

Power and the Activist

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ABSTRACT *Jenny Pearce reports on a scoping study called 'Power in Community' in which she carried out 'Power Talks' with community activists in the North of England. She first gives a comprehensive analysis of the meaning of power, ranging from the classic concept of dominating power (power to) to power to cooperate (power with), to empowerment. She concludes that the community activists involved in the scoping exercise were using non-dominating power. They talked of power as enabling others, sharing and listening with others. She argues that evidence of the practice on non dominating powershould be used to shift the debate from 'empowerment' to 'transforming power'.*

KEYWORDS *community activists; dominating power; empowerment; change; community organizing*

'Power that you can change stuff with'; 'Power is being able to help others'; 'Power is people listening to you'; 'Some people might have power, but its deep down, they are frightened to let it come out'; 'A person should know how much power he can handle, like a wire, volts go through and can blow the fuse'; 'You cannot get power overnight, you have to keep going up that hill'; 'I see power when it holds people back, stops people doing things'. 'I don't like to think I have power, I don't like it to be abused'; 'Power is something everybody should have and to express themselves and a lot of people don't have it'.

These quotes are from community activists in the North of England who took part in a scoping study I recently completed on Power in Community.¹ As part of the study, I held a series of 'Power Talks' with community activists in a range of community settings in Bradford and Sheffield. The first part of the scoping study had been academic, a review of the literature on power. There is a rich academic debate. It shows that academics have fostered a significant shift in our understanding of power, from classic *dominating* power, where 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests',² to the idea of power *to* or power as capabilities to act (Moriss, 1987). It is not just academics who engendered this shift, of course. Many would give activists, in particular feminists, an important role in pushing for power to be understood in terms of power to act or power to cooperate (power *with*) rather than power to dominate others, in other words *non-dominating* power. Despite the academic shift, however, the conventional understanding of power in the world remains 'domination' of the Other. Academics themselves remain deeply divided, between those who stress consensus and those who stress coercion with respect to power. Feminists went on to

argue for 'empowerment' as a means of enhancing the power of those dominated by Others. Empowerment began to enter mainstream discourses of a range of sectors, from large funding bodies such as the World Bank to private businesses. It ceased to offer a radical rethinking of power. We are, I believe, at a moment when power needs a fresh look in terms of how it relates to action for change. This fresh look should revisit non-dominating power and explore its empirical not just theoretical qualities. This article argues that if civic activism is to encourage a wide and inclusive form of involvement in politics, then it needs to look at its own assumptions about power and not only at its efforts to build 'power' against the state or other powerful bodies. If non-dominating power was to become conventional, I argue, how could it also become effective in bringing about change without reproducing dominating power?

The activist is in a difficult position with respect to power. Mostly he or she is 'fighting power' (Mansbridge, 2006), but at the same time, trying to use power. Saul Alinsky, whose ideas around community organizing had an important impact in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s and are now being revived in the United Kingdom, recognized that power was essential to movements for change. He himself defined power as 'ability, whether physical, mental, or moral, to act' (Alinsky, 1971: 50) and was concerned that it had become a negative word, arguing that power had to be accepted as part of the world and *to know power and not fear it is essential to its constructive use and control* (Alinsky, 1971: 52; italics). Alinsky was clear that the goal of community organizing was to build a 'mass power organisation which will change the world into a place where all men and women walk erect' (Alinsky, 1971: 3). Yet, many movements and organizations have trouble with power. The most progressive have found that dominating power within their ranks and justified in terms of the effectiveness of achieving goals can often divide and ultimately weaken them. Over the last decades, many social movements have tried to find new approaches to power and decision making. Horizontalism has been pitched against the vertical top-down approaches to politics of the traditional left. Processes of consensus deci-

sion making have been employed. Most recently, consensus hand signals have become widespread in the Occupy protests, building on Climate Camp, Seeds for Change and UK Uncut protests around 2007. Activists are thinking about how to facilitate voice and democratize within their movements. Wagging fingers indicates agreement, the limp wrist to the floor disagreement. Facilitators make use of the 'progressive slant' to ensure that race and gender not the order by which people raise their hands are taken into account when people ask to speak (Klein, 2011). In practice, the contemporary generation of activists is giving a lot of attention to the diffusion of power in order to build more powerful movements. Tahrir Square is emblematic also for global activists, in the way power was built up without violence. Non-dominating forms of power, I believe, can be correlated with diminishing violence (Pearce, 2007).

Alinsky called upon us to 'know power'. Mark Haugaard, who has made a very important contribution to contemporary understandings of power, has called for a 'discursive consciousness of power' (Haugaard, 2010). In other words, there is a need to become deeply aware of how power flows and is exercised in order to recognize how it constructs our self, as well as our dispositions to act in certain ways or to feel unable to act. I would add another dimension. We need to explore much more deeply the nature of non-dominating power and when and how it is exercised in practice. The tension between effectiveness in movement action and making change remains strong in all civic activism. By becoming aware of non-dominating power as a distinctive form of the exercise of power, we might be able to develop it and harness its constructive and democratizing potentials as a foundation for inclusive change processes, which do not reproduce the kind of social orders that are under contestation.

Power *to* and Power *with* are important conceptual tools for thinking about non-dominating power. However, they are not always presented as tools for transforming our understanding and practice of power as such, so that dominating power becomes the exception rather than norm

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in human interactions. What was so surprising in our Power Talks is that community activists did understand power in a non-dominating way, and also exercised power in that way. As the quotes at the beginning of this article indicate, independently and across the eight 'Power Talks' we held, activists talked of power as enabling others, sharing with others, listening to others. Most also felt deeply uncomfortable with the world of the 'powerful', and also did not want to be seen as 'having power'. Someone described power as a hot potato to be quickly passed on and another said that if he ever came into power, he would be the first one to resign: 'I believe that if

you are given the opportunity, you can do all the work you want, its not about position.'

As activists try to build power to change the world, what kind of power are they building? An effective form of non-dominating power is not so easy. Many of the community activists in the Power Talks found themselves losing battles and ending up on the periphery of processes. The challenge for activists is to reconcile the tensions of building power for change and transforming power, so that tomorrow's new social orders do not reproduce the dominating power models of the past through which old orders can be restored.

Notes

- 1 The study was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Connecting Communities Programme and the Discussion Paper (Pearce, 2012).
- 2 This is the definition of Steven Lukes (1974 [2005]) in his important text on Power.

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