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## Is Power Zero-sum or Variable-sum? Old Arguments and New Beginnings

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The political and social world in which we live and act is partly constituted by the words we use and the way we use them. *What power is* and *how power works* is shaped by what we collectively *think* it is and how we think it works.

This essay revisits the question of whether power should be understood as inherently zero-sum (gains for some entailing equivalent losses for others) or variable-sum (both mutual gains and mutual losses of power are possible). The zero-sum assumption is very old (predating by thousands of years the game-theoretic shorthand) and draws its force from the prevalence of conflict, inequality, and the possibility of violence in political and social life. But the zero-sum view cannot explain the blend of conflict and cooperation characteristic of many important power relations – including the rule-bound political competition of democracy.

Challenges to the zero-sum view are relatively recent and in most cases briefly outlined rather than fully-developed. The two most elaborate variable-sum theories, those of Talcott Parsons and Hannah Arendt, are insightful but flawed.

Through critical analysis of power literature on both sides of the zero-sum question (including the “three faces of power” debate, international relations theory, and extended commentary on Parsons and Arendt) the paper attempts to clear the way for a more persuasive variable-sum theory than has hitherto appeared.

**Keywords:** power; zero-sum; variable-sum; faces of power debate; international relations theory; Talcott Parsons; Hannah Arendt

## Introduction

The world in which we live and act – and especially the political world – is itself partly constituted by the words we use and the way we use them. Terms like “law,” “constitution,” “nation,” “sovereignty,” and “justice” denote, not natural facts, but entities inseparable from the words we use to describe them. Therefore to change how we understand certain words – especially words of central importance for orienting the actions of human beings in politics and social life – is, in some degree, to change the political and social world itself. The United States Constitution, for instance, would cease to *be* a constitution if Americans collectively ceased to *call* the document by that name.

The constructed character of “law,” “constitution,” “nation,” and “sovereignty” is reasonably clear. But *power* – another key word that constitutes our political and social world – might appear to be an exception. One of the attractions of the concept of power, for analysts as well as activists, has always been that it seems to denote some “hard reality” underlying political and social life -- a reality often at variance with our laws, constitutions, and ideals. That for some important and controversial decision, for instance, it was not law or constitution or justice that explains the outcome but *who was powerful and who was not* – this is a typical employment of the idea of power. To reach for the word “power” in explaining and/or criticizing some decision or practice typically signals a desire to strip away the veil and expose the harsh reality that lies beneath.

But though the concept of power does legitimately function this way – to explain what “really happened,” to tear away the veil – political and social power is not some irreducible fact or quantum unaffected by our words and shared meanings. Instead, *what power is* and *how it*

*works* is significantly shaped by what *we collectively think it is* and *how we think it works*. We do not merely exercise, resist, analyze, or quantify power. We exercise, resist, analyze, and quantify it based on some implicit or explicit understanding of what “it” – power – is and how it functions in political and social life. If our understanding of the word “power” changes, then how we (individually or collectively) exercise, resist, and analyze power may also change.

But it does not follow that we individually can transform the political world simply by altering the way we ourselves use and understand the word “power.” The usage of the word reflects shared understandings and practices and its meaning cannot easily be changed by one or a few participants. Changes in how we employ the word “power” will catch on only if a new understanding enables us better to explain social and political outcomes, and to orient social and political action, than an older understanding does.

The specific question with which this essay is concerned is whether power – and especially political power – should be regarded as inherently zero-sum, one’s agent’s gain entailing by definition an equivalent loss for another or others; or variable-sum, whereby it is possible to have mutual gains of power not offset by equivalent losses somewhere else (positive-sum), and mutual losses of power not offset by equivalent gains somewhere else (negative-sum). This essay is part of a larger book-length project that will systematically examine zero-sum and variable-sum understandings of power; and argue that a variable-sum understanding of power is at least as fruitful in describing actual power relations – including relations characterized by significant conflict – as the zero-sum view (see Read 2009a; 2010).

My aims in this essay are more limited. They are, first, to examine how a few representative samples from the (very large) literature on power, classic and recent, have treated the zero-sum/variable-sum problem; second, to show that most attempts to challenge the zero-

sum understanding of power have not provided a persuasive alternative; and finally, to describe what criteria a fully persuasive variable-sum theory of power would have to meet.

The terms “zero-sum” and “variable-sum” are borrowed from contemporary game theory. But the ideas behind those terms are much older, in some instances thousands of years old, and could be described equally well, though perhaps less succinctly, in non-technical language. For example, Thomas Hobbes writes in *Elements of Law*: “Because the power of one man resisteth and hindereth the effects of the power of another: power simply is no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another. For equal powers opposed, destroy one another; and such their opposition is called contention” (Hobbes 1928, p. 26). Hobbes’s account here of the workings of power in social and political life perfectly captures what we would today call a zero-sum description of the functioning of power: where human beings find themselves in “contention,” equal powers cancel out, and what really matters is *greater* power relative to one’s rival. (However, Hobbes’s general definition of power in Chapter 10 of *Leviathan*, as we shall see, does not logically require that one’s gain equal another’s loss.)

I use the game-theoretic terms “zero-sum” and “variable-sum” to frame this inquiry into power because they are convenient, concise, and readily understood; I rarely encounter anyone who does not understand what they mean. Most of the strategic situations modeled by formal game theory – including deterrence, bargaining, and prisoner’s dilemma – could readily be classified as power relations, even though the term “power” itself is largely absent from game-theoretic analysis (on this point see Dowding 2011, p. xxix). But my examination of power here is not limited to the methodological assumptions of rational choice game theory. Formal game theory, for example, assumes that the preferences and identities of actors are fixed and unaffected by the process or results of the interaction itself; whereas many analysts of power,

including theorists as different from one another as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, concentrate precisely on the way in which power relations reshape the desires and identities of those participating in them.

The zero-sum understanding of power has a long history, and it is both impossible and unnecessary to survey it all here. In the first part of the essay, after examining some very general definitions of power, I consider a few illustrations of the zero-sum view, selected from a much larger body of literature in a similar vein. In the second part of the essay I turn to some theorists of power who challenge the zero-sum view, and indicate what I believe is necessary to make the challenge more effective.

### **Classic definitions and longstanding assumptions**

The first and most general meaning of “Power” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “ability to do something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing.” We should notice, first, that this most general definition blends two logically separate but practically connected ideas: *ability to do* something, and *acting upon something* or someone. The entry on “power” follows with a host of more specific meanings, including “possession of control or command over others; dominion; government; sway”; “a particular faculty of body or mind”; “physical or mental strength; vigour; energy; force of character” and, “of things: active property: capacity of producing some effect.” Thus “power” in its broadest meaning is not limited to deliberate interactions among human individuals or groups (i.e. social and political power), but would also include humans’ capacity to produce changes in themselves (“power over oneself”), and to act upon the natural world (“power over nature”). Power at its most general includes the capacities to affect and be affected inherent in all of nature, of which human nature is but a small subset.

John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* refers to this broadest meaning of power in his chapter “Of Power” where he writes that “Power...is two-fold, viz. as able to make, or able to receive, any change: the one may be called active, and the other passive power.” Thus, Locke notes, fire has the power to melt gold, and gold has the power to be melted by fire (Locke 1979, p. 233). For Locke the idea of power addresses the question, “how one [thing] comes to an end, and ceases to be, and another begins to exist which was not before.” Locke observes that the changes wrought by power can be either in external things or within oneself. Indeed, understanding the peculiar power of the human will – an internal power either to act or refrain from acting – is his chief aim in the chapter.

Thus power in this most general sense includes both the capacity to *change* something, and the capacity to *be changed* -- or, alternatively, to resist change, as in the case of a metal not easily melted by fire. These twin ideas of changing something or someone, and of being changed by something or someone, obviously have their counterpart in the possession and exercise of power in social and political life. But as stated thus far the zero-sum/variable-sum question does not yet arise. We have no reason to imagine that the power of fire to melt gold comes “at the expense” of gold, or that gold is looking for ways to redress the imbalance of power. Before we can even formulate the zero-sum question, we need desiring, deliberating, choosing agents of a fundamentally different character than fire or gold.

