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On the Concept of Power

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On the Concept of Power

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Abstract

“Power” is the modal concept of politics; nevertheless, despite the mole of discussions about it, it is significantly under-theorized. For decades, the debate – across political science and philosophy, from Weber to Lukes, including Dahl and Searle amongst others – revolved mainly around empirical and operational questions, while a conceptual definition has scarcely been thematized. The question of what power is has been reduced to the question of how power works; but the two are not the same, and addressing the latter presupposes a proper answer to the former.

The definitions have been provided can mostly be reduced to a single tautological form: “one has power if one can (=has the power to) do such and such”. The circularity is due to the shared presupposition that power is like an object, to be empirically observed. To better understand the concept of power we should, instead, examine its categorial form – “power” represents not a thing, but a condition under which certain things may be done and thought – corresponding to possibility, as opposed to necessity. The best way to see this is to turn to Arendt, whose idea of power is the key to a proper comprehension of this basic category of politics. While the link between power and communication has been a staple of Arendtean studies, it has often been reduced to aspirational understandings, which tend to obscure its deeper significance. It is rather the formal aspect of the concept of power which allows us to get right its categorial role in defining politics.

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1. Introduction

Political science used to be very interested in obtaining a precise definition of power, and such an interest ran through multiple generations of scholars:

Power is central to modern political inquiry because, as Morgenthau says, "Without such a concept, a theory of politics ... would be altogether impossible, for without it we could not distinguish between political and nonpolitical facts, nor could we bring at least a measure of systematic order to the political sphere." (Ball 1975b, 192; quoting from: Morgenthau 1965, 4-5)

This assertion might be correct – I would argue that it is, albeit only for an adequate definition of power – but, if ever it were universally recognized as a truism within “modern political inquiry”, it is not today. The debate that started at the very center of the discipline, then embodied by Robert Dahl (Dahl 1957; Dahl 1968), gradually drifted toward the intersection of political theory, sociology, and philosophy. Thus, while it is true that the discussion continues after more than fifty years (Haugaard 2002; Morriss 2002; Lukes 2005; Clegg and Haugaard 2009; Dowding 2011), it now happens mostly at the fringes, if not outside, of political science as commonly understood.¹

To be sure, political science did not lose interest in either power or the formalization of concepts. On the contrary, “political realism”, in its various flavors, is still holding to its contention that power is the key variable of politics; and, on the other hand, with the growing dominance of formal modelling and quantitative approaches, the demand for precise definitions is stronger than ever. However, the two tendencies do not overlap much anymore,² and what was once central is now relegated to the periphery of political science,³ while the mainstream appears mostly satisfied with either using the concept without defining it, or falling back onto older definitions (which are

1. Whether it did exercise a direct influence, or just represented the *Zeitgeist*, Ball’s work is paradigmatic. While seeking to open up the field to a richer conceptualization of power, not limited to mechanistic causality, Ball marks the time when mainstream political science mostly stopped caring for the topic (Ball 1975b; Ball 1975a). Although it is true that disappointment about the uselessness of the concept of power had already been expressed in the previous decade (March 1966).

2. Within mainstream political science, IR is the field where discussions of power are still relatively common (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Berenskoetter and Williams 2008). It is not a coincidence that it is also the least formalized and least quantitative field.

3. Such as constructivist approaches (Guzzini 2005); I do not mean this as a disparaging categorization. I am, in fact, more sympathetic toward these perspectives than to “positivistic” ones; although I am not satisfied with either one’s uses of the concept power.

more pliable to causal explanations than the labyrinthian debates developed afterwards).⁴ Thence, albeit from quite a particular standpoint, Bruno Latour was not being so “breezy” in suggesting that “the notion of power should be abandoned” (Lukes 2005, 62-63, quoting from: Latour 1986, 278). If the proper aim of political and social sciences is limited to providing causal explanations, then it is true that they have no use for any meaningful concept of power.

Here, I would take classical realism at its word when it claims that without considering power we would be unable to define politics. However, I think that a proper concept of power cannot be found in contemporary social sciences,⁵ and I believe that, once we get a grasp of such concept, it would be apparent why the pretension to reduce the study of politics to causal explanations (no matter how epistemologically refined) is doomed to miss its object altogether.

I will proceed by first explaining why extant definitions of power, despite their daunting variety, share the problem of being circularly tautological. This will occupy the next section of this paper, while the following part, dedicated to explain how power corresponds to the category of possibility, should be relatively straightforward after the critique of current definition has been expounded. Finally, I shall discuss some of the implications that a proper conceptual understanding of power should have on the study of politics; this would obviously be a larger theme in its own right, but here I will merely be able to sketch some general remarks.

2. The circularity of power’s definitions

In this section I will survey the existing definitions of power across the social sciences and philosophy, and show how and why they share the problem of being circular, along with a few other issues specific to some of them. I will begin (§2.1) by examining the family of definitions of “power over” – which are still commonly employed, despite having received decisive critiques. This will allow us to unpack the basic structure of the definitions, as a step toward understanding why going beyond the circularity is indeed necessary (§2.2). I will then turn to the definitional efforts of

4. This may be an instance of a widespread dilemma: “faced with the difficulties of pinning down a concept, scholars decide to go for its more easily operationalizable aspects, but they thereby incur the risk of neglecting its most significant aspects, thus voiding the concept of the very significance for which it had been chosen in the first place.” (Guzzini 2005, 502)

5. Of course my knowledge is very limited. However, I would be happy to exchange any pretension to originality for the recognition of the wider diffusion of the correct understanding of a concept, if that were the case.

recent analytic philosophy, and show how, while making relevant conceptual gains, they are not sufficient to escape the circularity (§2.3).

This cannot be but a broad and quick survey, nevertheless I have to advance a claim of completeness. This should be understood not as the absurd pretense of giving an exhaustive list – for example, I do not discuss Bertrand Russell, Felix Oppenheim or Philip Pettit, all three having been quite relevant to the debates, at different times and from different perspectives – but rather as the more circumscribed claim (still open to be disproved, of course) of having considered all those variations that are conceptually relevant.

Such a broad literature review is not merely to provide for context, but it is rather an integral part of the argument. Since the re-definition I will propose has no other motivation than to capture as much as possible of the common meaning of “power”, the only reason to propose it is the lack of an adequate alternative in the extant literature. The widespread, if not always explicit, practice of constructing concepts instrumentally to some ulterior end is indeed amongst the reasons why a viable definition of power, internally consistent and coherent with linguistic use, has not yet been produced.

