

# A critical review on power philosophy essay

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200692670 Introduction As such a short book, *Power: a Radical View* is, undoubtedly, influential and, most importantly, classic. By crediting it as classic, I by no means consider the arguments in the book totally robust or plausible; rather, what is considered to be highly contestable and problematic is likely more conspicuous than its achievements. But just because of the attention drawn by both of its considerable strengths and weaknesses, great deals of lessons have been learned by students and scholars through the debates it provoked. In terms of Lukes' main argument, his account of the third dimensional power refers to the power that shapes people's preference and cognition of their interests. Power not only changes how people do, but also how people think. Stepping into the realm of preference-shaping power, Lukes inevitably draws on the notion of 'real interests', arguing that people's preference might well be the product of the powerful system which works against their own interest (Lukes 1974 p. 38). This notion, however, irredeemably opens the paradox of false consciousness (Rosen 1996), becoming a lightning rod of criticisms from numerous scholars. Having considered the existence of 'real interests', Lukes furthers his inquiries upon the question that whether power can be exercised in one's 'real interests', and thus advances a 'radical view' that power can be exercised in one's 'real interest'. There are also some other arguments in the books, including the basis on which the process of power can be identified on the three dimensional view of power, the relation between power and responsibility, and individual's capacity to be autonomous, but since they are mostly derived from, and based on the notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness', I will concentrate most

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of my attention upon the critical analysis on the notion of 'real interest' and 'false consciousness', as well as the criticisms on Lukes' radical view. I suggest that the notion of 'real interest' and 'false consciousness' is indeed problematic, because it entails the irreconcilable tension between ontology and epistemology in Lukes three-dimensional power, resulting in the confusion of structure and agency, as well as the conflation of two mutually exclusive notions --- analysis of power and critique of power (Hay 2002). Also, Lukes' radical view is indeed somewhat condescending, and might be used, as an excuse to normalise paternalism, even tyranny. However, in my perspective, its problem is not the paternalism; rather, the problem is that it is not enough paternalist, or in Lukes's term, radical. The problems and inconsistencies of PRV notwithstanding, since it indeed enormously expands our scope of political studies and heuristically enlightens our thinking, it should not be undervalued and should still be considered a must-read for every scholar and student of power politics. the Notion of 'Real Interests' and 'False Consciousness' Lukes criticises the one-dimensional and two-dimensional power advanced by Dahl (1957), Bachrach and Baratz (1970) respectively as 'too individualistic and allows for consideration of the many ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics (Lukes 1974 p. 28)'. In order to expand the definition of power to include preference-shaping, he is made to make the assumption that people have 'real interests' and are misled by their 'false consciousness'. This assumption, however, results in the most essentially problematic inconsistency in Lukes' three-dimensional power. Specifically, to assume that people have 'real interests' and 'false consciousness' is to acknowledge the objectivity of interests, which will necessarily make one embrace a fundamentalist ontology that assumes

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there is something 'out there' independent of our knowledge of it (Furlong and Marsh 2010). However, in the attempt to identify the unobservable, the three-dimensional view is required to abandon a positivist epistemology that preclude the possibility to make knowledge claim based on the unobservable social phenomenon. So accordingly, what inevitably follows appears to be that Lukes must accept a realist, strictly speaking, a Marxist position, which could enable him to acquire the ground to define 'real interests' and 'false consciousness', of which the standard will necessarily be recourse to some external observers' points of view (Clegg 1989), or otherwise, the tension between its ontology and epistemology would remain unresolved. Claiming the subject's credit to judge her 'real interests' seems to an alternative, but actually, as Clegg (1989) insightfully points out, 'this settles nothing in the issue, because the issue is precisely whether, how and in what way people may know what their real interests are' (p. 117). However, crediting the external observer as the arbiter to judge the subject's interests is a much unwelcomed notion that is considered to be politically offensive by many. In fact, numerous commentators, including Benton (1981), Hay (1997) and other scholars criticise Lukes' notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness' as pejorative and politically offensive to individual's capacity of self-determination, 'implying a vantage-point for the enlightened academic' (Hay 2002 p. 179) as well as giving 'paternalist license for tyranny' (Clegg 1989 p. 103). But ironically, the fact is precisely the opposite ---- it is precisely Lukes' unwillingness to endorse paternalism and claim credit to the external observer that causes the essential problem in his notion of three-dimensional power. Precisely speaking, Lukes not only appears to be ambivalent towards the idea of paternalism, he even argues <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-review-on-power-philosophy-essay/>