Thomas Hobbes opens Chapter 10 of *Leviathan* with a general definition of power that specifically refers to power as possessed by desiring, choosing human agents: “The Power of a Man (to take it Universally) is his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good” (Hobbes 2009, p. 58.) What is remarkable about this definition is what it does *not* include, given what Hobbes says elsewhere (including in the *Elements of Law* passage quoted earlier) about power

struggles among human beings. Hobbes's definition of power in Chapter 10 is purely "power-to"; the effects of one's power upon others – negative or positive – are not specifically mentioned. Thus conflict is not made definitionally necessary to power, however prevalent conflict is in Hobbes's wider picture of human social life. That one human being is capable of securing some "future apparent good" does not logically require that good to be secured at someone else's expense; rather it would seem to depend on what the good was and how one set about obtaining it. Hobbes's general definition of power leaves the "means to obtain" the good entirely open: persuasion would count as power ("Eloquence is Power," Hobbes notes) no less than threats or manipulation; the use of wealth ("Riches") to realize one's aims through uncoerced exchange would be no less an instance of power than extracting benefits through the threat or use of violence. In short: at least with respect to Hobbes's most general definition of power, nothing logically requires that the power of one human being (or group) come at the expense of the power of another.

The gulf between Hobbes's *definition* of power and his description elsewhere of its *workings* in the world is not some odd inconsistency; Hobbes is among the most precise of writers. By defining power in open-ended, morally-neutral, conflict-free language, he strategically prepares readers for the shock of recognizing what happens when human beings (like themselves) attempt to obtain good things in a world of scarcity where trust and enforceable law are weak or absent. There is little mystery about why the power of one would necessarily come at the expense of another in the hypothetical state of nature described in Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, where no one is secure and the preferred strategy is a pre-emptive strike. But whether power should continue always to come at another's expense even after the state of nature has been replaced by civil society, when it becomes relatively easier to coexist peacefully and



relatively safer to trust others, is another question (Read 1991). Hobbes's definition of power creates space for a variable-sum theory of power if one can effectively challenge his zero-sum description of the practical workings of power in the world.

The assumption that the power of one is a direct function of another's lack of power is very old, and not limited to the Western political tradition. Benedict Anderson finds in ancient Javanese culture the assumption that "The quantum of power in the universe is constant" and consequently that "concentration of power in one place or in one person requires a proportional diminution elsewhere." He adds that even in the European tradition, the idea that power might be "non-zero-sum" "probably did not arise until the Industrial Revolution (Anderson 1990, pp. 5 n.9, 21-23). J.G.A. Pocock discovers a zero-sum conception of power in certain ancient Chinese philosophers (Pocock 1989; see especially discussion of Han Fei, pp. 64-69). In classical Western thought, one finds the idea, among other places, in the Melian dialogue in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* (a strong influence on Hobbes), where the Athenians argue that it is a rule of nature that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides 1998, p. 352). The idea that one's gain of power is inherently another's loss is at least strongly implicit in Machiavelli – not only in his discussion of principalities, where the assumption is not surprising, but also in his discussion of republics. For Machiavelli, the Senate and people of Rome can mutually gain power, but only by cooperating in conquering someone else; as soon as they lack an external enemy, Senate and people will turn upon one another (Machiavelli 1998, pp. 4-23; for analysis of Machiavelli's zero-sum assumptions see Read 2009a, pp. 203-206). The early modern makers of economic policy known collectively as the Mercantilists argued that *both* wealth and power were zero-sum, and closely connected: with respect to both wealth and power, more for one necessarily meant less for another; and on the

basis of this assumption they argued that nations enriched themselves by impoverishing their neighbors and trading partners (Heckscher 1935, Vol. 2, pp. 21-22; Viner 1948).

But the ancient, pre-industrial origin of the zero-sum idea does not prevent it from enduring in suitably modified form today. Contemporary Realist international relations theorist Robert Gilpin discards the Mercantilists' premise about wealth but echoes their understanding of power: "The essential fact of politics is that power is always relative; one state's gain of power is by necessity another's loss. Thus, even though two states may be gaining absolutely in wealth, in political terms it is the effect of these gains on relative power positions which is of primary importance" (Gilpin 1975, pp. 33-34; see also Gilpin 1981, p. 94). Another contemporary IR Realist, John Mearsheimer, asserts as a fundamental axiom of world politics that "The overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states" (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 2).

The assumption that power is zero-sum is not limited to analysts of international relations (where the weakness of institutions and frequent resort to violence make the claim less surprising) but is also employed to describe domestic politics – in functioning democratic states no less than despotic or failed states. In his influential work *The Theory of Political Coalitions* William Riker argues that democratic politics should for practical purposes be treated as a purely zero-sum game; analysts should pay attention only to "the direct conflicts among participants" and ignore "common advantages" – even though he admits these common advantages exist – because the simplifying assumption of pure conflict makes it possible "to concentrate on one important and precisely stated problem, namely, how to win" (Riker 1962, p. 23).

### **Three faces of (zero-sum) power**

The well-known “faces of power” debate in the community power literature of the 1960s and 1970s has been described and critically examined many times (see for example Lukes 2005; Ball 1992; Isaac 1992). It raised a number of important questions: not only the meaning of power as such, but also where and with what methods power can be empirically studied; whether or not there exists a ruling elite in the United States; whether important matters are systematically excluded from political debate, and if so why. Yet despite their other differences, nearly all participants in the debate assumed that the possession and exercise of power was exclusively associated with conflict – whether of revealed preferences or real interests. Thus the entire debate was conducted on the basis of an implicit, and sometimes explicit, zero-sum model of power.

Robert Dahl’s definition of power – “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957, pp. 203-204) – can serve as a starting point for the “faces of power” debate (in which Dahl himself participated) because it shows how a definition of power *not* originally zero-sum *became* zero-sum once operationalized for purposes of research and description.

Dahl’s original definition -- that A has power if he/she can get B to do something B would not otherwise do -- does not on the face of it necessitate that B act contrary to his/her preferences or interests, merely that he/she act *differently* than if power had not been exercised. The definition itself is open-ended with respect to the methods used to shape another’s conduct. It is also open-ended with respect to the character of its effects on another: A might in principle affect B’s action in ways that advanced B’s interests – the ethic guiding the power of every conscientious teacher or parent – or that were neutral in their effects on B’s interests. Summaries of the faces of power debate sometimes treat Dahl’s original definition as presupposing that A

causes B to act contrary to the latter's preferences or interests (see for example Lukes 2005, pp. 16-18; Scott 2001, pp. 6-7), but that step requires additional assumptions not included in the definition itself.

The key move in turning a neutral general definition into a zero-sum operating definition came from the way in which participants in the debate attempted to answer the counterfactual question: How can we know what B would otherwise do? The assumption shared by nearly all participants was that, if not for A's exercise of power, B would "otherwise do" what B *preferred* to do, and/or what was in B's *real interest* to do. If we can identify B's preferences and/or interests, and then observe B acting contrary to those preferences or interests as a result of something A did, or might do in future, then (according to this line of reasoning) we can demonstrate A's power over B.

Who wins and who loses in a direct political contest is arguably the most visible and readily measurable index of power. As Nelson Polsby put it, in attempting to determine which actors have more power than others, "direct conflict between actors presents a situation most closely approximating an experimental test of their capacities to affect outcomes." Similarly Dahl maintained that a ruling elite could be inferred only if "the preferences of the hypothetical ruling elite run counter to any other likely group that might be suggested" and that in any contest "the preferences of the elite regularly prevail" (Polsby and Dahl quotations from Lukes 2005, p. 18). Dahl, Polsby, and others marked themselves as "pluralists" in the community power debate because, following this method of study, they concluded that, though power was unequally distributed, there was no ruling elite in the United States – no single group that gets its way on every important decision.

The more radical participants in the community power debate raised a number of important objections to the pluralists' methods as well as to their substantive conclusions about the distribution of power in modern society. But they did not call into question the assumption that power was exclusively associated with conflict; on the contrary, they drove that premise further.

A key early statement of the radical critique was Peter Bachrach's and Morton Baratz's pair of co-authored articles, "The Two Faces of Power" and "Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework" (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; 1963). Their argument was that power has two faces: a more visible face in which someone wins and someone loses on some matter brought up for public debate and decision; and a less visible face where someone successfully exercises power by preventing certain issues from even entering the arena of public debate and decision. The pluralists' methods, they maintained, restricted them to observation of only the first face of power -- the public decisions. The second face of power -- the ways in which more fundamental challenges to elite power and privilege were shut out of public decision altogether -- was at least as important yet more difficult (though not impossible) to document and describe. The authors describe these so-called "nondecisions" as instances of what E.E. Schattschneider had called the "mobilization of bias," according to which "All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some forms of conflict and the suppression of others...Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out" (quoted in Lukes 2005, pp. 6-7). If certain key actors have the power to prevent a threatening issue from coming up for public decision at all, this would suggest a more unequal distribution of power than indicated in the public decision-making examined by the pluralists, where no one group seems to win or lose all the time.

