The state is a social relationship, a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; that is by people relating to one another differently.

Gustav Landauer

Nonviolent movements or campaigns aim to change society – or even to promote revolution. In doing so, they will come up against existing power structures which want to prevent change. An understanding of power – of different forms of power – is therefore crucial for any movement for social change.

Most people have some assumptions about power. The power lies with the government (which may or may not be democratically elected), with the large multinational corporations, with the media, with the international institutions – to name just a few. All of these views are true to some degree, but how is their power is exercised? Where does it come from?

This article aims to explore a nonviolent understanding of power, and the forms of power nonviolence opposes, but also the forms of power it wants to build and nurture. Because power is needed to achieve social change – revolutionary change. And clarity about the kinds of power we object to, and the kinds of power we want, can help to avoid a "power-trap" of recreating structures of domination after toppling the powers-that-are.

A nonviolent theory of power

When we talk about power, we are often refering to power-over: the power of governments or corporations (or other power structures, such as patriarchy or heteronormatism) to impose on us what they see fit.

But power-over is only one form of power. There are several others, such as power-with, power-(in-relation)-to, and power-within.

Power-within

Power-within is related to an individuals sense of self-worth and self-knowledge; it is the capacity to imagine and have hope. Power-within means, on one hand, to understand our own situation of dependency and oppression, and to want to freedom from this; on the other hand it means to realise that every person has the possibility to influence the course of their own life and to change it. Developing power-within is crucial in any empowerment process.

Power-with

Power-with is power found in common ground among different people, and building collective strength. An awareness develops that you are not the only one affected by a situation, but that others have had similar experiences, too. This can lead to the realisation that people do not personally bear the guilt for their fate, but that often a structural or political pattern is at fault. This realisation and cooperation in the group can strengthen one's self-esteem. Not everybody has to find ways to deal with the situation - it is possible to struggle jointly for change. The group provides the opportunity to combine skills and knowledge, to support each other.

Power-with is related to the power of numbers, to the collective power we build when joining together with others, forming organisations, networks, and coalitions.

Power-(in relation)-to

Power-(in relation)-to refers to our goals and to the dominant power relationships. It is the power to achieve certain ends and opens up the possibilities of joint action for change. The question is: What leverage do we have, working in groups and coalitions, against the entrenched corporate and political power?

Any nonviolent movement needs to set into motion empowerment processes that develop these types of power, in order to challenge what is usually understood when we talk about power: power-over.

Challenging power-over

Power-over – or just power – as understood by most nonviolent movements is nothing static. A government doesn't just have power because it is the government, even if it is a military dictatorship. People in positions of power do not have in themselves any more power than any other human being. If that is the case, then, as Gene Sharp points out, the power to rule must come from outside.

Sources of power

If power is not intrinsic to political elites, then it has to be based on external sources. These external sources include authority (the acceptance by people of the elite's right to command), human resources (the elite's supporters, with their knowledge and skills), intangible factors (such as psychological considerations and ideological conditioning), material resources, and sanctions at the disposal of those with power. These sources of power depend on the obedience and cooperation of the people. The relationship between command and obedience is an interactive one, and power-over can be exercised only with the active or passive compliance of those being ruled.

It would be over simplifying to say that people obey only because of the fear of sanctions – legal sanctions such as fines or imprisonment, the threat of violence, or death. While this might be the dominant reason in extremely violent dictatorships, generally, there are other reasons for compliance that are more important. For example, habit (or tradition) is an important reason – we are used to obeying and without being challenged about it, we do not see any reason not to.

A third reason might be called "moral obligation": because of social or religious values in society we feel morally (not necessarily legally) obliged to obey so as not to divert from the accepted norms and paths within society. This is also linked to "hidden-power" (see below),

Cooperating with power might be in our own interest. We might gain from it – in terms of prestige, monetary benefits, or we might gain a little more power too. We might even identify with those in power, or simply not see the issue as important.

Finally, we might lack self-confidence and just feel powerless (a lack of power-within).

Of course, it is not always easy to disobey. We are part of a web of (power) relationships and structures that often appear to leave us few choices. How can we disobey capitalism, when we need to earn money to satisfy our basic needs? While complete disobedience might not always be possible, there are often different degrees of compliance with the demands of power-over, which can be used to develop resistance.

A social movement aiming for social change – and not just for replacing one government with another – needs to address these reasons for compliance with power-over in order to challenge the power relationships, and build different types of power as a social movement.

Visible, invisible, and hidden power

It can be useful to look at power-over also from a different perspective, which is in some way related to the sources of power. These can be called 'dimensions' or 'levels' of power-over.

Visible power

Power-over can be very visible. This includes the formal rules (constitutions, laws) which establish relationships of power-over, but it also includes the threat of sanctions, either legal sanctions or the threat of arbitrary detentions or torture, which are designed to prevent people from claiming their rights.

Hidden power

Power-over can also be hidden, in the sense that no obvious, visible decisions need to be made which would expose the power. One example is the power of agenda setting: which issues are worth discussing in a society, at the place where decisions are being made. Who decides this? This can be done by controlling the media (which plays an important role in agenda setting), as well as by deciding who will be involved in discussing certain issues, and eventually in taking formal decisions. While the process of decision making itself might seem democratic, power-over is exercised by keeping issues off the agenda or excluding those most affected from taking part in decision making.

Invisible power

Power-over can also be completely invisible. It is kept from the mind and consciousness even of those most affected by it. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power-over contributes to shaping people's beliefs, sense of self, and acceptance of their supposed superiority or inferiority.

In many ways, invisible power is closely related to what Johan Galtung calls 'cultural violence', which serves as legitimisation of both direct and structural violence, or the existence of power-over. As VeneKlasen and Miller put it: 'Processes of socialisation, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable, and safe.' This contributes to creating what Sharp calls the "moral obligation" to obey.

Patriarchy in societies where it is still almost unchallenged and therefore widely accepted can be seen as a form of invisible power.

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