

Who Is Served by Explanations of Power?

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The use of “power” is fashionable in many discourses.

In **physics**, power is the work that energy does. It must exceed its resistance. The laws of thermodynamics state that energy can only be spent, not created. It invariably flows from where it is to where it can no longer do work.

In the **social sciences**, power has several meanings but its explanations tend to rely on **metaphors from physics**:

- For **Foucault** power is everywhere. It accounts for what discursive regimes produce (causing changes) or oppress (preventing changes). Actors and authors cannot escape being fueled and directed by it.
- In **rhetoric**, power is attributed to texts, forms of arguments, tropes, memes, and media. It is what compels recipients to believe in or enact.
- In the **communication** literature, power is what causes actors to influence others to do what they would not do otherwise. It explains what unequal distribution of resources (weapons, money, knowledge, charisma, beauty, privilege) does. Resources are possessed by individual actors, families, or social organizations.
- In **sociology**, power is attributed to collective social phenomena: institutions, ideologies, and hegemonies that control the material, economic, social, media, and/or symbolic conditions of populations.

I am concerned with **what social theories do when they enter the very social processes they are intended to explain**. I contend: social scientific explanations that

- Rely on physical metaphors favor deterministic constructions of social realities and
- Serve the status quo of existing social structures.

My interest is to find **dialogical explanations** that preserve human agency.

The video of the interactions in the county clerk’s office offers an opportunity to debunk deterministic explanations of power.

For once, the word “power” was never mentioned.

I question theoretical frameworks that “reveal” power to underlie what is happening there.

My analysis of this interaction will conclude:

Authority can be exercised only over those who submit to it. (The challengers did not comply).

Authority resides in the plausible claim to ventriloquize higher and absent authorities (the Governor, God, values), invoked for being not presently addressable.

Any authority can be **challenged, defied or circumvented** by

- Questioning its correct ventriloquation (not observed)
- Going elsewhere (legally inapplicable here)
- Denying its relevance in the given situation (religion has nothing to do with your job)

- Invoking another (higher or more appropriate) authority (the Supreme Court)
- Appealing to reciprocity (I would not do this to you so you should not do this to me)
- Reversing its claimed asymmetry (I pay your salary so you should serve me)
- Creating popular support for a redefinition (the chorus saying “Do your job”)
- Calling on a judge to rule in my favor (I’ll call the police) – agreed (yes, call the police)

In the short run, the challengers were not successful in getting a marriage license. However media presence made the effort to redefine the claimed authority a national issue and encouraged a judge to act.

This did not prevent advocates of religious liberty to construe the looser to be a hero who exercised the right to ventriloquize God at the expense of others!