For a political system to privilege consideration of some issues and marginalize other potential issues might suggest that power in its second face is inherently zero-sum (my public agenda drives out your public agenda) and that is certainly the tone of Bachrach's and Baratz's analysis. But every political order, the best as well as the worst, discourages certain possibilities in order to open up others. A regime committed to racial equality, for instance, may be able to tolerate racist speech, but its commitment to racial equality would collapse if its public agenda were *equally* open to efforts to ensure racial equality and attempts to restore racial hierarchy. Bachrach's and Baratz's analysis of power's "second face" provides no criteria for distinguishing between different types and degrees of system bias. If every mobilized bias is as negative in its aggregate effects as every other mobilized bias, then the authors' critique of the pluralists loses its normative bite.

Bachrach and Baratz did not attempt any new definition of power. Instead they followed Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan who in *Power and Society* defined power as characterized by the threat of "relatively severe sanctions" under circumstances where there is a direct conflict of interest or values between two or more actors (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, p. 84). They likewise echoed Lasswell and Kaplan in maintaining that any effect on another's action or thought that did not involve the threat or imposition of severe sanctions counted as "influence" but not power (Bachrach and Baratz 1963, pp. 634-635).

Steven Lukes's *Power: A Radical View* (first edition 1974, revised and expanded 2005) combines a concise summary of the community power debate with his own substantive contribution: an argument in favor of a "third face" or "three-dimensional view" of power, whereby power includes, not only the capacity to get one's way in public decisions (first face, open conflict); and to prevent certain issues from being considered for decision at all (second

face, suppressed conflict); but also by shaping the preferences and beliefs of those subject to power (third face, no visible conflict). Lukes writes: “To put the matter sharply, A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?” Bachrach and Baratz had still associated power with open conflict – conflict sometimes manifest outside the regular channels of politics. Lukes argued that “this is to ignore the crucial point that the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place” (Lukes 2005, p. 27).

Lukes’s apparent removal of conflict from the definition of a power relation did not, however, mean that his view of power was more positive than his predecessors in the “faces of power” debate; on the contrary, his definition of power (at least in the first edition of the book) was the most negative of all: “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes 2005, p. 37). Lukes designed this definition to cover cases in which A leads B to believe or desire something that is objectively harmful to B, but where B does not resist because he/she is unaware of his/her real interests – an important substantive issue. The effect of the definition, though, was practically to require a zero-sum understanding of power, because the fundamental interests of participants in any power relation were assumed to be inherently and radically opposed.

In his 2005 expanded version of the book, Lukes replaced this with a deliberately more neutral definition: social power is an agent’s ability “to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether

positively or negatively” (Lukes 2005, pp. 64-65). What Lukes had defined as power in the original version of the book, the unequal power of some over others at the latter’s expense, he relabeled in the 2005 revision as “domination,” a special case of power.

That Lukes fundamentally revised his definition of power, without losing his substantive interest in problems of inequality and domination, suggests a belated realization that a deeply negative view of *all* power was counterproductive to his own normative purposes in the book. For any effective challenge to an oppressive status quo would itself require a sustained exercise of power *by the oppressed* -- certainly over the oppressors, but also to some extent over one another in the course of the struggle. If power is by definition harmful to those over whom it is exercised, then the only alternative to A exercising power over B, contrary to B’s real interests, would be for B to exercise power over A, contrary to A’s real interests -- and probably also over B’s allies in the struggle C and D, ultimately contrary also to their interests. In other words, an exchange of dominators would be possible, but domination itself would continue. Such a conclusion is incompatible with the normative commitments that inform Lukes’s analysis of power. This perhaps explains why, on long reflection, Lukes redefined power as the capacity to affect the interests of others, “whether positively or negatively.”

### **Inequality, conflict, and violence**

Before we turn to some of those who challenge the zero-sum understanding of power, it is helpful to acknowledge some undeniable elements of truth in the picture (it would not be so tenacious if it didn’t capture some part of the truth) while also indicating where these elements of truth leave space for a variable-sum alternative.



1. *How power is distributed is always important.* Robert Dahl remarks: “That some people have more power than others is one of the most palpable facts of human existence” (Dahl 1957, p. 201). That A is more powerful than B does not necessarily mean that A is powerful *because* B is less powerful. (See Keith Dowding’s discussion of what he calls the “blame fallacy.” Dowding 1991, pp. 89-90). Additional assumptions are required to draw this kind of zero-sum logic out of the simple fact of unequal power. But in no foreseeable social or political world would it be unimportant, for instance, whether power relations were roughly equal or highly unequal; or whether decision-making power was widely distributed or concentrated in one or a few key actors. Highly unequal power relations have characteristics that make a mutual-empowerment outcome very unlikely. And inequality of power may very well be the rule rather than the exception in political, social, and economic life. Any plausible variable-sum description of power would have to take this into account.

2. *Some human desires and goals can only be realized at another’s expense.* Hobbes speaks about the desire for “glory,” which he defines as “that passion which proceedeth from the imagination or conception of our own power, above the power of him that contendeth with us” (Hobbes 1929, p. 28). Glory for one presupposes the defeat or humiliation of another.

Contemporary sociologists speak more generally of “positional goods” like fame, status, and “conspicuous consumption” -- i.e. enjoying one’s car or house principally because it is better than someone else’s car or house. In fact, a kind of positive-sum scenario is sometimes possible for positional goods: if A considers himself better than B, and B considers herself better than A, and nothing forces them to battle out their divergent judgments, then both “win.” But it is a different matter if A considers himself superior to B, and harms or oppresses B to prove it.

If motives of this kind were the only, or always the strongest, motives for human beings generally (there is no question they are the strongest motives for *some* individuals), then power for one would inevitably come at the expense of another, simply because the purposes for which power was accumulated and exercised would be mutually antagonistic. But if these are not the only important motives, and their effect on our conduct toward one another turns out to be a variable rather than a constant (i.e. stronger under some circumstances than others), then the mere existence of positional motives does not force us to a zero-sum view of power.

3. *Conflict is an enduring feature of all social life, and especially of politics.* All social relations contain the potential for conflict (whether open or suppressed), and conflicts that cannot be resolved in routine fashion become “politicized” – a development which in turn may resolve the conflict, leave it unresolved, or escalate it. Theorists of power differ on whether conflict should be considered a definitionally-necessary component in all power relations. But for practical purposes any adequate theory of power – however that theory defines power – must address the fact that much of the time, and especially in what we call politics, the attempt by some to realize their aims encounters resistance from others.

But cooperation is also a permanent element of social life, for without it there could be no social life at all. Cooperation and shared interest is also an element of politics, as advocates of a zero-sum model of political power (like Riker) concede. The theoretical move characteristic of zero-sum models of power is to *associate power only with conflictual relations*, or with the conflictual components of relations in which conflict and cooperation are blended; and to *give a different name* (like “influence,” “exchange,” “alliance,” or “shared values”) to cooperative relations, or to the cooperative components of a mixed relation.

But this theoretical move – analytically separating conflict from cooperation and exclusively associating the former with power – is in my view a mistake. To dichotomize cooperation and conflict as though they were simple opposites inclines one to the further assumption that so much conflict in a relation is so much less cooperation and vice-versa. In fact conflict and cooperation can under favorable circumstances *add* to one another, not just subtract from one another. (On this theme see Simmel 1971, p. 73.) Purely harmonious relationships would be lifeless and could not sustain any social life, much less any shared political traditions and institutions. The same would be true for relations of pure conflict.

Moreover to simplify our understanding of politics, as Riker recommends, by focusing exclusively on conflicts among participants – on “how to win” – has an important and far-from-trivial consequence: common interests among participants, though their existence is admitted, are taken for granted and sink to the level of passive background. Activity and conscious strategy – i.e. the possession and exercise of power – is on this view directed to winning at another’s expense; the cooperative background for democratic political competition ends up being taken for granted, like sidelines, game clocks, and referees in a football game.