that agent has a relative autonomy even under domination. Lukes states this point very clearly: ‘... although the agents operate within structurally determined limits, they none the less have a certain relative autonomy... (Lukes 1974 p. 57)’. Consequently, the identification of ‘real interests’ involves a Kantian moral-relativism, which is grounded on existential conceptions without any concrete empirical evidence. However, with the assumption of ‘real interests’ that require external observers to be the judge, it results in what Benton identifies as a ‘paradox of emancipation’: ‘If the autonomy of subordinate groups (classes) is to be respected then emancipation is out of the question; whereas if emancipation is to be brought about, it cannot be self-emancipation’ (Benton 1981 p. 162). In other words, Lukes uses a fundamentalist ontology to define interests as objective, and nonetheless, attempts to identify real interests with an anti-fundamentalist epistemology, incurring an essentially inconsistency in his three-dimensional power. Having been strongly criticised in terms of his inconsistent ontology and epistemology, however, Lukes still does not want to abandon his notion of ‘real interests’ and ‘false consciousness’ and thus defends it in his two essays in the second edition of PRV-- ‘Power, Freedom, and Reason’ and ‘Three Dimensional Power’. He contends that it is a plausible answer to conceive of interests as ‘constitutive of well-being’, in which interests are given by the content of leading a worthwhile life, and which is not straightforwardly preference-dependent (Lukes 2005 p. 81), so that it can be concluded that one’s preferences may not necessarily and directly represent one’s real interests. While acknowledging the subjectivity of interests (2005 p. 109), Lukes still insists that power can be deployed to block or impair its subject’s capacity to use reason correctly (2005 p. 115), <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-review-on-power-philosophy-essay/>

so what is said by someone to be her real interests could well be a product of irrational thinking. Keith Dowding (1996, 2006), speaking in defense of Lukes' notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness', argues that value system could be broken into belief and desire by introducing Dennett's notion of intentional stance (Dennett 1987), and it follows that people may be led by a false belief to make action that result in a situation in which this belief is no longer desirable. Also, people may have adoptive consciousness to make the best of a bad job which can be exemplified in the scenario in Prisoners' Dilemma (Elster 1983). In other words, people can still make actions which are not in favour of their real interests, even if they are free from power. However, since the essential problem is whether interests should be evaluated as subjective or objective, be it 'straightforwardly preference-dependent' or not, as long as the agent's subjectivity is still acknowledged in Lukes framework by which power and interests could be evaluated, these alternatives are of no avail at all in resolving the essentially contestable tension in Lukes' three-dimensional power, that is, the tension 'between his evaluative theorization of the interests implicit in action and the absence of any coherent theoretical framework by which these interests might be evaluated' (Clegg 1989 p. 118). To sum up, the crux of problem in three-dimensional power is not the notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness' itself. Rather, it is the way how Lukes applies it in his theory: Lukes defines interests as objective, yet refuses to analyse power and interests in an objectivist way, rendering the very theoretical framework by which power and interests can be identified and appraised inapplicable. The Confusion of Structure and Agency

The confusion of structure and agency is yet another problem that derives from the ontological and epistemological

