

# Lukes' three dimensions of power



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**Lukes: On Power**

Power is a term that has seen much discourse and debate. The meaning of the word has been discussed and developed by many people from varying walks of life; academics, philosophers, politicians, and many others. It is a term whose understanding is crucial to how we, as humans, view and live in our social world, as it is a concept that governs our everyday living in several ways; some of which we are not even aware of. Political and social theorist, Steven Lukes, defines power in terms of, what he calls 'dimensions'. These dimensions or faces of power are approaches that can be used to study power relations. Lukes looks at the theory of power in three dimensions of what he calls a "conceptual analysis" (Lukes, 1974: 9). Lukes puts across an implicit proposition that the level and effectiveness of power in a given institution, can be analysed using these criteria (Lukes, 1974: 10). Lukes' three dimensions of power can thus be used to study corporate power; an issue of growing concern and discourse space in the contemporary world.

The one dimensional view of power proposed by Lukes is commonly known as the 'pluralist' view of power (Lukes, 1974: 11). Dahl, Polsby and Wolfinger are some of the more prominent writers on this approach of looking at power (Lukes, 1974: 11). It is known as the 'pluralist approach' to power because, through it, its proponents sought to show interest groups, in any democratic power structure, compete for power (Lukes, 1974: 11). Dahl differentiates the pluralist view from the elitist by asserting that his 'intuitive view of power' involves not only the possession of, but the exercise of power; comes not only by reputation but also by execution (Lukes, 1974: 12). The argument of the one dimensional view of power asserts that the group/s

wielding power can be determined by simply looking at who prevails when there are decisions to be made and there is “observable direct conflict” (Lukes, 1974: 12). The pluralist approach emphasises the importance of actual observable behaviour and hence studies the outcomes of decision making (Lukes, 1974: 25). Such empirical study can be done through first-hand observation by analysis of official second-hand records (Lukes, 1974: 13). Dahl acknowledges that the power wielded by a group may be overt or covert, but the actual culmination of power is seen at the point when decisions are made, especially the decisions on controversial issues that are surrounded by the most conflict (Lukes, 1974: 13).

Robert Dahl exemplifies the pluralistic view of power with his analysis of the power structure in New Haven, Connecticut; in the 1950s (Domhoff, 2005). In Dahl’s view, there were a number of influential groups whose opinions held weight when it came to making and influencing decisions about the city (Domhoff, 2005). His conclusion about the power structure in, New Haven was that no single group held the monopoly on power (Domhoff, 2005). Although there were inequalities within the society, the fact that power was dispersed among different elites with different interests at heart meant that the situation was one of ‘dispersed inequalities’; where no one group controlled all of the important resources (Domhoff, 2005).

The one dimensional view of power is very simple to grasp and can be observed with relative ease. The theory gives a straightforward way of thinking about “the behavioural study of decision-making power by political actors” (Lukes, 1974: 57). It would be useful in many cases, especially where pluralist power structures have been established. However, the view fails to

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observe, in any system, the means by which the political agenda is controlled (Lukes, 1974: 57). In many cases, the exercise of power is more subtle and results from the use of mechanics beyond the scope of the one dimensional view.

Lukes' two dimensional theory of power is an elitist view theorized by Bachrach and Baratz, as a critique to the one dimensional pluralist view (Lukes, 1974: 16). This two dimensional view acknowledges the observable power of Dahl's theory but asserts that power is exercised when issues are arranged specifically so that some are not discussed (Lukes, 1974: 16). By keeping issues of potential conflict off the agenda, observable conflict is completely avoided, but clearly 'power over' is still exercised (Lukes, 1974: 17). The first dimension would only look at the apparently open discussion and the results of conflict over matters actually allowed onto the agenda, but miss the more subtle exercise of power (Lukes, 1974: 19). Bachrach and Baratz also mention the latent power relations that occur in the event of "non-decisions" (Lukes, 1974: 18). This is when actor 'B' refrains from voicing an issue of interest to him/her, anticipating an unpleasant reaction from actor 'A' (Lukes, 1974: 18). 'Non-decisions' such as this consolidate the dominance of a particular group and help in maintaining the status quo of power relations (Lukes, 1974: 19). The two dimensional view of power thus consists of observable decision making and more subtle non-decision making. Decision making is the selection of one option from a set of alternatives, whereas non-decision making entails suppressing an interest that conflicts with those of decision-maker (Lukes, 1974: 19). In effect Bachrach and Baratz distinguish between potential and actual political

issues, thereby drawing a distinct difference from the pluralist view that only looks at the 'key' issues that are actually in the discourse (Lukes, 1974: 20). From this distinction the authors draw the conclusion that behaviourism is false (Lukes, 1974: 20). In other words conclusions about power cannot always be drawn from observable behaviour. The two dimensional view of power recognises this; that the mechanisms of power and the way it operates can go beyond what meets the eye. Power is not only reflected in struggles within a system, but is also present in deciding what can get into the system and what cannot; defining the boundaries of the system (Lukes, 1974: 20).

Crenson's book *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution: A Study of Non-Decision making in the Cities*, a good example, of the two dimensional theory, is provided. Lukes asserts that the example also borders on the third dimension of power (Lukes, 1974: 42). The example focuses on two cities in Indiana; Gary and East Chicago. Both cities had similar populations and were facing a similar level and problem of pollution (Lukes, 1974: 42). East Chicago took measures to clean its air in 1949, while Gary only took action in 1962 (Lukes, 1974: 42). Crenson explains that the reason behind Gary's inaction was that the city's prosperity was based on the only major industrial company in it; U. S. Steel (Lukes, 1974: 42). The issue was kept out of discourse for so long because of the reputation of U. S. Steel (Lukes, 1974: 43). The company exercised 'silent power' and did not need to act, but it was simply its potential to act that kept policy-makers silent on the issue (Lukes, 1974: 43).