But even the most rudimentary historical perspective reminds us that the rules that make democratic competition possible cannot be taken for granted. There is nothing automatic about accepting the unfavorable results of an election rather than resorting to violence, secession, civil war, or revolution – which of course do occur. The losing party in a democratic election, especially one involving significant conflicts of interest or value, will not concede victory to the opponent unless the rules and practices safeguard its *future capacity for action*, and consequently its hope for future success. Far from being automatic, stable institutions of this kind are among the most difficult of political accomplishments. To exist at all they had to be actively created,

and when at risk their survival may require active attention by rival parties or by the community as a whole. This cooperatively-conflictual creation and maintenance of democratic institutions is in my view no less an exercise of power than the political competition it makes possible.

4. *The near or distant prospect of violence is always a factor in political life.* This is one of the central premises of Realist international relations theory, though other schools of thought also recognize its importance. Nor is the prospect of violence limited to international politics among sovereign states: violent civil conflict, in some cases civil war or violent revolution, forms part of the history of nearly every modern political community, even those whose current political life is stable and peaceful. And the political significance of trans-border violence by nonstate actors (like international terrorist networks) is unlikely to disappear soon.

What defines political violence in its most extreme form, warfare (whether international or civil) is its zero-sum logic. War is characterized by what Clausewitz called the logic of polarity: whatever is in the interest of one party in a war, the interest of the other side is precisely the reverse: “the positive and negative interests exactly cancel one another out.” The ultimate aim of a war is victory, which means “to compel our enemy to do our will” (Clausewitz 1976, pp. 75, 83). Clausewitz recognized that some wars remained limited while others proceeded to their furthest extreme; but he believed that both limited and unlimited wars followed a similar zero-sum logic (for discussion see Read 2009a, pp. 211-216). And yet Clausewitz recognized that war required a “political object” to give it direction and purpose – otherwise it degenerated into pointless bloodletting.

What characterizes warfare is not necessarily that the warring states or factions are assumed from the outset to have completely antagonistic interests. On the contrary, a shared interest in avoiding mutual annihilation or mutual economic devastation may be conceded by

both parties. But the practical logic of warfare, once a conflict comes to be seen *as* a war by one or both sides, is such that *these potentially shared interests do not enter into the strategic interactions* between the two rivals, or do so only with great difficulty.

The zero-sum logic of warfare does not by itself prove that *political power* as such is zero-sum. Reaching that conclusion requires the additional assumption that the quantity and quality of one's *present* political power, even during periods of relative peace, is a function of the probability that one will prevail in a *future* violent conflict. (Realist international relations theorists offer the clearest illustrations of this argument.) This is an argument that, in my view, should not be either quickly dismissed or quickly embraced. Whether the "war-winning" argument applies with equal force in domestic politics (where violence also remains a present or future possibility) is an open question. Even among international relations scholars (see below) the war-winning theory of power does not stand unchallenged.

### **Challenging the zero-sum view**

The zero-sum view of power has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, if one peruses the literature on power, especially that of the last two or three decades, one will find many criticisms of the zero-sum assumption. But for the most part these critiques are brief: they typically raise one or more problems with the zero-sum view, but do not proceed to work out an alternative variable-sum theory in much detail. (Talcott Parsons's and Hannah Arendt's treatments of power are obvious exceptions and will be critically examined below.) Thus most challenges to the zero-sum view remain in negative form, an argument-against-an-argument, rather than proceeding to make a positive case at any length.

The principal strength of the zero-sum view has always been that, despite the one-sidedness of its understanding of power, it has clearly shown itself capable of grounding rich description of political life. The descriptive purchase of assuming that one's gain of power is another's loss is demonstrated by classic writings like Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses* as well as more recent studies in a zero-sum vein like John Gaventa's *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Gaventa 1980) – arguably the most perfectly realized and lasting work of the “faces of power” debate. A variable-sum theory of power, if it is seriously to challenge the zero-sum view, needs to enable description of political and social life in equally rich detail.

Dennis Wrong's *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses* includes a section late in the book titled “Collective Power and the ‘Zero-Sum’ Debate.” The section consists principally of commentary on Talcott Parsons and his critics, and is not accorded much prominence in Wrong's overall argument. Wrong ultimately concludes – not very helpfully -- that “whether power should be regarded as a zero-sum phenomenon or as a collective resource does not appear to be a genuine theoretical issue in which two incompatible views confront one another” (Wrong 1995, p. 247). His position is that both views are true, because both shared power and power-at-the-expense-of-another are permanent elements of social and political life. That both elements are always present is certainly the case, but a zero-sum theory of power will conceive the relation between cooperation and conflict very differently than does a variable-sum theory; so there is a genuine theoretical issue at stake.

Peter Morriss's *Power: A Philosophical Analysis* argues throughout for a “power-to” understanding of power – power as principally an “ability” rather than “influence” concept. The capacity to affect the actions or thoughts of others is not in Morriss's view an essential

component of power; he restricts the locution “power *over*” others to specific (indeed sadistic) cases in which one’s principal objective is “kick others around.” In a brief section late in the book titled, “Is Power Constant-Sum?” (i.e. zero-sum) Morriss answers that it is not. “Power, itself, is never constant-sum,” he states, but admits that there are occasional circumstances in which “one person can only gain power when another loses it” (Morriss 1987, pp. 33-34, 91-92). The question is not treated in much depth, and indeed hardly even arises as a theoretical problem given Morriss’s description of power as exclusively “power-to.” Whether and when one’s gain of power entails equivalent loss for another emerges as a serious theoretical question only if one is equally concerned with “power-to” and “power-over,” – i.e., with the multiple ways in which the “power-over” of one actor affects the “power-to” of another.

Franco Crespi’s critique of the zero-sum view in *Social Action and Power* is also brief but somewhat more promising in that it does incorporate “power-over,” or what Crespi calls “outer power,” into the argument. Crespi distinguishes “outer power” from what he calls “inner power” – essentially a human being’s capacity actively to form and maintain a coherent personal identity. Turning to the zero-sum question, Crespi argues that “the zero-sum rule does not apply to inner power, since the increase of an individual’s inner power is to the advantage of others.” For “outer power” (power as it affects others), whether or not power is zero-sum “will depend on its concrete forms”; outer power “can either be exercised to maintain the members of society in their dependence on power interests, thus giving way to an effective subtraction of power”; or “it can enhance the inner and outer power all members of society by increasing resources for the individuals’ education as well as their chances of participating in the decision-making processes.” In general, then, whether power is zero-sum or positive-sum will depend “on the conditions on which power is grounded and on the ways in which power is exercised” (Crespi

1992, pp. 100, 103, 110). This is certainly the appropriate starting-point for a variable-sum theory of power, but one would like to know more specifically *what these conditions are*, what “concrete forms” and practices enhance power for all and how they do so.

Anthony Giddens’s critique of the zero-sum view of power in *The Constitution of Society* likewise comes across as a not-fully-delivered promise. Giddens’s overall purpose in the work, which sets forth his theory of so-called “structuration,” is to reconcile active human agency with the existence of persisting social structures that shape and constrain action. “Structuration” refers to the way in which human agents actively choose and reproduce structures over time rather than being passively subjected to them. Power becomes a key concept in this attempt to reconcile agency and structure because power refers to the ability of an agent “to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events”; power is precisely this “transformative capacity” (Giddens 1984, pp. 14-15). Elsewhere Giddens defines power as “the capability of actors to secure outcomes where the realization of those outcomes depends upon the agency of others” (Giddens 1979, p. 93), a formulation that specifically includes both “power-to” and “power over” as definitionally necessary elements.

Giddens proceeds to note that power as thus defined is not necessarily zero-sum. He accepts Bachrach and Baratz’s “second face of power” but criticizes their argument “because it preserves a zero-sum conception of power” (Giddens 1984, p. 15). Power involves constraint, but constraint and enablement go hand in hand: “Power is the means of getting things done, very definitely enablement as well as constraint” (1984, p. 175). Giddens further observes that “Power is not necessarily linked with conflict in the sense of either division of interest or active struggle, and power is not inherently oppressive...Power is the capacity to achieve outcomes; whether or not these are connected to purely sectional interests is not germane to its definition.



Power is not, as such, an obstacle to freedom or emancipation but is their very medium – although it would be foolish, of course, to ignore its constraining properties” (1984, p. 257).

These are all important observations about power. But Giddens’s discussion remains at a very high level of generality. That the exercise of power by one agent both constrains and enables the action of another agent – i.e. that it does not *only* constrain another’s action – is an essential corrective to zero-sum conceptions of power that recognize only the constraint. But Giddens’s general observation here would hold for any type of social and political order; for even under plantation slavery it can be asserted that the slaveowner’s power “enables” the slave to accomplish certain tasks while at the same time “constraining” the slave in quite severe ways. Giddens would more effectively challenge the zero-sum understanding of power if he described whether and why some ways of exercising power (and/or some structures of power) are *less enabling* or *more enabling* in their overall impact on another’s continued capacity to choose and act. Such a description is certainly possible within the framework Giddens lays down, but he does not himself provide it.