2.1. Political science’s definitions

Despite decades of debate, the “standard” definition of power may still be the Dahl’s: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957, 202-03) – itself a simplified version of Max Weber’s classical definition (Weber 1947, 152). The main problem is that this definition is circular, and thus says little about the concept it purports to define. However, and despite the mole of criticism elicited by Dahl’s efforts,⁶ this particular defect went largely unnoticed; this is probably because, in accordance with social science’s general interest, discussions have not been focused on the concept itself,⁷ but rather on its empirical applications and/or preconditions.

6. It is brazen to say that this way of looking at power is not controversial (Naim 2014, 16), for it certainly is and has been for a long time; but this just underscore how diffuse Dahl’s definition and its derivatives still are, especially amongst those whose primary interest is not to understand concepts.

7. Notwithstanding very explicit titles (Dahl 1957; Parsons 1963; Wittman 1976; Hay 1997; LedyaeV 1998); a work that partly defies the contradiction between title and content is (Emmet 1954).

To see how this has been the case, let us start by considering the debate about the “three dimensions” (or “faces”) of power, following Steven Lukes’s rendering of it (Lukes 2005). According to Bachrach and Baratz (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), the problem with Dahl’s definition was that it allowed one to identify power only when visibly exercised – later labelled as “exercise fallacy” (Morriss 2002, 3.2; Dowding 2011, 229-30). But power needs not be visible to be efficacious: powerful actors may exclude some outcomes without explicitly displaying their power. The ability to covertly shape the agenda is the key example of the second face of power, and may be available as the result of being in a dominant position, with no need to take action. But this is not yet enough, at least according to Lukes (Lukes 2005, 25 ff), who found a third dimension of power in the shaping of the perception of available options: a systemic distortion which is not analyzable in terms of behaviorism or methodological individualism, and not even cognizable without presupposing counterfactual conditions (Lukes 2005, 144-50) – this used to be labelled “ideology” or “false consciousness”, but Lukes had to be cautious in employing these relatively discredited terms.

These discussions – as well as others within different frameworks⁸ – debated different operational definitions, geared toward measuring power (possibly failing at that: Isaac 1987, 19-21), or understanding how it works, not toward expounding the concept. To Lukes’s question: “What interests us when we are interested in power?” (Lukes 1986, 17), the prevailing answer has not been “its concept”. Instead, “what is power?” has been mostly understood to mean “which phenomena are instances of power?”. Accordingly, the disagreement between pluralists and radicals lay in empirical questions: who are the powerful? How is their power exercised, and with what effects? Are the powerless thoroughly dominated? How could they be empowered (without lapsing into paternalism)? These questions are undoubtedly important, in fact more important than the mere definition of a concept; the problem is that having a clear concept is a necessary presupposition to rationally conduct substantive enquiries, and such clarity can be achieved only through an adequate definition.

8. For example, Clegg’s reconstruction (Clegg 1989) gives ample space to structuralist and post-structuralist theories. Such a wider perspective raises a daunting number of conceptual questions around the study of power, but not about the concept itself. There is, instead, the familiar interest in power’s phenomenal manifestations, or ways of working. Clegg gives an original answer (power works like a circuit) but does not discuss the concept to which all the questions refer.

What has been questioned is how and why some people get to exercise power over others (and/or how that could be avoided), but, at least with regard to this strand of debate, it remained true that “[t]he core notion of power is that A has power over S with respect to action B if and only if A can intentionally get S to do what A wants regarding B, whether S wants to do it or not” (Searle 2010, 151). Searle’s definition is preferable to Dahl’s, in that, by limiting the domain “to action B” and by explicitly referring to intentionality (though that introduces its own issues), it avoids some problems to which the latter was exposed (Ball 1975b, 205-06). However, these are technicalities, and the two definitions, along with variations within the same family, share the same circular character.

The circularity is due to the fact that “can” obviously equals “having the power to,”⁹ hence, stripped of the ornamental capitals, the overarching definition could be reduced to:

- one has power if one has the power to get what s/he wants from others.

We shall return to the significance of this circularity in a moment, but first we should dwell a little more on the meaning of this generic formulation. First, the equivalence between “can” and “having the power to” is useful not only to expose the circularity, but also as the shortest way to show the dependence of “power over” on the wider “power to”. The point has been stated as clearly as ever by Peter Morriss (Morriss 2002, § 5.3; The forerunner of this argument is: Pitkin 1972, 276-77), and should by now be quite settled, though it has been a matter of contention for a long time.¹⁰

More recently, a related confusion has emerged around the tripartite conceptualization, often employed by feminist theorists, of “power over”, “power to” and “power with”.¹¹ These terms, despite the cautious way in which they were (re)introduced by Amy Allen,¹² have been interpreted

9. The morphological divergence between the noun and the verb could partly explain the confusion – if not for William the Conqueror, you probably would have “may/might” just as Germans have *moglen/Macht*. Unfortunately, for unrelated reasons, confusion is even more prevalent in some languages that have maintained the noun-verb correspondence, such as Italian or French.

10. Most starkly in Lukes’s original account (1974), against what he then saw as Parsons’s and Arendt’s conceptions (Lukes 2005, 30-34). He later accepted the priority of “power to”, albeit still declaring himself more interested in the study of the “sub-concept” of “power over”, in the course of reassessing his own views (Lukes 2005, 69-74).

11. The original use of the locution “power-with” seems to have been in a 1925 paper by Mary Follett (Follett 2003).

12. “Although power-to is perhaps the most basic of the three senses I have delineated, it is not opposed to either power-over or power-with. ... Power-over, power-to, and power-with are not best understood as distinct types or forms of power; rather, they represent analytically distinguishable features of a situation” (Allen 1998, 37; see also: Morriss 2002; Pansardi 2012b).

as if they represented alternative courses of actions and/or factual conditions, often with moralistic overtones (Mansbridge 1996, 60; Kraft 2000; Berger 2005). This would be all well if the aim were to pass normative judgements about empirical instances of power, but it should be kept separate from the analysis of the concept which is, once again, presupposed but not expounded.

