*. Since all the instances of *power to* included in the social understanding of power are based on social relations, they all coincide with instances or set of instances of *power over*. Once we have left aside mere abilities, when we talk about power in a society we are always implying a *social* understanding of power, which is in part based, of course, on differentials in human personal abilities, but which cannot be correctly defined and understood without a reference to the social relations by which it is implied.

3. Is there a 'priority' between *power to* and *power over*?

The concepts of *power to* and *power over*, then, despite their apparent dissimilarities, refer to the same category of social facts. At this point of the analysis, it seems appropriate to investigate the reasons which lead different authors to concentrate on the former rather than on the latter: if the two concepts describe the same social facts, why have different theorists tended to give some kind of priority of one of the concepts over the other? An answer to this question can be provided by distinguishing between the different theoretical concerns of the proponents.

The primacy of one of the two concepts in contemporary studies can be explained by reference to three major theoretical purposes. Certain scholars, in an attempt to define the most basic and general interpretation of power, have privileged *power to* due to its assumed *logical priority* over *power over*. Other scholars, who have instead been working towards a morally or politically relevant definition of power, have prioritized *power to* over *power over* on the basis of the higher moral status of the former, interpreting the relations between the two concepts in terms of a *normative priority*. Others, again, have focused on one of the two interpretations of power in virtue of the specific descriptive purposes of their investigation, implying, accordingly, a different *explanatory priority* of either *power to* or *power over*. In this section I shall reconsider the relative priority of the two power concepts at the three

levels at which that priority might be proposed. In particular, I shall suggest that the tendency to privilege one concept rather than the other is mostly due to the erroneous assumption that they refer to different categories of social facts.

The *logical priority* of *power to* is advocated by scholars who suggest that it should be seen as more basic (Dowding 1996, 4; Morriss 2009, 55) than *power over*, because any instance of *power over* necessary includes an instance of *power to*. Since *power to* is used to indicate the ability-to-act of an individual, and *power over* is used to refer to the ability of an individual to produce other individuals' actions, they find it reasonable to infer that, in order to have some kind of *power over*, the same individual needs some kind of *power to*. The reasoning proposed in the previous sections, by contrast, allows us to question the thesis about the *logical priority* of *power to* with respect to *power over*. If it is true that also in the case of *power over* an actor cannot lack the ability to initiate the actions aimed at bringing about someone else's action, the thesis about the quasi-equivalence of the two concepts suggests that, in many cases, no difference – and accordingly, no logical priority – remains between an instance of *power over* and one of *power to*. As already suggested, my *power to* buy a car entirely corresponds to my *power over* the car seller. Of course, in order to buy the car I need some sort of ability, at least in terms of a physical or mental ability. However, the arguments previously put forward suggest that what transforms a 'mere' ability into a *power to* is the social context in which the individual's action would take place. Undoubtedly, then, an individual's abilities can be thought of as constituting a basis for her *power to*, but are not *power to* themselves: were it to be otherwise, two individuals equipped with an identical set of abilities but endowed with different amounts of money would be describable both as having the same '*power to* buy a car' (when we refer to their abilities) and a different '*power to* buy a car' (when we refer to what they are actually able to do). Accordingly, if we consider as *power to* only the second of these cases, it becomes clearer that no reason is left for considering *power to* to be logically prior to *power over*: any attribution of power, of the socially relevant kind depicted in the previous section, is at once a *power over* and a *power to*.

These arguments point to a more direct criticism to Dowding's attempt to distinguish between *power to* (outcome power) and *power over* (social power) (1991, 48). Dowding claims that the main difference between the two concepts is to be found in the different aims in the deliberation of the power-wielder: while in outcome power the intention of the power-wielder consists in the obtainment of a specific outcome, in social power the action is deliberately carried out in order to change the incentive structure of the power-subject, which is a means for the obtainment of a particular outcome (1991, 49). However, since, as I have extensively illustrated, *power to* and *power over* refer to the same social facts, they both consist in the changing of someone else's incentive structure and in the obtainment of a specific outcome, no matter whether they refer to something I can do by myself, having obtained the non-interference of others,[13] or in the specific product of someone else's action. Accordingly, no distinction, and consequently, no priority, can be applied between *power to* and *power over*.