The two dimensional view of power is a good critique on the one dimensional view as it aptly points out the flaws of the one dimensional view as it aptly points out the flaws of the one dimensional view, then goes on to set out a theory that holds water better than the first one. It fails, however, to satisfactorily examine the bias and control of power; “ it lacks sociological perspective” that is used to observe the methods by which “ latent conflicts within society” are suppressed (Lukes, 1974: 57). Lukes is not satisfied with the two dimensional view of power as set out by Bachrach and Baratz (Lukes, 1974: 21). He offers three criticisms, which in his opinion, are the shortcomings of this view (Lukes, 1974: 21). From these, Lukes suggests that power can go deeper, into a ‘ third dimension’.

The first criticism, of the two dimensional view, put forward by Lukes is that it, like the one dimensional view, is still too behaviourist (Lukes, 1974: 21). The argument of Bachrach and Baratz implies that the power exercised in the exclusion of information is deliberate; a conscious decision made by the decision-maker (Lukes, 1974: 21). This, however, is not the case. Such selection of issues may merely be the unconscious following of bias within a system and not an intentional attempt at exercising power by any particular group (Lukes, 1974: 22). The exclusion of certain issues from an agenda may also result from the norms of a particular society due to the prevailing modes of thought in the time and place in question (Lukes, 1974: 22). For example, before the twentieth century, women were generally viewed as naturally subordinate to men, thus issues of empowering women would not be seen as issues meriting consideration or attention.

Lukes' second criticism of the two dimensional of power argues that the theory still refers to the potential of conflict (Lukes, 1974: 23). The theory asserts that if people were made aware of the exclusion of certain matters, of interest to them, and the agenda they would react in order to protect their rights (Lukes, 1974: 23). Contrary to Bachrach and Baratz's theory, the 'air-pollution' example showed that the decision makers, who had the interests of the people in mind, knew all of the relevant facts pertaining to the situation; however, they still took no action against U. S. Steel (Lukes, 1974: 43). This shows that power can act in a further 'dimension' and take an even more insidious form.

The third criticism Lukes has, of the two dimensional view of power, is that when it analyses if power has been exercised or not, it looks only at the subjective interests, policy preferences and grievances that are overridden (Lukes, 1974: 24). The view holds that if the observer can find no grievances there is the assumption that there is 'genuine consensus' on the issue at hand (Lukes, 1974: 24). The view, however, does not consider the possibility of a group having preferences that do not necessarily include all of its real interest (Lukes, 1974: 24). For example, in 2009 the number of American workers in trade unions was 12.3% and only 7.2% in the private sector (White, 2010). The 'peak' in the private sector was 30% in 1958 (White, 2010). Trade unions can organise and empower workers if they have significant membership and worker support. It is a real interest for workers to be involved in them, but partly due to the historical linking of trade unions with communism and partly due to other factors, few American workers choose to exercise their rights to join trade unions (White, 2010).

Lukes sets out his own idea of how the most effective forms of power operate. He calls it three dimensional power (Lukes, 1974: 23). Lukes asserts that this form of power, to operate effectively, requires an acceptance of the status quo because of an accepted underlying ideology (Lukes, 1974: 23). Those who hold power within the system will be accepted by the people, due to the peoples' belief in the system (Lukes, 1974: 23). In such a situation the preferences of the people can be manipulated to fall into line with the agenda of the rulers (Lukes, 1974: 23). Lukes calls his three dimensional view the “supreme and most insidious exercise of power” as it allows rulers to shape the preferences and perception of the masses as well as prevent them from having grievances (Lukes, 1974: 23). This is because, as Lukes argues, the people will “see or imagine no alternative” to the existing order “or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial” (Lukes, 1974: 23).

Three dimensional power works by means of a mechanism called adaptive policy formation (Barber, 2007). This refers to a human reaction of reconciling oneself to one's misery, or altering one's attitude to console oneself in difficult circumstances (Barber, 2007). In embracing a particular system, people accept its consequences and thus resort to cognitive dissonance reduction as a functional means of dealing with oppression (Barber, 2007). It is, however, ironic to note that the worse off a people are, the less they demand (Barber, 2007). Rather than acting in favour of their interests, they accept repression and adapt to oppressive conditions. An example of three dimensional power at play is Sen and Nussbaum's analysis of Bengal, where of the millions affected by the post 1944 famine, it was



primarily men who reported to relief centres for aid, despite both sexes being similarly affected (Sen, 2008). In accepting their 'place', of having limited rights in society, the women were not prepared to step forward and claim their rights to healthcare (Sen, 2008). Three dimensional power is the most supreme form of power as it gives rulers almost totalitarian power over the masses (Lukes, 1974: 23).

Steven Lukes provides three theories of power and evaluates them, and at the same time building on their scope and complexity. His third dimension of power does a good job of exploring and explaining the mechanisms behind complex and entrenched power. The other two dimensions account for weaker forms of power that can be exercised. Lukes third dimension of power can be applied in explaining corporate power in the modern world. Corporate power is built on an unquestioned and accepted ideology, founded on the premise that it is the natural way of being of as Margaret Thatcher voiced out, "There is no alternative". Acceptance of the free market ideology inevitably means acceptance of its consequences; the status quo of our world today. Lukes' theory also helps us to explain why despite the destruction that is done to the planet, and the disregard for humanity, that characterises the system, it has survived and still thrives. Lukes, then, very aptly describes this form of power as both "insidious" and "supreme" (Lukes, 1974: 23).

### **Bibliography**

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