From a conceptual perspective there is only one overarching notion of power, which is always a “power to”,¹³ regardless of its being over someone, with someone, or of its moral significance in any given case. If your power over/with/from-whatever-source-you-want is not the power *to* do (or abstain from doing) something, the power *to* obtain (or hinder) something, then it is not power at all. This is not to deny the importance of studying, and possibly oppose, some forms of “power over” or domination; nor to deny the moral value of the collective emancipation of “power with”, etc. Such questions are not prejudged by the conceptual definition here sought, although they could easily be derailed by an incongruous one.

The second point that should be noted is that the definitional problem would not be solved just by denying, or evading, the equivalence between “can” and “having the power to”. In fact, even if the definition were not circular, it would still not be defining “power”, but rather the conditions according to which we could say that someone has power: more like an empirical theory than a definition. This is consistent with Dahl’s original intent of reducing power to a measurable quantity (Dahl 1957, 202-09), and it explains something about the ensuing debates, but it is not the same as a conceptual definition. To the contrary, if the point is to get empirical results, then the conditions to detect something *must not* be equivalent to a full definition – otherwise, the enquiry would not yield any new knowledge, it would be mere data-gathering, not inductive science.

Political scientists can diagnose things like civil wars, legitimacy of governments, stability of international systems, etc., on the basis of certain conditions that do not exhaust the definition of the phenomena. The more parsimonious the required conditions, the better and stronger the theory. Causality is what sustains the construction: observed conditions are either causes of or

13. Lest we reify the locution, let me note that various languages use different prepositions to express the same meaning. For example, Italian would have “*potere di*”, where “*di*” corresponds more closely to “of” than to “to”. The label of “power of” has occasionally been used in English too (Hay 1997, 50).

caused by a broader phenomenon, therefore the latter can be inferred from the former through scientifically controlled induction.¹⁴

As a consequence, even if it were true that power be better conceptualized as an empirically observable “thing” (Dahl 1957, 201), and even if the common definitions were not as circular as they are, a proper understanding of what the “thing” is – different from the set of conditions from which its presence could be determined – would still be missing. The observed circularity could itself be seen as a result of this conundrum, since an operational definition can be obtained from a list of conditions only if the list encompassed all the possible instances of the concept.¹⁵ Of course, such a list would be unmanageably long, but the need for it is obviated by the covert use of the same concept as part of the definition. It is in fact obvious that if we ascertain that someone has some specific form of power (one *can* do such and such), then it follows that they have at least some measure of power as such, even if the latter is not defined. Thus, “can”, meaning “having the power to”, implicitly stands for all the instances of power, linguistically hiding the circularity and producing the semblance of a definition achieving the impossible feat of being at once conceptually exhaustive and employable as an empirical test.

2.2. The structure of the definition and its problems

After going through these observations, we can see that most definitions of power – actually being condensed empirical theories – are made of three basic components:

1. the circular: “power is the power to ...”
2. the reference to an agent having power “A”
3. the reference to the exercise of A’s power over one or more subjects “B” (or “S”)

14. In actual scientific practice the picture is more complex, and classical causality may become problematic. Within the social sciences, the causal model has been often challenged by more holistically oriented perspectives, like Marxism, structuralism, or various flavors of postmodernism. However, the model according to which from a limited set of observations wider phenomena are induced remains applicable.

15. This would negate the original Socratic definition of what a concept is – *i.e.* not just a list of examples – but if the list could really be all-encompassing, it would work in the same way for the empirical interests harbored by most social scientists.

These three elements can be said to frame the extant debates about power. Points 2 and 3 have been amply discussed, and variously criticized, in the aforementioned debates about which things or phenomena should be counted as instances of power.

We should of course add that the negation of point 2, the de-subjectification of power, or its de-facing (Hayward 2000), has been a staple of Foucauldian, or generally “post-modern”, positions (Digeser 1992; Brass 2000; Widder 2004; Hörnqvist 2010). From a different perspective, an analogously de-personalizing thrust regarding power can be observed in systems theory (Borch 2005),¹⁶ and to a lesser extent throughout every functionalist approach in both sociology and political science. Under these perspectives, power would be not a property of “someone” (either an individual, a group, or a single institution), but rather inherent in the whole system of relations society is made of. Formerly, for example within the Frankfurt School, this could be understood with a strong emphasis on domination; more recently, since the late Foucault has been digested by the secondary literature, the creative and productive aspects of such an holistic “power” have often been stressed (Allen 2007; Hörnqvist 2010).

Concerning such “ultra-radical” positions, we could follow Lukes in noting that, when their claims are taken seriously, they result in so wide an extension of the meaning of power (as a phenomenon) that it would cover most, or even all, social relationships (cfr. Foucault 1988, 3). Therefore, the resulting concept would be scarcely useful as an analytical tool and not so radical after all (Lukes 2005, 97 ff). Most importantly, whatever one’s opinion on the value of these efforts, it is clear that the focus is still on empirical and operational aspects (even if not necessarily observable with the tools of mainstream political science), on how power works, while the conceptual circularity of point 1 is left un-thematized.

Given the amount of work that has been produced within the aforementioned debates, one could well ask: is the observed circularity actually problematic? Answering this question requires some clarification. There is a sense in which every definition, implying an equivalence, may be considered circular, so that: $2+2 = 4 = 2+2$... and so on. Likewise, if we assume man to be specifically defined as the *animal rationale*, then of course an *animal rationale* is a man just as much as a man is an *animal rationale*. However, this kind of analytical circularity – which would corre-

16. Nicklas Luhmann is interesting also because he explicitly asserts that trying to analyse the concept *qua talis* is useless (Luhmann 1982, 107).

spond, in fact, to the kind of definition here sought – is not the same kind of circularity observed in the extant definitions of power, which did not analytically represent multiple components of the concept, but rather proceeded by inferring the presence of power from specific instantiations of it (disagreeing about which instances were relevant). Thus, the generic definition “power is the power to do such and such” is circular, but not in the same way of $2+2 = 4$, but rather like $p \in P \rightarrow \exists P$. That is to say: from an instance of power (p) we infer the presence of power in general (P); which is appropriate as the concise formulation of an empirical theory, but does not in any way define P . The implication would formalize the logic of a suitable empirical theory, on the condition that P had a meaningful definition, which is another way of observing how a general definition of power is presupposed, but not given in the debates we have observed.