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inconsistency in three-dimension power. As Hay (2002) points out, the divergent opinions of the debate on structure and agency is actually rooted in different ontological perspectives. Accordingly, claiming primacy upon structure will reveal one's fundamentalist ontological position; claiming primacy upon agency will reveal one's anti-fundamentalist ontological position, and vice versa. It could be argued that Lukes' model adopts a dialectical view that put more weight on human agent rather than a voluntarist view. To identify the process or mechanism of an alleged exercise of power on the three-dimensional view, as Lukes (1974) proposes, one has to be aware of that power may be exercised unconsciously or collectively (p. 52). These two difficulties, if not answered appropriately, could easily be attributed to the causation of social structure. In response, Lukes argues that though 'agents operate within structurally determined limits, they none the less have a certain relative autonomy and could have acted differently' (p. 54), so the key lies in the relation between power and responsibility (p. 57). It follows that power and structure are not mutually exclusive in Lukes sense. But in fact, Lukes does not make it clear in his book 'where structural determinism ends and structural constraint begins (Layder 1985 p. 139), so how Lukes posits the relation between structure and agency remains substantially ambiguous. Actually, in PRV, Lukes also asks himself this unanswered question: 'when can social causation characterised as an exercise of power, or, more precisely, how and where is the line to be drawn between structural determination, on one hand, and on exercise of power, on the other?' (1974 p. 54). Accordingly, his answer is that to locate power is to fixed responsibility for consequences held to flow from action and inaction of agents. And since the exercise of power, in Lukes' sense, can be located to <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-review-on-power-philosophy-essay/>

agents, the question that he asked himself, arguably, can be translated into 'when can structure be reducible into agency'. Implicitly, such question pre-assumes that structure could be reducible into agency, therefore in Lukes model, his primacy is actually, implicitly placed upon agency with the reduction of structure, which turns out to be an agency-focused model. All in all, in terms of the issue of structure and agency, what is problematic about Lukes' three-dimensional view is that, on one hand, with the absence of a clear demarcation between structure and agency, it becomes so elusive that it can hardly be defined as dialectical; on the other hand, it is arguably too agency-reducible and could be seen as a potential or implicit voluntarism. As a matter of fact, many scholars argued that Lukes is actually more agency-focused than dialectical (Clegg 1979; Layder 1985; Barbalet 1987). The Conflation of Analysis and Critique Another problem arises is that, in terms of how one should study the process of power and interests, Lukes conflates the notions of analysis and critique, the former of which is dependent upon an objective, and sometimes a scientific, ontological basis, the latter of which is essentially normative and entangled with subjective value-judgment. Specifically, as mentioned above, if we were to agree on the notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness', we necessarily have to conceive of real interests as objective and something 'out there' independent of our knowledge. So in order to identify one's real interests, we are required to use analytical tools and methodology to examine the objective factors involved, such as one's physical, psychological, and economical conditions etc., which will unavoidably preclude normative inquiries. In other words, because of the fundamentalist ontological position on which the notion of 'real interests' is grounded, the only appropriate

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questions are delimited to be ‘ what exactly are people’s real interests?’ (Parsons 2007). However, Lukes cannot resist the temptation of engaging into critique, arguing that the significance of power can be identified by the extent to which B could have thought or acted different with absence of A’s domination (Lukes 1974 p. 44). This prima facie plausible assumption is actually very inconsistent with the notion of ‘ real interests’ and ‘ false consciousness’. Accordingly, in response to the pluralist objection that ‘ how can one study, let alone explain, what does not happen?’ (Lukes 1974 p. 40), Lukes argues ‘ where there is no observable conflicts, we must provide other, indirect, grounds for asserting that if A had not acted in a certain way, then B would have thought and acted differently from the way he does actually think and act’ (1974 p. 44). In other words, in Lukes case, the way to identify real interests is to look at the extent to which one could have thought and acted differently when one is no longer dominated by any form of power. Just as Colin Hay points out, since ‘ to engage in critique is not to apply a scientific principle or analytical technique but to compare real practices to idealised (often utopian) alternative’ (Hay 2002 p. 183), we can be sure that the way that Lukes provides to identify ‘ real interests’ is typically a form of critique, which is based on an anti-fundamentalist position, critically asking the question of ‘ what and how one’s real interests should be ?’, with reference to an anarchic utopia where one is free from power. Consequently, the ontological inconsistency is considerably apparent in Lukes’ argument in terms of how one should study power and interests: how could one discern a subject’s objective real interests that based on a fundamentalist ontology, by engaging into an anti-fundamentalist-based critique? As Hay (2002) criticises, Lukes ‘ smuggles the normative and