A second way in which the relations between the two concepts have been analyzed is constituted by their assumed different *normative priority*. Scholars advocating a normative interpretation of power have distinguished between *power to* and *power over* on the basis of their ethical standpoint. As mentioned earlier, *power over* has been frequently thought of as a negative evaluative term, indicating, accordingly, a morally wrong property of a relation between individuals. Apart from Lukes (1972), other scholars (Townsend et al. 1999; VeneKlasen and Miller 2002; Eyben 2004), proposing a feminist and empowerment interpretation, have used *power over* as an intrinsically negative concept. Since *power over* is described as a social relation in which an individual is able to cause actions on the part of other individuals, what should be criticized is the very existence, in our societies, of relations of such a kind (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002, 45). What emerges from this

[13] And this is the case, even more significantly, in virtue of Dowding's endorsement of Barry's distinction between *luck* and *power* (1980a, 1980b), according to which luck is defined as 'the probability of getting what you want without trying' (Dowding 1996, 52) and power as 'the probability of getting what you want if you act in all possible worlds which are the same as the actual one with the exception of the preferences of all other actors' (1996, 52). Accordingly, if the preferences of other actors are significant for the attribution to someone of (outcome) power, what is at stake is the power-holder's capacity to obtain the desired outcome through an overriding of their preferences, implying that 'having outcome power' is equivalent of 'having social power'.

perspective is the total rejection of *power over*: because *power over* implies some individual's 'using' other individuals as 'means', it should be condemned as such on the basis of the value of individual autonomy and of the Kantian moral imperative that prescribes treating each individual as an end in herself. As a result of the moral dismantlement of *power over*, the proponents of this view have focused on *power to*, in virtue of its intrinsic ethical superiority. Consequently, they have privileged a definition of power in terms of ability in order to both propose critical investigations of the actual distribution of power and, more radically, to discuss the hierarchical way – on the basis, that is, of the command-obedience relationships implied in the concept of *power over* – in which power is articulated in our societies.

The qualified equivalence thesis proposed in this article, however, inevitably casts doubts on the arguments in favor of a *normative priority* of the concept of *power to* over that of *power over*. Since, as I have illustrated, an instance of *power to* logically implies an instance of *power over*, suggesting the greater moral goodness of one of the two concepts must be a logical fallacy. An attribution of *power to* (of the socially interesting sort identified by certain feminist and empowerment theorists) always entails the simultaneous attribution of a *power over*, or of a particular set of *powers over*: the two concepts, as a consequence, should be understood as referring to the same category social facts. On this basis, no reason can be applied for attributing a higher moral status to one of the two concepts.

A more complex interpretation of the normative relation between *power over* and *power to* is offered by Amy Allen (1999), who, as previously illustrated, aims to propose a specifically feminist understanding of power. The main theoretical peculiarity of Allen's work is the reference to two distinct criteria for the definition of *power over* and of *power to*. While *power over* is described in purely non-evaluative terms, as a social relation between agents which can be either detrimental or beneficial to the power-subjects (1999, 125), *power to* is defined as an evaluative concept, consisting in the possibility to act of members of subordinate groups despite their subordination (1999, 126). The result of this double criteria is that certain instances of power, like the case of acts of 'resistance', fall under both categories: acts of resistance are undoubtedly cases of *power over*, in line with Allen's formal

definition, because they consist in posing constraints on someone else's action.[14] But they are cases of *power to* as well – and, according to Allen, *specifically* cases of *power to* – because they mainly 'involve asserting one's capacity to act in the face of the domination of another agent' (1999, 125). What emerges from Allen's analysis, then, is the contrast between the need to offer a formal description of power, and the concurrent need to propose an interpretation of power which is politically relevant and, more specifically, feminist. The recognition of a relation of qualified co-extensivity of *power over* and *power to* allows us to explain this tension in Allen's account: since a *power to* always includes a *power over* as well, the *normative* difference between the two cannot be stated on the basis of certain formal characteristics of the concepts. As Haugaard points out: 'the task of normative theory […] is the subtle fact of distinguishing normatively legitimate from illegitimate power' (2010, 434). The attribution of legitimacy to a particular instance of power, then, is to be seen as totally independent of the distinction between *power to* and *power over*. [15] Rather, it should be verified case by case, since it mostly concerns the interpretation of a single particular action or social relation on the basis of a normatively (and politically) relevant standpoint.