Another possible way to confront the circularity would be to assert that, even without a precise definition, we do in fact have an idea of what “power” means – good enough to use it without further definitional efforts, just as we do with other basic concepts such as causation, implication, possibility, etc. – and therefore that it is proper to focus on where the actual disagreement is: the empirical instances of power which have been at the center of the debates? If that were the case, the critique here presented would be limited to the labeling of the discussions as “conceptual”, which could be an insignificant verbal error. There are arguments that could be read along these lines. For example, Searle quickly dispatches the general concept of power as “a capacity”, not necessarily linked to human relationships (Like the power of an engine: Searle 2010, 145), and promptly moves on to the analysis of the more specific “deontic powers” that are central to his social ontology. Similarly, one could accept that the most general concept of power is “power to” – which is the same as accepting an unproblematic equivalence with “can” – and then move on to discuss the politically and morally contentious instances of the power of someone over someone else, as Lukes does (see above, fn. 10).

However, there are reasons, even for those who do not fancy conceptual analysis for its own sake, for not leaving the circularity as it stands. First, broadening the consideration of power to include instances not linked to human interactions may have a philological validity of its own,¹⁷

17. In that *dynamis* and *potentia* could refer equally well to people or things. Although it should also be noted how that was the case within cultures where a decidedly anthropomorphic view of all things was still prevalent – including highly refined philosophy; think of the all-encompassing teleology in Aristotle’s view of the world – and therefore the question would not have ordinarily been thought in the same terms we could use now.

but would leave us short of a concept of that kind of power which, instead, is relative to people. This could also explain why some would be ready to accept that there is a plurality of different, or even incommensurable, concepts of power.¹⁸ By assuming, explicitly or implicitly, that there is an overarching concept, but that it pertains to a different domain, the intractable variety of uses of “power” regarding human affairs might be considered unproblematic. But such a fall-back position would not be satisfying. “Power” is not just one amongst the concepts we make use of while studying politics and societies; rather, the way in which power is perceived and understood is relevant for actual political actions, as already noted by many. A purely descriptive social science could perhaps do well without an adequate notion of power – and that is why a purely descriptive social science could not really be about politics – but people willing to act certainly cannot.¹⁹

Following Hannah Arendt’s lead, I would argue that the relation of political power to people as actors is what renders it different from a generic capacity (like the power of an engine),²⁰ hence allowing us to individuate it as a concept which is relevantly circumscribed, but still ample enough to cover the diverse manifestations of political power, including domination. A proper concept, to be clear, by itself would say nothing about empirical facts; it would merely define which occurrences may meaningfully be gathered under the label of power and which may not. Thus, the only direct application of a correct conceptualization would be negative: not to produce knowledge but merely to avoid errors, as proper for a critical enterprise.

2.3. Analytic philosophy and dispositional power

One contention of this paper is that the lack of a non-circular general definition of power (as referred to human actions) is not accidental, but depends on the presupposition that power is like a phenomenon or an object, which then leads to the further claim that it is understandable through empirical observation. If it were true that «power is a social phenomenon»,²¹ then it would be appropriate to look for an empirical definition, as for example we may define a street demonstration,

18. A pluralism which may be connected to the thesis of power as an “essentially contested concept” (Haugaard 2010). It should be noted that power was not amongst the examples when the essential contestability thesis was first introduced (Gallie 1955).

19. The sad parade of radical movements that consigned themselves to impotence, in part because of the confused urge to “fight the power”, should stand as a clear admonition in this respect.

20. Interestingly, the distinction is embedded in some natural languages, so that in Italian we would usually say “potere” of a person, or an institution, but “potenza” of an engine, or a power plant.

21. References to this sentence, the meaning of which I am unable to parse, would be in the hundreds of thousand (42,600 results for the exact phrase on Google, at the moment I am writing this).

or the enactment of a law, in terms of certain observable events and facts which distinguish them from other phenomena. This approach has not been working for power, and that is not surprising, as there is not any phenomenon which could be meaningfully be called “power”, even though there are countless phenomena in which the presence of power may be apparent.

While debates in political and social science have largely been derailed by this “empiricist” presupposition, analytic philosophy has produced significant, if not entirely satisfactory, progress beyond this roadblock, particularly through the description of power as a “dispositional concept” (Morriss 2002, §§ 3-4).

I would like to begin the discussion of these philosophical analysis of “power” with a brief *de-tour* through Searle’s social ontology. The example is relevant because social ontology purports to provide an adequate “philosophy *for* the social science of the future” (Searle 2010, 5) – therefore adopting a healthy critical attitude toward the rushed way in which crucial concepts, power amongst them, are employed within empirical enquiries. However, even when conceptual clarity is the foremost goal, an inadequate framework may still produce disappointing conclusions. Nevertheless, Searle has a crucial point, which should be expanded, in his notion of deontic powers – which are intersubjectively recognized attributions of status – and their link with language (Searle 2008a; Searle 2008b).

Obviously, Searle is too sophisticated to think that power is just like a thing or object that can be observed; but the fixation on objects is deeply rooted in ontological enterprises, and social ontology, ever since its inception (Reinach 1989, 148), never escaped it. By this I do not mean to say that every possible social ontology must have an image of power as something that is literally like a material object. Rather, the point is that even those theories that, like Searle’s, take extra pains in differentiating non-brute (institutional, political, social, etc.) from brute facts, still treat both in the logic form of objects – the conceptual proximity of facts (something that has been done/made: *factum*) to objects being, by the way, quite evident. If the conceptualization of power as an object, albeit of a peculiarly abstract kind, is warranted by philosophical works aimed at precision and clarity, then it is not surprising that less rigorous enterprises have often been incapable of conceiving it otherwise than as an observable thing or phenomenon.

The point that power is not to be conceptualized as a thing is hardly new. It has been highlighted by Ball, himself reprising Dorothy Emmet’s “admonition” (Ball 1975b, 212-13; Emmet 1954, 19-20),²² and the earlier Hamilton’s *dictum*: “What is a power, but the ability or faculty of doing a thing?” (Hamilton et al. 1787, no. 33). The idea of power as a dispositional concept, championed by Morriss and reprised by Lukes (Lukes 2005, 63-70), is in a sense a development of this same thread. However, while this line of thought highlights an important aspect of power, it does not completely detach it from an objectified conceptualization. In fact, logically and grammatically, capacities and dispositions are still considered like objects or phenomena. Even if they are observable only when actualized, they are still conceived of as objective properties, which someone or something has or has not, may acquire or lose, and that have some specific content-meaning. For example, the capacity of playing music is not observable except in its exercise; yet it is conceptually distinct from such exercise; and yet again it is defined as a specific quality that a person may or may not possess.