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ethical foundations for his critical theory into his analysis of power' (p. 183). This conflation, as a result, would lead to one's frustration when one conducts analysis with Lukes theory. Case Analysis Conducted with Lukes Three-Dimensional Power

The frustration mentioned above notwithstanding, John Gaventa (1982), in his book *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*, explicitly applies Lukes' three-dimensional power theory in his analysis of the quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian Valley. In the valley, due to the exploitation of the mining company and huge corruption of the miners' union, inequalities between the mining company and miners were egregiously evident. So apparently, a reform of the miners' union would be potentially favourable to most of the miners' interests. Yet, though miners were in an 'open system' and free to take action against the company and the union for their interests, consent to the status quo, rather than support for reform, was ubiquitous. In order to explain the question of 'Why did the miners of District 19 oppose the potentially favourable reforms and reformers within the organisation', Gaventa draws on the three-dimensional approach, arguing that the ubiquitous consent was originated from a sense of powerlessness, which internalised the loyalty of the miners. Consequently, 'with no perception of cogent reasons to support one member of the union elite over another, but with plenty of knowledge of the possible costs of defying the established regime it was simply safer for the miners of District 19 to go along with the incumbents' (p. 194). Moreover, myths were developed from the bottom up in the community by the information provided by the power hierarchy of the union, deepening the idea that the safety brought about by obedience would do much more benefit than reform. In other words, the powerful successfully

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secured the compliance of the powerless through controlling of information, making them susceptible to myths, and thus created a situation where a overwhelming sense of fatalism was developed and there was no alternative but to obey. Gevanta's work is empirically valuable, but it illuminates the third dimensional power in more of a ethnographical perspective which depicts the process of power generation that embeds in everyday life experience, rather than in Lukes original model that lays emphasis upon the notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness' (Clegg 1989). In other words, in Gevanta's case, the objectivity of 'real interests' of the powerless is actually dissolved with an anti-fundamentalist epistemology through in-depth ethnology and historic-analysis, which, perhaps unintentionally, deproblemaises the ontological and epistemological inconsistency of Lukes' model. Many other scholars also argue that to reserve the consistency of the three-dimensional power, the notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness' must be either dispensed with or totally endorsed. Colin Hay (2002) brings forward the redefinition of power, arguing that by redefining power as 'context-shaping' and 'conduct-shaping', a dialectical model can be formulated, with the notion of 'real interests' being dissolved (Hay 2002 p. 184). Clegg (1989) also suggests that only Marxist structuralism, which defines 'real interests' as 'class interests' and 'false consciousness' as distorted by 'dominant ideology', turns out to be the best alternative to Lukes' three-dimensional power. Conclusion Lukes' three-dimensional power is grounded on the highly contestable notion of 'real interests' and 'false consciousness', it entails an insurmountable tension between a fundamentalist ontology on which interests are defined as objective, and an anti-fundamentalist epistemology with which interests are to be identified

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and evaluated normatively. Furthermore, the three-dimensional power model is also problematic in terms of the confusion of structure and agency and conflation of analysis and critique, both of which are derived from the essential inconsistency of its ontology and epistemology. As a result, scholars, including Hay (2002) and Clegg (1989), contend that the notion of ‘real interests’ and ‘false consciousness’ should be dissolved, otherwise it would remain fundamentally inconsistent. Despite of its insuperable problems, numerous lessons have been learned in the discussion of three-dimensional power, and it is indeed edifying and enormously enlarges our intellectual exploration on power. In this sense, because of the illumination and inspirations provoked by Lukes’ three-dimensional power, the value of PRV should never be understated. In fact, PRV will, for a long time, remain a classic literature in the field of politics.