Mark Haugaard’s recent article “Democracy, Political Power, and Authority” (Haugaard 2010) is notable here because Haugaard begins to fill in what was missing in Giddens: i.e., to describe *specific* kind of structures that are *more* collectively enabling than others. Haugaard’s theme in the essay is the particular type of “power-over” characteristic of rule-governed democratic elections. He argues that what differentiates democratic from predatory states is “the containment of conflict within consensual parameters. In a democratic system, power over is accepted as legitimate precisely because it does not entail predation or domination. Democratic power constitutes a blend of consensual constrained conflict.” In a rule-governed democratic contest, rivals agree on the rules, and the loser of a particular contest consents to the defeat –

rather than violently challenging the results – because the rules themselves preserve all actors’ capacity for future action. In a non-democratic power contest, if A defeats B, B may very well “remain subaltern for good” whereas under democratic rules, “B may lose this time but win next time”; thus both A and B have “an interest in reproduction of the democratic rules of the game.” It is in this sense, Haugaard argues, that in a functioning democratic system “the total power of the system has been increased – political power is positive-sum for the system as whole” (Haugaard 2010, pp. 1052-1056). It should be noted here that Haugaard’s argument for collective empowerment under democracy presupposes the *real* possibility that losers in one round can hope for success in another, not just the formal right to vote and nominate candidates for office. Where democratic systems produce permanent winners and permanent losers (see Read 2009b), the case is altered and the capacity of a democratic system to expand power for all participants becomes doubtful.

Turning to the sphere of international relations theory, where the zero-sum conception of power seems most deeply entrenched: here too the zero-sum assumption has been persuasively criticized but not yet effectively replaced. In “Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies” (Baldwin 1979) and “Power and International Relations” (Baldwin 2002) David Baldwin challenges the assumption that a nation’s power in international politics is always reducible to its war-winning capacity (the Realists’ argument, also the root of their claim that power is zero-sum). Drawing from the work of Robert Dahl, Lasswell and Kaplan, and other power theorists from outside the subdiscipline of IR theory, Baldwin argues that power is always context-dependent: one cannot attribute or quantify power in global terms, without specifying who has power over whom, to do what, in what situation, using what means, for what purposes. Realists’ attempt to reduce all forms of national power to military power, Baldwin claims,

ignores all these contextual factors; superior military resources may be very effective in some circumstances and worse than useless in another.

Baldwin's critique of the assumption that all power can be reduced to war-winning capacity leads him, toward the end of both essays, to take up the zero-sum question. His treatment of the question is clearly stated but frustratingly brief (two pages). Baldwin notes that "scholars of international relations have distinguished between conflict and cooperation. Power, it has often been argued, has to do with conflict but not with cooperation." Baldwin questions this assumption, drawing support from Thomas Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* which showed that "most, if not all, interesting international political situations involved mixtures of both conflictual and cooperative elements." He observes that "despite Schelling, nuclear weapons, and ever-increasing awareness of the fragility of the earth's ecosystem, one still finds references to international politics as a zero-sum game in some or all respects." He argues that to conceive of a political situation as a zero-sum game "virtually assures that cooperative dimensions will be overlooked." Baldwin concludes his brief discussion by noting that a non-zero-sum conception of power "permits us to describe situations in which A's ability to get B to do X increases *simultaneously* with B's ability to get A to do X" and that "mixed-motive game models almost always provide a more accurate description of real-world situations than do zero-sum models" (Baldwin 1979, pp. 186-187).

Baldwin's critique is on the mark, but remains a critical response to Realist IR theory rather than a fully-worked out variable-sum theory of power in international politics. It would be helpful, not only to note the abstract possibility of A and B each increasing their power over one another in ways that benefit both, but to describe what such relations look like in practice. That rival nations may share some common interests (like avoiding nuclear annihilation or ecological

collapse) is a necessary condition for any cooperative exercise of power, but certainly doesn't guarantee it. It would be helpful to compare zero-sum and variable-sum explanations for why rival nations (and rival factions in a civil conflict) often fail to realize their latent common interests. Finally, in noting that the zero-sum view "virtually assures that cooperative dimensions will be overlooked," Baldwin suggests (but doesn't directly state) that zero-sum and variable-sum understandings of power *shape political action* in very different ways. This is an important theme that deserves further treatment.

Perhaps the most sustained and detailed challenge, within international relations theory, to the Realist view of power is the interdependence theory initiated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in *Power and Interdependence* (Keohane and Nye 1977) and developed further by Keohane, Nye, and others in subsequent works over the last three decades (Keohane 1984; for the debate over interdependence theory see Baldwin 1993). *Power and Interdependence* argues that whether or not the Realist assumption holds, i.e. whether power is reducible to war-winning capacity, depends on the specific conditions that characterize the international system at a given time and issue context. A state's concern for military security sometimes does, and sometimes does not, take precedence over social and economic issues; in many important cases military force is "irrelevant to resolving disagreements." This may occur, either where military power is roughly balanced (as in "mutually assured destruction") or where for one reason or another, the threat of military force is ineffective, as in international trade relations, monetary regimes, or among partners in a strategic alliance. Under such conditions (which the authors call "complex interdependence") states can reciprocally either help or harm one another through their willingness or refusal to cooperate. The authors emphasize that states' incentive to cooperate in certain respects does not eliminate conflict, which indeed can increase in certain respects under

interdependence; nor does power itself become less important than before. But the possession and exercise of power takes different forms and employs different instruments under conditions of interdependence than it does where military superiority rules the day (Keohane and Nye 1977, pp. 7, 25).

As summarized thus far Keohane's and Nye's theory of power under interdependence seems an extended version of Baldwin's point about the context-dependency of power. The authors (and Keohane in particular, in later works) draw out this point in far greater detail than Baldwin does. But unlike Baldwin, who – briefly but effectively – uses the occasion to argue against a zero-sum understanding of power, Keohane and Nye do not take this step, but instead leave hanging the question of whether or not one's gain of power is, or is not, inherently another's loss under conditions of interdependence. (Nor does Keohane address the zero-sum question in his subsequent study *After Hegemony* though he discusses the nature of power at length. See Keohane 1984, pp. 20-24.) The Realist reduction of power to war-winning capacity virtually guarantees that one's gain of power entails another's loss. But the zero-sum premise might still hold even if power is not simply reducible to military force – as is clear from the “faces of power” debate noted above, where those who staked out the most unequivocal zero-sum positions did not necessarily ground that assumption on a power-holder's threat of violent action. That under conditions of complex interdependence one finds a mix of conflict and cooperation does not tell us whether power is zero-sum or variable-sum, unless we also know whether cooperation and conflict both count as power, or only conflict. Baldwin's argument for a variable-sum understanding of power was premised on the inseparability of cooperation and conflict in most cases. One might use the empirical description provided by Keohane and Nye to make the case that power is not inherently zero-sum, but the authors themselves do not do so.

Joseph Nye's recent work on the role of "soft power" in international politics (a nation's capacity to attract with its ideals rather than merely threaten with its military or purchase with its wealth) continues the interdependence theory's critique of excessive preoccupation with military power (Nye 2004). But to argue that one can exercise power by swaying hearts and minds is not the same as arguing that power can be collectively gained or collectively lost; some theorists of power (including Lukes and Foucault, in different ways) provide a radically zero-sum interpretation of precisely this type of power. (Elsewhere I argue that Foucault's description of power is zero-sum despite its "productive" character. See Read 2009a, pp. 216-224). Nor (to my knowledge), in the more than three decades since *Power and Interdependence* was published, have *any* theorists of international relations (Baldwin's brief remarks excepted) made an explicit case for a variable-sum theory of power in international politics.

The commentaries above do not pretend comprehensively to survey all works and lines of argument that challenge the zero-sum view of power. Dozens of other theorists and works could have been substituted for the ones mentioned here. My purpose instead is to pick a few illustrations of a larger pattern I have found in the power literature as a whole: that explicit challenges to the zero-sum understanding of power tend to be brief, often very general, sometimes focused on one or two specific problems or themes, and rarely rival in richness or breadth those who theorize on the assumption that one's gain of power is inherently another's loss. Of the works sampled above, I find Haugaard's examination of democracy and Baldwin's critique of Realist international relations theory to offer the most promising leads for a comprehensive alternative to the zero-sum view. I turn next to two theorists who have worked out alternative views in some detail, and whose theories of power are simultaneously insightful and flawed.