At a first glance, this might seem just like the case of “power”. After all, saying that some do have power, while others do not, is a widespread use of the term – it is, in fact, its most common reification, which is acceptable as long as we remain aware of its metaphorical character. But the homology ends here: while we can somehow say what it means to have the capacity of playing music (actually, by referring back to power/can), the same does not hold true for the case of power, in which we remain trapped in tautological circularities. Indeed, it is not even correct to say, with Searle, that “power ... names a capacity or an ability” (Searle 2010, 146); and most importantly, it is not equivalent to saying that “the notion of power is the notion of a capacity” (Searle 2010, 145). The second proposition may be true, but the first one is false, because there is not any capacity or ability named “power”, but rather power is (almost) synonymous with capacity. Analogously, it is not that power is a dispositional concept, it rather corresponds to a certain facet of the concept of disposition.

Moreover, we could swap “power” with “capacity”, then with “ability”, or even “ableness” (Morriss 2002, §§ 11, 23), and so on, but we would remain within the circle: something is powerful/has

22. Though Ball forced Emmet’s hand somewhat; for she was merely saying that the meaning of power as a capacity should not be obscured by the reified meaning of power as a thing, while according to Ball (correctly) the conceptualization of power as a thing is to be avoided *tout court*.

the capacity/ability, if and only if... something is powerful/has the capacity/ability. We cannot understand “capacity” without the concept of power, therefore saying that “power” means “capacity” still does not give us a viable definition. Hence, we may see that the circularity problem does not pertain only to specified conceptualizations of power – from “power over” interpreted as domination, up to extensive analyses of the preconditions and effects of power in a given society – but it is already embedded in the most abstract definitions produced so far. Just as we could say what a particular power is, we may say what a specific capacity is; but we are equally unable to give a non circular definition of “power” and “capacity” as general concepts.

Thus, we can understand this line of enquiry as having correctly brought the question back on the conceptual level, although not solving it in an entirely satisfying manner. Morriss, the most conspicuous representative of the analytic approach to power, has the merit of having explained clearly the priority of “power to”,²³ which is the same as to say the dispositional character of power. In terms of the definition as articulated in the previous section, this means that the focus shifts from points 2 and 3 (which dominated the debate, making it empirical and not conceptual) to point 1, but the circularity itself is not yet solved.

3. The categorial meaning of power

I hope to have clarified that the observed circularity cannot be evaded either with operational/functional definitions of power, which always presuppose a more general concept, or with those abstract definitions along the lines of “capacity”, “dispositional concept”, and so on. Nevertheless, power and related concepts are meaningfully employed, as they are necessary to understand entire classes of acts and facts. There is an adequate name for a concept so general as to be contentless, and yet necessary, as a condition of possibility, for our understanding of the world, and that name is “category”. To obtain something meaningful from the concept of power, we should examine its categorial form – “power” represents, not a thing but, a condition under which things may be thought and done.

23. Even though he backtracked somewhat in the second edition of his main work (Morriss 2002, xiii-xiv). The priority of “power to”, however, is re-affirmed in the work of Pamela Pansardi, which for this reason only would represent the most advanced result of this line of enquiry (Pansardi 2012b; cfr. Morriss 2012).

But which kind of condition, which category, corresponds to power? For a while,²⁴ causality seemed to fit the bill, but it has already been observed how that was unsatisfactory. We have also seen how a recognition of the allegedly unescapable pluralism of concepts of power has been common. In Lukes's words:

It is not self-evident what talk of horse power and nuclear power, of the power of grace and the power of punishment, of power struggles and the power of a group to 'act in concert', of the balance of power and the separation of powers, of the 'power of the powerless' and the corruptions of absolute power all have in common. (Lukes 2005, 62)

It may be not self-evident (though, what has ever been?), but to me it seems clear enough what these uses of "power", along with every self-consistent use of the concept, have in common, and that is the reference to possibility, as opposed to necessity. We shall see in a moment how a careful consideration of the category of possibility allows to escape the immediate circularity produced by simply defining power as capacity, ability etc. But first, we should consider what can be gained with the mere recognition of the categorial meaning of power.

Nowadays, few would agree with Kant's claim that categories, in the exact number of twelve, are pure a priori concepts; nevertheless, we still use concepts that are devoid of content, that acquire a referent only through further specifications, and that are conditions of understanding, speaking, and, therefore, acting in certain modes – in our case, the mode of possibility.²⁵ I do not know if a language would be possible without the category of possibility – perhaps a very primitive one, or a dystopian newspeak – but I am reasonably certain of the reverse: the category of possibility is not thinkable without, or outside of, language. In a sense this is trivial, every concept requires language; but possibility is tied to the representational capabilities of language in a way that other categories may be not. To understand something as possible, one must be able not only to register things as they are (whatever this is taken to mean), but also to represent or imagine them as different from what they are – this would be the basic affinity between political action

24. A time which became in earnest with post-WWII social science, but has a distant origin in Hobbes (Hobbes 1655, X,1; Ball 1975a).

25. If "category" sound too metaphysical for contemporary sensibility, we could just say "modal concept", which nicely captures both the ubiquity of power and the way in which it defines a modality.

and lying (Arendt 1993; Arendt 1972, 5-6) – and performing such representative acts is impossible without a reasonably complex language.

Since language is (at least partly) socially contingent, it follows that the extent covered by the category of possibility, and therefore available to the exercise of power, is contingent too and, at least partly, dependent on the way our concepts are arranged. A theory of power should be primarily concerned with clarifying how this dependence works; in this sense, it would pick up the same questions underscored by Critical Theory, ideology critique, or generally by any approach suspicious of social relations as *prima facie* presented. The difference would be that, precisely because categories cannot be thought as purely a priori any longer, conceptual questions should take priority over empirical observations. Contrarily to a seemingly common intuition, in fact, the contingency of concepts does not mean that one can substitute empirical for conceptual analyses, but rather that the latter have an immediate practical relevance.