The *explanatory priority* of one of the two concepts, lastly, concerns the descriptive purposes of the proponents. Certain scholars, in fact, may be interested in ascertaining the presence of actors able to pose constraints on someone else's actions, and, accordingly, in 'measuring power' in terms of the 'amount' of *power* those individuals have *over* others and in terms of the number of individuals who are subject to that power.[16] Other scholars, on the other hand, may concentrate on the evaluation of 'what' individuals have the *power to* do. Leaving implicit the intrinsic relationality of power, then, these latter scholars may focus on the assessment of the number of actions an individual can accomplish, in order to make comparisons between different individuals within (and between) societies. Since what they want to

[14] Even more significantly, certain cases of 'resistance' may be consistent with Allen's own definition of 'domination' (Allen 1999, 124), consisting in posing constraints on other individuals' action in a way which is detrimental to the latter's interests.
[15] Unless, of course, the two expressions were used precisely as labels signifying, respectively, legitimate and illegitimate power.
[16] See, for example, Lukes 1972; Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Gaventa 1980.

ascertain would be the possibilities of action of certain individuals, they would have no theoretical interest in the social relations by which that *power to* is implied. This does not mean that no social others are 'subjects' of that power, but rather, that the question of 'over whom' that power is exercised would left implicit since it is irrelevant to the explanatory purposes of investigations of such a kind.

The high degree of correspondence between *power to* and *power over* also emerges in this case: while it is true that many scholars have had recourse to the concept of *power over* to evaluate societies on the basis of the 'powerful/powerless' dichotomy, it is also true that other scholars, expressly endorsing a relational understanding of power, have used it in order to investigate 'who has more power' in a society. This is the case, specifically, of one of the most influential and well-known contributions to the contemporary study of power: Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961). Although explicitly defining power in terms of *power over* (1957, 202-203), Dahl insists that the point of empirically studying power does not consist in ascertaining 'who has the power', but rather in investigating its *distribution* among people. Paradoxically enough, then, while being one of the most acknowledged proponents of a concept of *power over*, Dahl seems to base his empirical analysis of decision-making power on a conception of *power to*. However, far from being the result of a logical inaccuracy, Dahl's focus on 'who has more power' illustrates perfectly the logical equivalence of certain instances of *power over* with instances of *power to*. In the case of political decision-making power, as I have shown, the two concepts perfectly overlap: the agent who has 'more' *power to* take political decisions is the one who has more *power over* the political community. In Dahl's empirical analysis, then, the reference to the power-subjects is only left implicit.

What it is important to notice here is that the distinction between *power to* and *power over* is nothing more than an analytical distinction between two aspects of a single concept of power, and, since they always occur together, an investigation of the former is always also an investigation of the latter. Also for explanatory purposes, then, the distinction between *power over* and *power to* proves to be less relevant that it appeared to be at first sight.

Conclusion

The principal aim of this work has been to offer a re-interpretation of the analytical divide between *power to* and *power over.* I have argued that not only *power over*, but also *power to*, is a relational concept; the only difference being that the reference to the social relations in virtue of which the latter concept qualifies as relational is left implicit, and is often even ignored by *power to* theorists. I have suggested, moreover, that, the social relations on which *power to* is based are, specifically, relations of *power over*.

I have suggested, then, that the general misconception which has induced scholars to talk of *power to* and *power over* as two distinct concepts of power is based on an underestimation of their extensional correspondence. I have shown, in fact, that *power over* and *power to* stand in a relation of qualified logical equivalence: in many cases, indeed, they refer to the same social facts. This means that no reason is left to assume a logical priority of *power to* with respect to *power over*.

As a consequence, the arguments in favor of a normative priority of *power to* over *power over* turn out to be similarly ill-founded: since 'facts' about *power to* are necessarily also 'facts' about *power over*, no reason is left to privilege either of the two concepts on the basis of a moral evaluation. While some reasons remain to suggest a different order of priority of *power to* and *power over* on the basis of their *explanatory* role – since different studies may be directed, respectively, to ascertaining which are the actions that an individual has the possibility to perform, or at ascertaining 'over whom' an individual has power –, this fact does not amount to an argument for assuming a conceptual distinction between the two. Rather, it can be explained as indicating a priority given to one or the other aspect of the concept of social power in accordance with the descriptive purpose at hand.

The arguments proposed here provide the basis for a substantive claim. *Power to* and *power over*, despite what most of the contemporary power literature implies, cannot be described as two distinct concepts of power. They are, by contrast, best understood as two different aspects of a single, unified concept of power, which is intrinsically social and, as a consequence, able to account for the (implicit or explicit)

relationality which every attribution of power involves when we talk of power in a society. Power, in a society, is always both a *power over* and a *power to*, including in cases where the social others which are involved in the power relation are not immediately visible to the eye of the observer. *Power to* and *power over*, far from being two different concepts of power, should be seen and understood as two different faces of a single concept of social power.

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