## **Parsons: expanding collective power**

The most fully-worked out case for the variable-sum nature of power remains that of Talcott Parsons – this despite its age (more than half a century), its significant limitations, and Parsons’s sometimes-unreadable prose (Parsons 1957; 1963). The principal strengths of Parsons’s variable-sum argument are: 1) that it attempts to account for three basic possibilities – mutual gains of power, mutual losses of power, and equilibrium (zero-sum) cases where power gains equal power losses – all within the framework of a comprehensive variable-sum theory; 2) that it does not ignore hierarchy, inequality of power, and coercion, but instead incorporates them into the theory; and 3) that it explores (if imperfectly) the important but elusive parallels between the creation and distribution of power, and the creation and distribution of wealth, money, and credit. Parsons also appears principally responsible for introducing the terms “zero-sum,” “variable-sum,” “power-to” and “power-over” into the power literature (Parsons 1957, p. 139), usages subsequently adapted by many writers on power including Parsons’s critics.

One limitation of Parsons’s argument is that it focuses exclusively on a single, admittedly important, type of power: legitimate political power possessed by the central government of a modern nation-state. This is not a fatal flaw in the theory, however, because Parsons’s mode of analysis can be adapted to other forms of collective power, such as the power of a large private corporation or quasi-governmental entities like the International Monetary Fund. The far more significant (and interconnected) problems with the theory are 1) that it is concerned exclusively with *growth in the power of the collective as a whole*; whether and how more power “for the system” translates into *more power for the individual human beings* who participate in that system is left unexplained; 2) that the theory assumes collective power will be used to pursue

collective goals, but cannot distinguish between collective power for genuinely shared goals and collective power harnessed for the sectional interests of a privileged group, masquerading as the interests of the whole; and 3) that the process by which collective power is created and deployed under Parsons's theory could describe a powerful oligarchy as well as a democracy, even though Parsons himself frames the argument for a democratic setting.

There is a very extensive critical literature on Parsons's theory of power that I will not try to summarize here (for critique see Lukes 2005, pp. 30-35; for a more sympathetic assessment see Wrong 1995, pp. 238-247). I will only observe that, while all of the shortcomings of Parsons's argument have been copiously identified, nothing yet has replaced it as a fully-worked-out case for the variable-sum character of power. Parsons's argument has been improved upon in specific respects by Niklas Luhmann, among others (Luhmann 1975), but not in ways that overcome its basic limitations: for Luhmann, as for Parsons, expansion of power accrues to the system as a whole; whether and how that aggregate increase translates into gains or losses of power for individuals, households, economic classes, political parties, and other agents is unclear.

Parsons first conceived his variable-sum theory of power in response to C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), which argued that real power in American society was becoming increasingly concentrated in a relatively small, privileged, and irresponsible class. In "The Distribution of Power in American Society" (1957) Parsons disputed Mills' claim, partly on empirical grounds, but also by challenging Mills's understanding of power as such. Mills, according to Parsons, applies "what may be called the 'zero-sum' concept; power, that is to say, is power *over* others... To Mills, power is not a facility for the performance of function in and on behalf of the society as a system, but is interpreted exclusively as a facility for getting what one



group, the holders of power, wants by preventing another group, the ‘outs,’ from getting what it wants.” Parsons admits that distributional conflicts where one gains power at another’s expense are part of the picture, just as competition over the distribution of wealth is an element of every economic system. “There is obviously a distributive aspect of wealth and it is in a sense true that the wealth of one person or group by definition cannot be also possessed by another person or group...But what of the positive function of wealth and of the conditions of its production? ...[Wealth] is a generalized class of facilities available to units of the society – individuals and various types and levels of collectivities – for whatever use may be important to them.” Parsons insists that the case of power is parallel: power, like wealth, must be *created* before it can be distributed, and societies create power in order to pursue collective, not sectional interests. “Power is a generalized facility or resource in the society. It has to be divided or allocated, but it also has to be produced and it has collective as well as distributive functions. It is the capacity to mobilize the resources of the society for the attainment of goals for which a general ‘public’ commitment has been made, or may be made” (Parsons 1957, pp. 139-140).

Before taking up Parsons’s power-wealth analogy we should note in passing that, even if Parsons is right about the nature of power, this does not disprove Mills’s contention about the increasing power in America of a small group at the expense of the rest. A variable-sum theory of power has to be able to explain power-elites, oligarchies, dictatorships, slave systems, monarchies, and the like – for all of these have existed or continue to exist *somewhere* in the world -- though it would explain them differently than would a zero-sum theory. On a variable-sum theory, for instance, the increased power of an irresponsible elite might go hand in hand with collective *loss* of power for the social and political order as a whole, and for most of the human beings participating in it. It is unfortunate that Parsons’s theory of power emerged under

circumstances that conflated his challenge to the zero-sum view of power with his defense of one specific social and political order. A variable-sum theory of power is worthless if it functions only as justification for an established regime.

In “On the Concept of Political Power,” (1963) Parsons attempts systematically to elaborate the wealth-power analogy first introduced in his critique of Mills. He compares the political system to the economic system, the function of power to the function of money, and the creation of *new* power to the creation and expansion of credit through the practice of banking. Just as, in the economic system, individual depositors trust a bank to lend out their savings to firms that will (it is hoped) undertake new investments that expand the economy in ways that benefit everyone; so too, in the political system, citizens trust their government with new increments of power, committing themselves to obey its laws and support its policies, in the expectation that this expanded power will be used better to realize goals shared by all. Coercion plays a necessary but subordinate role in both the economic and political systems: if banks could not insist on the contractual repayment of loan obligations (backed by legal sanctions) they could not create credit or expand investment; if governments could not insist on citizens’ obeying their laws and policies – enforced where necessary through coercion – they could not effectively pursue collective goals (Parsons 1963, pp. 125-139).

Even though (he argues) both wealth and power are inherently variable-sum, Parsons observes that both the economic system and the political system can sometimes settle into a zero-sum equilibrium state; in this way he accounts for zero-sum phenomena as a special case within an overarching variable-sum theory. A static economic system, one in which net new investment was zero and where every new commitment was canceled out by the extinction of an older commitment, would be one in which every gain of wealth for one entailed a corresponding loss

for another – though participants in a static economy still enjoy the fruits of *past* acts of wealth-creation. A political system in which citizens and office-holders carried out their functions in purely routine ways, without creative leadership or new approaches to problems, would be the zero-sum equivalent of the static economy; under these circumstances, one’s gain of political power is another’s loss, though all still depend upon the continued benefits of past acts of power-creation. But just as healthy economic systems depend over time on net new investments, effective political systems must from time to time break the “circular flow” and “bring about net additions to the amount of power in the system.” This can happen when there exists a general sentiment that “something ought to be done,” and to make this possible “the collectivity and its members are ready to assume new binding obligations” which in turn enable leaders, acting in non-routine ways, to “create additions to the total supply of power.” Parsons points to the New Deal expansion of government’s role in the economy as a prime example of power-creation in this sense (Parsons 1963, pp. 130-133).

The same effect can occur in reverse: economies can shrink, sometimes precipitously, when confidence disappears – as in the classic case of a run on the banking system, where in panic too many depositors insist on withdrawing their savings at once and the credit system collapses. The political counterpart of a run on the bank occurs when trust in government is quickly eroded, and “a ‘deflationary’ [political] spiral sets in, in a pattern analogous to that of a financial panic.” Parsons specifically mentions McCarthyism of the 1950s (still recent at the time of his writing) as an example of “a deflationary spiral in the political field” because it undermined the trust necessary for legitimate political power to function (Parsons 1963, pp. 127, 135). Under circumstances of demagogic accusation, political power is not merely redistributed but also shrinks on the whole.