From such a point of view, the necessity of a representational language is the root of power's intrinsic connection with rhetoric and persuasion. Those are not to be considered just as means to obtain some (reified) power, but rather as its conditions of possibility. In this sense, the common expression “brute power” is practically an oxymoron (here we may think of Searle's “brute facts”; but the common meaning of brutality also hinges on speechlessness). Surely, one can be at the receiving end of a violence which is the result of some organized power, but the power itself, if it correspond to the possibility of deciding to use that violence or not (otherwise, it would not be power at all), must at some point involve actions moved by persuasion,²⁶ which needs representative language. If it existed, a collective behavior enforced exclusively through incentives (material rewards) and disincentives (violence and the threat thereof) would not be compatible with power, because, consisting merely in moving around existing resources, it would bind the bosses, the executors, and the victims in the same structure of necessity (which of course is not to say that their situation would be the same).

Thus, Arendt's insistence on the role of rhetoric, narrative, and persuasion within politics, far from being naïvely idealistic – or even a relapse into a moral basis for politics she otherwise rejected (Benhabib 1992; Benhabib 1996) – makes sense from a strictly realistic point of view, once

26. It bears remembering how Hobbes, often interpreted as a crude causal-realist, was aware of the necessity of something besides force to close the motivational chain (Hobbes 2010, 183).

the connection between power as possibility and the representational capacities of language is made explicit (Penta 1996). The same emphasis is also useful to dissipate the confusion surrounding her fastidious distinctions between power, violence, force, and strength (Arendt 1970). If these were interpreted as empirical descriptions, they would be vulnerable to critique most often raised against them, that is to say the practical inseparability of the facts they are taken to describe (Breen 2007). Once the discussion is understood conceptually, and the relevance of power as a category is grasped, the futility of such objections should become apparent.²⁷

Indeed, Arendt's whole *oeuvre*, from *The Human Condition* to *The Life of the Mind*, was, with increasing explicitness, dedicated to understanding possibility (or contingency)²⁸ and necessity, their separation and their relations. This concern, I think, is what is missing in the debates about the concept of power, even while it is crucial for making it intelligible. Only by abstracting up to the level of power as a category it becomes possible to grasp its meaning in everyday language, which somehow eluded all the examined definitions.

Possibility is, of course, part of the meaning of disposition and capacity, and thus coheres with the family of dispositional definitions. However, it is important to expound a further distinction, which finally allows to properly differentiate the concept of power as applied to human interactions. That is the distinction between possibility and potentiality.²⁹ In a sense, potentiality, understood in the philosophical sense of *potentia/dynamis*, may represent the most refined result of the discussion to date, being co-extensive with the dispositional character of power and connecting it to its historical-philosophical roots. The equivalence between "power to" and *potentia*, in contrast to "power over"/*potestas*, is reached by Lukes through a consideration of Spinoza (Lukes 2005, 73), and, focusing on Hobbes from quite a different perspective, by Carlo Altini (Altini 2010).³⁰

27. It should be noted, however, that Arendt's language may be misleading, as she often speaks of power and the other concepts as phenomena. This may be due to a slippery usage on her part, or to her pragmatically inflected (mainly through Heidegger's influence) phenomenological orientation. Either way, the confusion with the kind of reification of power criticized in the previous section should be avoided.

28. Possibility presupposes contingency, but the reverse is not valid; therefore the two terms cannot be collapsed into one. This is the error of those interpreters who too hastily posited an equivalence between contingency and freedom (Martel 2008).

29. While it is true that power is in a sense always a potential Arendt 1998, :200, we should be careful in discerning how the teleological facet intrinsic to potentiality makes it different from the more general concept of power.

30. Unfortunately, Altini's informed analysis of the history of ideas is hindered by too quick an identification between power and *potestas*, so that the problem of modernity becomes the flattening of *potentia* over power while, if anything, the opposite is true. This issue is more evident in his book-length take on the same topic (Altini 2012).

As referred to objects, possibility and *potentia* are not distinct concepts. When we refer to nuclear power or horse power we mean that an engine or a nuclear reaction have the potentiality to produce a certain energy, which is the same as saying that is possible for them to produce that energy. But when we apply the concept to actors, then the fact that *potentia* implies a predetermined end, while possibility does not, should be evident. There is a sense in which when we say that a boy “has potential”, we are not merely saying that he has the power to become something. Most likely, what we mean is that he could, should, and likely will become such something. He has a disposition in the sense that there is an intrinsic tendency, likely to be loaded with normative significance, pulling him in a certain direction. This use harks back to Aristotle’s *dynamis* and *energeia* (neither of which, it should be noted, is a category for either Aristotle or Kant), later translated as *potentia* and *actum*, potentiality and actuality. In this framework, dominant for centuries and still present in our way of thinking,³¹ every movement is toward a determinate end, and ultimately everything that happens is linked in a chain of final causes leading to something like the Prime Mover, God, or Hegelian totality.

However, these are not the examples we commonly have in mind when talking about the power of someone.³² When we think of people within these teleological structures, we are rather struck by the meaninglessness of any power they may possess, which is the same as the obliteration of their being agents or actors. We are but dust in the wind in front of God, nature, or the cunning of reason. When, instead, we do speak of people having power, we have to employ possibility as an open concept, without the defined end implied by *potentia*. What makes people powerful is precisely that they have the possibility of setting their own ends freely, and to pursue and realize them in practice.³³ Thus, it is the double application of the category of possibility as both a subjective and an objective concept that makes up the meaning of power. This may be better comprehensible by going back to a simpler linguistic analysis.

Often, it is the same thing to speak of “possibility”, “capacity”, or “probability”: in many cases there is a nearly perfect overlap, as evidenced by the use of the modal verb “can” to mean them all.

31. Although the Christian idea of a personal God introduces complications, reflected in the problematic distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia absoluta* (Courtenay 1990; Altini 2012).

32. The beginning of the slide from *dynamis*/power to *dynamis*/potentiality-with-a-determined-end can be observed in Plato, and in his drive to moralize politics, see for example: *Gorgias*, 466e-469e. At the same time, Plato’s *dynamis* seems closer to our present concept than the Aristotelic couplet would later have been.