Parsons's argument is compelling in many respects, and some of its elements remain essential building blocks for any attempt to construct an improved variable-sum theory. The parallel Parsons draws between power and money (or wealth, credit) is certainly overdrawn, but insightful all the same. (For critique of the power-wealth analogy see Kindleberger 1970; Baldwin 1971.) It is actually Parsons's failure adequately to follow through on the implications of his own power-money analogy that reveals the greatest shortcoming of his variable-sum account of power. In first introducing the analogy in his critique of Mills (Parsons 1957), Parsons remarked that wealth was a cooperatively-generated resource "available to units of the society – individuals and various types and levels of collectivities." Wealth, in other words, is a resource available both to the political community as a whole – the largest of all collective actors -- *and* to individuals, households, and smaller collective enterprises. Nowhere in Parsons's theory of power does he make an equivalent theoretical move: political power, unlike wealth, remains for him a purely collective resource. He never explains how increased power for the "system as a whole" translates into increased power for classes, parties, smaller collectivities, or individuals. This would be like an economist who could track increases or decreases in GDP, but who was unable to say anything meaningful about median household income.

Voters play a subordinate, almost backstage role in Parsons's account of political power. Citizens' function is to create power for the government, and then to obey its dictates: a scenario more Hobbesian than democratic. He is unclear about whether citizens, individually or collectively, *exercise power* in any way except by entrusting it to their government. Or if an active and vigilant role for citizens is somehow assumed in Parsons's theory, he certainly fails to emphasize it; and the role he does emphasize, that citizens incur "binding obligations" to obey the law – failing which they will be subjected to coercion – readily finds its functional equivalent

in nondemocratic orders. Binding obligations are necessary to the creation of power, but whether citizens *bind themselves in order to empower themselves*, or *bind themselves in order to empower someone else*, is fundamentally unclear in Parsons's theory.

Perhaps the most telling limitation of Parsons's theory of power is how readily it lends itself to analysis of power-creation in political orders as far from democratic as can be imagined. In *The Sources of Social Power* Michael Mann provides a speculative reconstruction of the first emergence of the state in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, China, and elsewhere around 3000 B.C. His narrative draws explicitly from Parsons's theory of power-creation. Mann follows Parsons in rejecting the notion that power is inherently zero-sum: "Parsons noted correctly a second collective aspect of power, whereby persons in cooperation can enhance their joint power over third parties or over nature...In pursuit of their goals, humans enter into cooperative, collective power relations with one another." Mann describes the initial creation of centrally-controlled, militarily and economically dynamic states as grand Parsonian acts of power-creation. But who actually benefited from this enormous creation of new power? Mann speculates that the average human being – i.e. those not members of the ruling elite – were big losers on the exchange: most individuals found themselves forced into a cage, "constrained to accept civilization" by "*the closing of the escape route*" (emphasis in original); "they were trapped into particular social and territorial relationships, forcing them to intensify those relationships rather than evade them." Thus for Mann, "functionality and exploitation" were inseparable in the first grand drama of political power-generation (Mann 1986, pp. 6-7, 75).

If Mann's use of Parsons's theory of power here is a plausible one – as it probably is – then what Parsons means when he speaks of the collective generation of power to pursue collective goals has nothing inherently to do with the democratic empowerment of citizens, or

indeed with any necessary benefit for most of the human beings caught up in that collective. If Parsonian collective power does take a democratic form, it is so only by the accident of historical setting.

### **Arendt: power and public life**

Hannah Arendt has sometimes been categorized along with Parsons as offering variable-sum, consensus-focused understandings of power (see for example Lukes 2005, pp. 33-35). But Arendt's understanding of power is actually quite different from Parsons's. Their theories only resemble one another the way whales resemble sharks: both are large finned creatures that swim in the sea. While Parsons explicitly offers a variable-sum theory of power – i.e., that the aggregate quantity of power can under various circumstances grow, shrink, or remain static -- Arendt's discussion of power not only does not use that terminology, but is quite remote from it in substance. Her concept of power more resembles an on-off switch: power is either present or it is not; it does not readily lend itself to variations of degree. On the whole Parsons offers a much more complete account of how power is generated and used than Arendt, whose description of power is in certain respects remote from common usage, and on some points self-contradictory.

But Arendt's discussion of power has the merit of highlighting precisely what is least developed in Parsons: the genuinely *public* character of power in a still-vibrant republican system of government. What Parsons relegates to backdrop Arendt places at center stage. Arendt unconvincingly substitutes one type of power for the whole of the field, and ignores or mischaracterizes the rest. But that one element – *the idea of the public* -- is valuable enough to merit her searchlight, especially today when the very idea of the public appears endangered (at least in the United States). The genuine meaning of “public” does not refer to something

grudgingly conceded to the less fortunate (the way many wealthy Americans now think about public schools) but precisely the opposite: the space where *all* citizens come together and recognize themselves as belonging together in political community. Arendt arguably emphasizes this valuable but fragile idea better than any other 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher.

For Arendt, “power” and “public” are practically synonymous terms. “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence...Power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (Arendt 1958, p. 200). Elsewhere she remarks that power is “an end in itself” but intends by this something very different from how that phrase is typically used; she means that this public form of life is valuable for its own sake, above and beyond any particular decision or law enacted under its auspices. Thus she admits that “governments pursue policies and employ their power to achieve prescribed goals,” but emphasizes that “the power structure itself” (by which she means this coming-together of human beings) “precedes and outlasts all aims” (Arendt 1970, p. 68). An alternative way of making this point would be to reflect that, when anyone takes a public action in a republic – whether it be the high action of a president signing a bill or a citizen’s modest act of voting – he or she obviously has particular purposes in mind (enacting a specific policy, supporting a specific candidate); but at the same time is also *acting to preserve this form of public action* itself. When one votes for a particular candidate, for instance, one is also – consciously or unconsciously – “voting” for the continuation of public elections as a practice. It is in this sense that for Arendt power – by which she means *public* power – is an end in itself.

An obvious counterargument here would be that many forms of power -- or at least what most of us call power -- are far from public and open in this sense; the powerful often prefer to

keep their power hidden, and sometimes direct it toward ostensibly public purposes that in reality are not public at all. This objection, well-founded though it is, can prevent us from appreciating Arendt's insight. Even if she mistakes the rule for the exception – for considered historically, publicly-accountable power is rare, relatively recent, and fragile – the exception may sometimes be more valuable than the rule.

Jürgen Habermas, in his generally sympathetic critique of what he calls Arendt's "communications concept of power," assimilates Arendt's understanding of power to his own theoretical ideal of the rational pursuit of communicative consensus (Habermas 1977, p. 77). Arendt does identify power with "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert," (Arendt 1970, p. 64) which sounds like consensus. But in fact Arendt is completely uninterested in consensus on matters of policy. The only consensus that she cares about is the original agreement that this particular assortment of human beings, possessing unique and widely differing purposes, experiences, and capacities, *belong together* as a people with a shared history and a shared public life. Beyond that she appears untroubled by citizens' pursuit of diverse and conflicting goals, as long as this is done in ways that reinforce public life, or power as she calls it.

Thus her conception of power is able to do what Parsons's does not: make the transition from *collective* to *individual* activity and goals. Recall that Parsons was able convincingly to explain how the aggregate power "of the system" can be expanded, but left it unclear what this implies for the power of individuals or smaller groups. Arendt, like Parsons, treats power as a collective rather than individual capacity: "Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (Arendt 1970, p. 64). But for Arendt this collective property includes as an essential component what she calls "action," which *can* be individual, and which indeed she treats as the means by which



individual human beings display precisely their individual uniqueness through their contribution to public life and its shared fund of stories and heroes (Arendt 1958, pp. 7-21). What Arendt calls individual capacity for action I would categorize as a form of individual power. It has no equivalent in Parsons's account of power.

This intense concern for the idea of the public is the strength of Arendt's treatment of power. The weaknesses begin, and quickly multiply, when she compares her own treatment of power to other literature on the subject, and attempts to place power in relation to such other phenomena as command, obedience, hierarchy, and especially violence. She describes a supposedly overwhelming consensus among other writers that power and violence are one and the same. Max Weber defines power as an actor's capacity to realize his will "even against the resistance of others"; Arendt claims (inaccurately) that this identifies power with violence (Arendt 1970, p. 60). Every writer on power who speaks of command and obedience, or of power in connection with domination, Arendt claims, has also identified power and violence. Arendt's careless summary of the work of other theorists, and her own quick conflation of violence, domination, hierarchy, command, and obedience, does little to bring her treatment of power into dialogue with other theorists of power – if indeed this was her intention.

Arendt insists not only that power is different from violence – a reasonable claim – but that "power and violence are opposites... To speak of non-violent power is actually redundant" (Arendt 1970, p. 71). This would imply that the threat or use of violence never contributes anything to power, and that power never makes use of violence, an implausible claim that Arendt herself systematically contradicts in one place after another. Thus power and violence are wholly distinct phenomena, but "usually appear together." The vastly superior American military (violence) found itself defeated by Vietnamese guerillas who were "ill-equipped but well-

organized” (power) – except that the guerillas, of course, made very effective use of violence. Totalitarian rulers resort to terror and torture when their power has evaporated – violence stepping in to take the place of power, its opposite -- except that in doing so the ruler employs a “power basis – the secret police and its net of informers.” Arendt explains these baffling statements by claiming that the ideas of power and violence “hardly ever correspond to watertight compartments in the real world,” though these watertight compartments were of her own making (Arendt 1970, 65-69). Recall the problem identified in the first part of this essay: analysts of power admitting that conflict and cooperation are mixed together in politics, but nevertheless insisting that they are essentially different and that “power” refers exclusively to the conflictual components of a relation. Arendt makes the same conceptual move in reverse, with results at least equally implausible.

Steven Lukes considers Arendt’s definition of power “rationally defensible” but criticizes Arendt for describing power in ways “which are out of line with the central meanings of ‘power’ as traditionally understood and with the concerns that have always centrally preoccupied students of power” (Lukes 2005, p. 34). But that criticism partly misses the mark. The type of power Arendt emphasizes – power as the living creation of a self-conscious public – is very important, and has been at least one of the themes that have occupied theorists of power, though certainly not the only one. But the power phenomena that preoccupy Lukes (and others in the “faces of power” debate) – domination, inequality, ideological manipulation, exclusion of significant issues from public deliberation – are of course also extremely important. The real missed opportunity in Arendt’s discussion of power lies in the way it bars the path to any synthesis of, or even communication between, these equally important concerns and approaches.

And Arendt's conceptual roadblocks do little to advance understanding of precisely what she values most: that form of power that is the genuine and spontaneous product of a free people who value public life and public action. She speaks about the emergence of public life like a kind of creation *ex nihilo* – a miraculous and mysterious spark. In fact the theory and practice of public power emerged only with great difficulty, and over immense periods of historical time, out of other, less savory forms of power – forms that the public variety partly displaces, but to which it also remains connected and rooted. These older, more coercive, unequal, and exploitive forms of power remain at work even where the idea of the public is strongest, and it cannot be taken for granted that the public elements in this mixed brew of power will always keep the upper hand. The real miracle is not that public life appears out of nowhere, essentially different from what precedes and surrounds it – Arendt's spark of life scenario – but that it ever emerged at all, and developed its own qualities, despite its kinship with the harsher forms of power that gave it birth. If we are serious about understanding and perpetuating the ideal of public life and genuinely public power, we need to understand in what respects power changes, and in what respects it remains the same, when it undergoes this (never complete) transformation into *public* power in the service of public life. My hope is that a variable-sum theory of power, one more plausible than the versions advanced by Parsons and Arendt, will advance our understanding in this respect.

### **Conclusion: criteria for a better theory**

We use the idea of power both to describe the social and political world, and to orient our action within it. To change our understanding of power is thus, to a certain degree, to change the political and social world itself.

To date the most extensive and richly-detailed descriptions of power have assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that increased power for one necessarily entails an equivalent loss of power for another. There is no question that some important and enduring phenomena of the social and political world lend support to this assumption. But the zero-sum assumption cannot easily account for the peculiar blend of conflicting and shared interest, of competition and cooperation, which characterizes most important social and political relationships. (Of course the same is true in reverse for attempts to ground power on pure cooperation.) The zero-sum approach to power may acknowledge the fact of cooperation and shared interest, but treats them as phenomena essentially different from power – even when they are inseparable components of relationships admittedly involving power. This artificial dichotomy in practice treats conflict as the active and dynamic element and relegates cooperation to a passive, taken-for-granted background.

The principal argument in favor of a variable-sum understanding of power (whereby power can be collectively gained, collectively lost, but also sometimes gained at another's expense) is that such an approach promises to be more faithful to the entire range of phenomena and to the complexity of relationships. But to date no adequate, fully-worked-out variable-sum treatment of power has appeared. Most theorists of power who challenge the zero-sum view do so briefly, identifying flaws in the zero-sum logic rather than offering an alternative theory. The two most prominent exceptions, Talcott Parsons and Hannah Arendt, present extensive alternative accounts of power that are insightful but flawed.

I want to close by identifying what I see as the principal requirements to be met by any improved variable-sum theory of power. Much of this recapitulates central points of the critiques

presented above. Of course identifying requirements for a better theory is not the same as actually delivering a better theory, but it is a useful first step.

1) An adequate variable-sum theory must account for both the conflictual and cooperative elements in a power relation, and to facilitate description of the ways in which parties in conflict sometimes actively cooperate to realize common interests and prevent common losses.

Merely establishing that parties in conflict share limited common interests does not by itself demonstrate a cooperative exercise of power. For these interests may fail to be realized; or they may be realized entirely through the action of one party, on that party's terms – as when a victor in war offers “generous terms” to the defeated rival, or when a slaveholder feeds his slaves well. Benefits received entirely through the act of another do not demonstrate that the recipient possesses much power.

2) An adequate variable-sum theory must be able to describe highly unequal, exploitive, or violent relations of power, though it would explain them differently than would a zero-sum theory; it cannot restrict its theorizing to relatively equal or cooperative instances of power. Nor should it present itself as more “optimistic” in its outlook or predictions than the zero-sum approach. Within the framework of a variable-sum understanding of power, zero-sum outcomes remain real possibilities in particular contexts. The negative-sum outcome -- all sides losing power -- also remains a permanent possibility, and might in some cases be *more likely* than mutual gains of power. A variable-sum theory of power must keep all of these possibilities in play, and not display any general bias toward one type of outcome as opposed to the others. Whether positive-sum, negative-sum, or zero-sum factors predominate depends instead on the specific power relationships under examination.

3) For these same reasons, an adequate variable-sum theory of power would have to serve the purpose of critique, not only legitimation, of existing power structures. From the general premise that power is not altogether harmful, that it may sometimes be necessary and even positively good, it does not follow that one should refrain from challenging a particular regime or system. A variable-sum theory of power can indeed be used to argue in favor of preserving an existing system or practice. But the same premise – that power is not always harmful or oppressive -- can also be used to justify the power-from-below exercised by those seeking to reform or replace that system or practice.

4) A variable-sum theory of power cannot limit its attention to gains or losses of power “on the whole” without explaining how those aggregate gains or losses translate into increases or decreases of power for individuals, households, classes, and other agents smaller than the whole. (Recall the critique of Parsons, whose variable-sum theory of power could not take this step.) It is possible to imagine enormous increases in the aggregate power of a system that places actual power in the hands of very few and disempowers the rest. That would not be a positive-sum power outcome in the sense I’ve employed in this essay.

It is tempting to lurch to the opposite extreme and conclude that a genuinely positive-sum outcome must be one that literally increases the power of everyone – all winners and no losers, a kind of Pareto-optimality in the realm of power. This sets far too high a bar. To insist that no redistribution of power was justified unless everyone, including those currently most privileged and powerful, gained (or at least did not lose) power would have the practical effect of legitimating every existing regime and condemning every attempt at reform, however modest. If that is where variable-sum theorizing leads, we should cancel the project immediately and settle for the zero-sum view as the lesser evil.

I do not believe that variable-sum theorizing necessarily goes in that direction. But this does raise the question: how would such a theory, in attempting to describe what it means by collective empowerment, steer between the extremes of increased aggregate power that accrues to very few (a possible outcome) and increased power that accrues to literally everyone (an impossible outcome)? An adequate variable-sum theory would have to address this thorny problem in some way.

5) Finally, a variable-sum theory of power should enable us better to describe the (historically rare) form of power characteristic of rule-constrained democratic competition. In particular, such a theory should explain whether democratic rules merely redistribute political power, or *both redistribute and expand* political power; how the system rewards “winners” with public power while preserving the future power of “losers” (and how permanent winners and losers disrupt this effect); whether and in what ways rival powers actively cooperate to preserve the democratic system – or alternatively, fail to do so and put democracy at risk; and how the peculiar public form of power that characterizes democracy remains rooted in, and linked to, the harsher, less public forms of power from which it emerged.

A variable-sum theory that effectively meets these criteria, or even one or two of them, would mark an advance over existing literature challenging the zero-sum view of power. I welcome the reopening of this old but still important debate in the current issue of the *Journal of Political Power*.

### **Notes on contributor**

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