33. Notably, this was not only Arendt’s but also Kant’s general view of legal/political freedom (Ripstein 2009).

Yet, the concept of possibility carries some nuances that set it apart, making it a proper category, and that are relevant to understand power. Roughly, “possibility” shares the objective aspect that “probability” possesses, but “capacity” lacks – situations, facts, and outcomes, may all be possible just as they may be probable, but they cannot “be capable” – and at the same time it covers the subjective meaning that “capacity” has, but “probability” lacks – an actor may have the capacity and the possibility of acting in a certain way, but s/he cannot “have the probability” of doing something.³⁴

Recognizing that “possibility” covers both aspects allows us to perceive those cases in which the use of the different concepts would not be equivalent, cases in which only the double meaning of “possibility” would correspond to power. For example, I may have the capacity of playing guitar, but it may be impossible for me to do it in a given moment, either for lack of material requisites – I don’t have a guitar, or I lost the use of a hand in an accident – or for adverse social and psychological conditions – I may not want to play guitar in front of a judgmental crowd or, though wanting to, I may be unable to overcome shyness. In these and similar cases, in a sense I still possess the relevant capacity, and yet I have not the power of annoying people with my music.³⁵ Similarly, there may be a probability of my doing something, or causing an outcome, without the implication that I have power, because even if those things were objectively possible, I would not subjectively represent them as such. The reference to will or intentionality employed by Weber, and later by Searle and others, may serve to cover these cases. But it is a problematic addition, because intentionality, per se, does not imply power, nor does power necessarily involve the exercise of will – one may be powerful regardless of any intention relative to her powers, provided only that she knows she has them, and it is possible to be powerful without wanting to be.

All this is fairly banal, and languages may differ, so that these nuances may be stronger in some than in others (to me they appear stronger in Italian than in English, but that can also be due to my own intrinsic bias). But it should be clear that I am not trying to extract an argument from

34. It may be probable that a person does or achieves something, but that is just the point: probability is expressed objectively. There are exceptions, locutions like “she has the probability of...” or, conversely, like “this thing is capable of...”, are sometimes used. I take those to be linguistic quirks that do not affect the argument, although it is possible that they will cohere around a more objectivist idea of people’s actions and motivations. If that ever happened, however, it would represent a shift in the understanding of being a person, from which the element of having some power to act would be further removed, not a change in the meaning of possibility.

35. This may correspond to Morriss’ distinction between “ability” and “ableness” (Morriss 2002, ch. 11), though I am not sure the correspondence would hold for all cases.

contingent linguistic occurrences. Rather, said occurrences are useful to point out that it is at least possible – we have the power – to use our concepts in a certain way; a way which is indeed common, even if often obscured by language’s fuzziness. A fuzziness that, however, did not completely deter the efforts of the keener theorists. Weber’s treatment of power (*Macht*), despite having originated the most objectifying family of definitions, may be productively read in the aforementioned terms. This becomes apparent if we make use of the translation proposed by Isidor Walliman:

Within a social relationship, power means any chance, (no matter whereon this chance is based) to carry through one’s* own will (even against resistance).

* individual or collective (Walliman 1977, 234)³⁶

While this definition would still be insufficient according to the critique previously expounded, it should be noted how, through the qualification “within a social relationship”, and more importantly through the use of “chance” – which captures something of the double objective/subjective meaning of possibility – it is significantly closer to what I am proposing here than the versions it inspired, from Dahl onwards.

Pointing out the double applicability of the concept of possibility clarifies that a meaningful concept of power (as applied to actions amongst people) must share the same duplicity. The power of a person depends not only on her objective (here including “intersubjective”, as in Arendt 1998, §§7-8) situation, position in the social hierarchy, material resources, etc.; but also, and crucially, on her subjective perception of said power. For having power in a proper sense, both conditions must obtain. If a person perceived herself as powerful, while her possibilities were objectively very constrained, then she would just be delusional. But if a person were unable to perceive her possibilities, even if all the external conditions indicated she were powerful, she would still not have power in any meaningful sense. The same would hold true for an institution or any organized group of people, which, given how the formal and informal constitutive rules of organiza-

36. Cfr. the more commonly cited translation by Parsons: “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” (Weber 1947, 152). The original German definition would be “*Macht* bedeutet jede Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht” (Weber 1922, § 16).

tions generally works as limits to what is perceived to be possible, is perhaps the most relevant case.

The second occurrence – being objectively powerful without perceiving it – is particularly interesting as it has more often been ignored. One example may be that of ideologically, or just cognitively, enslaved subjects (Barnes 1988, ch. 4; Morriss 2002, § 12.6): they would have great power... if only they knew that much. But this common consideration might be deemed spurious, since it is at least arguable that the distribution of knowledge, and/or the presence of an ideology, have more to do with objective and external facts than with subjective perceptions. More interesting still is that the people topping a social hierarchy will usually be perceived as powerful by their subordinates, but in some cases their available options might be very limited. In fact, since being part of a hierarchy inherently carries limitations to the available possibilities (the constitutive rules of any social structure are themselves limits), it may be the case that such constraints are so strict that those dominating the hierarchy may not have much power in the proper sense.³⁷

Thus, even though “power over” (*potestas*, domination, etc.) remains logically dependent on “power to”, it is possible to have an excess of domination with no corresponding power. This decoupling of domination from power also allows us to better appreciate how Arendt’s notorious equivalence of power with freedom, to which some recent analytic philosophy came surprisingly close (Searle 1997, 117-18; Costa 2003; Pansardi 2012a), far from being idiosyncratic, is rather quite plain and obvious.

Examples of the decoupling of domination from power need not to be purely hypothetical. Totalitarianism, as described by Arendt, is a case in point (here, the hotly contested precision of her account is not particularly relevant, because I am using her description to explain a possibility, not to affirm historical facts). There would be little power in totalitarianism – even zero in its perfected actualization, which would be a world-wide concentration camp (Arendt 2009, ch. 12). This is so because totalitarianism is defined chiefly by the blind adherence to ideology, to the “logic of an idea” (Arendt 2009, 469), which explains everything in terms of necessary processes. Ideology is then used to justify the violation of every limit, of any previously recognized constitutive rule. But, once the totalitarian structure is in place, the “iron band of terror” (Arendt 2009, 466)

37. A nice literary example could be *Gormenghast* (Peake 1946), which is the name of an enormous castle governed by such a strict ritual that the Earl, who tops the hierarchy, is as powerless as everyone else.

binds the bosses almost as strictly as the dominated masses, or perhaps even more so. If the *Führer* exercised the power to act freely, without adhering to the logic of the idea, the totalitarian structure, and his dominant position along with it, would crumble rather quickly. In this respect, the totalitarian leader is the extreme instance of the politician who remains stuck in the web of her own lies (Arendt 1972).

As we saw, it makes no sense to say that one is powerful if s/he lacks the very power to choose between alternative possibilities, or even to perceive them (Canovan 1992, 88-89); this is why a perfected totalitarian regime may correspond to the maximum of domination (Arendt 2009, ch. 12, § 3), but the minimum of power.³⁸ Political scientists could protest that such a conceptualization renders power well-nigh impossible to assess on a purely empirical basis;³⁹ and this would be true, but it is unavoidable if we want meaningful concepts of action, power, and freedom. Social sciences' observed incapacity to produce a viable definition is a case in point.

Examples less extreme than totalitarianism are those of ordinary social interactions which are driven by their own logic, more or less independently of what people think or do. In Habermas's jargon (adapted from Luhmann and Parsons), which captures phenomena noticed by many critical theorists, these would be the systemic interactions: capitalistic economy and bureaucratic governance, driven by the steering media of money and administrative power (Habermas 1987b, ch. 6-7). Within these systems, actors have few possibilities available, they are mostly determined by systemic pressures, so there is little power present. Bureaucracy, in particular, would be guided by its own intrinsic logic – between Weber's "iron cage" and Michels's "iron law" – and thus it might exert domination, but the name of "administrative power" is tantamount to an oxymoron. If, against Habermas's theory, a society could be entirely systemic, and if such systems worked perfectly (as they never do), there would be no space, nor need, for power, because every action would be reduced to an automatic reaction to a given stimulus, ultimately grounded in some kind of necessity.

38. In practice, it may be that the perfected realization of total domination is incompatible with the realities of this world, and thus totalitarianism as it can actually exist still requires a modicum of power, individuated by Arendt in the relationship between the secret police and its informers (Arendt 1970, 50).

39. "Such an endeavour" could in itself be considered (independently from the account I am here presenting) "often unnecessary and usually prohibitively difficult" (Morriss 2002, 154).

The case could be somewhat analogous for a Foucauldian picture of society as penetrated and constituted by relations of power. Here it is not relevant whether the productive and creative aspects of such a societal power are understood or not, for the point is not repression *vs* production: either way we would be describing necessary processes; therefore (again, in the extreme case) leaving no space for a properly understood power. Incidentally, this means that many early critiques – which misunderstood Foucault, accusing him of simply denying freedom and normativeness (Fraser 1981; Honneth 1991, ch. 5; Habermas 1987a, ch. 10) – were remarkably correct in their main point, albeit mostly for wrong reasons.

“Necessity”, as the polar opposite of power/possibility, is the key word. Even if we disagree on the specific contents falling under the category of necessity – Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Foucault, Arendt, Habermas... each theorist would paint a different picture – we could still agree that there are things that are necessary and others that are not, and we should understand that necessity is by definition (categorically) the opposite of power (Arendt 1978, I, 59 ff).

The more general consequence of the argument here sketched would be that, despite all appearances, large parts of social science and theory are intrinsically not concerned with power, because they variously purport to explain society in the mode of necessity. This may assume different shapes, through sociology, political science, or even – by stretching the framework to include teleological causes – philosophy of history. What these diverse intellectual enterprises have in common is a descriptive and objectifying stance toward society as their subject-matter – even when the description itself is radically relativistic, as might be the case for some post-modern accounts.

We could once more go back to Searle who, through the notion of “deontic power”, introduced a good tool to discriminate between those studies which can recognize power, and those that cannot – even if he did not consistently use it as such. The point to be noticed is that, despite Searle’s limited use of the label, “deontic power” does not define a subset of a more general concept of power – which, as we saw, is spelled out only through tautologies – but rather power as such may be only within a deontological structure. This would imply the logical form of normativeness, but not any specific normative content.⁴⁰ In fact, the possibility of conceiving practical alternatives re-

40. The same being true for an Arendtean understanding of politics, not surprising since politics is itself defined as the space of freedom/power, as I have previously argued (Parietti 2012).

quires a deontology: if it were not possible to attribute statuses,⁴¹ it would be equally impossible to represent things in different ways, and therefore impossible to understand different possibilities, which is the first condition for power (as any example implying a categorial shift, a deontology-free language is perhaps difficult to imagine). The inherent deontic character of power would correspond, in Arendt's terms, to the political/social distinction (Arendt 1998, ch. 2).⁴²

A related consequence is that using the concept of power as separated from the capacity of people to think and act according to a normative grammar becomes oxymoronic. The radical de-personalization of "power" sought by some theorists would make sense only if the concept were understood as entirely objectified in structures of domination. These may well be the result of previous uses of power, but once in existence they are but its negation. People may feel compelled to behave in agreement with some norms (including implicit ones), and precisely this feeling that they do not have the possibility of transgression is what negates power, even if some such cases may be placed within a relatively strict domination's structure. Not even the exercise of social sanctions, for example by ostracizing the transgressor, necessarily implies power. In fact, the people whose behavior is functional to the implicit enforcement of the social norm may not perceive their behavior as a distinct possibility, but rather as something obvious, even cognitively incontestable.

Only when it is possible to take a reflective stance towards social norms, rendering them explicit, and therefore perceiving the possibility of compliance (and non-compliance), and the possibility of collaborating (or not) in the enforcement, we could properly speak of power. Otherwise, we could observe social structures of domination, but not power. Only those norms that are explicitly instituted and enforced, like law, inherently involve the exercise of power, because they must be explicitly and intersubjectively represented to be effective. Since power is the modal concept of politics, this is also the main reason for a conceptual differentiation between society and politics. Such a categorial differentiation between politics and "the social" goes against the grain of current political science and theory, and it is perhaps the main reason for Arendt's thought

41. An act reducible to the general form, according to Searle, of "X counts as Y in C", which is in itself a normative statement regardless of its moral value, or lack thereof.

42. This could be another remarkable point of contact with Searle's theory, if only he were willing to explore the consequences of the distinction between social ontology and the specific political ontology (Searle 2008b, 101; Searle 2010, 167).

often being dismissed. Nevertheless, once one comes to appreciate the present confusion, starting from the very concept of power, some stark distinctions begin to seem more reasonable.

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