

# Three dimensions of power

**Interviewee: Steven Lukes**  
**Interview by Nigel Warburton**



*Nigel Warburton: Power is a major theme in some philosophers' work, and it seems to be a major theme in politics too: it's something that people are very much concerned with, either gaining or keeping hold of. But it's not always clear exactly what it is. You've given a very clear analysis of three types of power in your work. But I wonder if you could just begin by very generally sketching what those are, and then perhaps we could flesh out with some examples, each one of those three.*

**Steven Lukes:** Yes, you call them three 'types', but actually I use the metaphor of dimensions. So, I think of these as three dimensions of power, the point being that if you look at power one-dimensionally, you only see a limited range of things. And if you look at it two-dimensionally, you

see more. And if you see it three-dimensionally, so I claim, you see further and deeper into the phenomenon. So, that's the way I think about it.

*Before we get onto the three dimensions I'm intrigued to know whether you think that every instance of an exertion of power potentially has these three dimensions?*

No, I think that the phenomenon we call power can reach more or less deeply into social human relations. Some forms of power, some exertions of power, are relatively straightforward and on the surface. What thinking about power three-dimensionally does is that it enables you to see into relationships that are deeper and more puzzling.

*Let's start with the simplest case of power. All of us have experienced occasions when we've been, as it were, victims of somebody with power over us. And it's usually quite unpleasant. It usually feels like somebody is just squashing you.*

I think the natural and simplest way to think about power is in terms of a conflict: a conflict between, let's say, at its simplest, two people, in which one person prevails over another person against that second person's will. The simplest kind of power is just

I win against you, maybe by coercing you. So, let's say in the simplest case I threaten you, I say, "Your money or your life!" Then that is very straightforward: two people's wills are in conflict and one prevails over the other. That is the simplest case.

*Is that simpler than the one where I overpower you physically? Because that seems to me the basic instance of power, the physical encounter between people.*

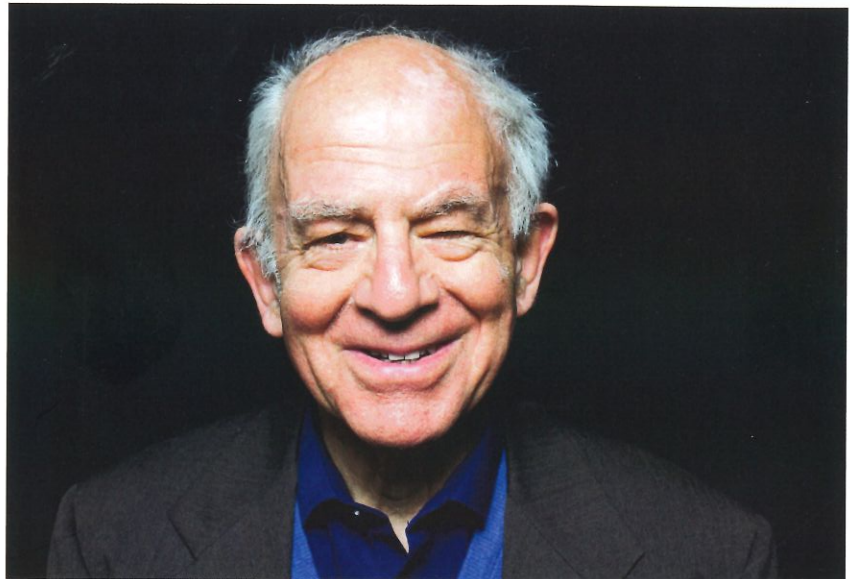
You ask a very good question. I actually don't think that what you've just described is power because I think power, the key idea, is securing somebody's compliance. And if I overpower you physically, I'm using what I call force. And that means I haven't secured your compliance. I've tried to get you to do what I want and you don't do it, so I force you, let's say, physically or in the extreme case, I kill you. But I haven't secured your compliance. So, in a way you could say force is failed power.

*That's really interesting. So, the example of the overpowering of wills is where somebody bends the will of another person?*

Yes, the person gets someone to do what they don't want to do, and so, there's a conflict of wills in which the

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Lukes's best-known, still controversial academic theory is his so-called 'radical' view of power, which claims there are three dimensions of power. The first is overt power, typically exhibited in the presence of conflict in decision-making situations, where power consists in winning, that is prevailing over another or others. The second is covert power, consisting in control over what gets decided, by ignoring or deflecting existing grievances. And the third is the power to shape desires and beliefs, thereby averting both conflict and grievances. The first is the most public of the three and is how the powerful usually want to be seen: for instance, the power of



political leaders to make policy decisions after widespread consultation with opposition parties and the wider public. The second is the power to control agendas. It has been called the 'mobilisation of bias,' reinforcing the powerful by excluding threatening issues from discussion in public forums. The third kind of power can be the most insidious. It is the most hidden from view - the least accessible to observation by social actors and observers alike. It can be at work, despite apparent consensus between the powerful and the powerless. It is the power to influence people's wishes and thoughts, inducing them to want things opposed to what would benefit them and to fail to want what they would, but for such power, recognise to be in their real interests.

first person gets the other to comply. And the simplest case of that is let's call them A and B; A threatens B, and B submits to the threat.

*The offer you can't refuse?*

Yes, that's right.

*OK. So, that's fairly clear cut. We know when we've had that done to us. It's conscious; it's an unpleasant experience. The implied threat or the actual threat brings about the change in behaviour without the need to push somebody literally into doing something.*

Right. Now, if you do the pushing, if you actually get hold of somebody's shoulders and force them to do something, you haven't succeeded. You haven't secured their compliance. You've got your way, but you haven't secured compliance.

*Colloquially, we might say that we've overpowered somebody in those circumstances, but that's not an instance of power in your sense, in the sense that you think is important?*

I'd prefer to distinguish force from power. We can use words any way we like, as Humpty Dumpty said. But, as I've said, I think it's helpful to see power as securing compliance, and force as failed power.

*I see. It's useful to see it this way because we're talking ultimately about political relations. Physical force is less commonly used in those situations.*

Yes, the threat of physical force can achieve power.

*Right. So, that's the first sense, the first dimension of power, as we've been discussing it seems to be relatively clear cut. What's the second dimension?*

The second dimension – a simple way to characterise it is to say that it's the power to control the agenda. If you've got some issue about which people are in disagreement, if you can

control the agenda, in other words what gets decided about, you can secure the compliance of another person just by making sure that what's decided upon is in your interests.

*Do you mean that it's the power to exclude things from discussion?*

Yes, it's the power to keep things off the agenda. I guess a very simple example of that would be censorship. If you can prevent people from objecting or raising an issue that they care about, you've controlled the agenda, you can avoid the conflict, you can avoid resistance by controlling what's discussed.

*Are victims of this kind of power always aware of it?*

Well, they might be. Or they might not be. I think that's very interesting. I think that if the censorship is very successful, like I imagine for instance in North Korea, people don't actually know about what's being excluded from their view; they don't know that this kind of power is being exercised over them. But often people do know, and they might resent it. But it's different from the first kind of power. It's different from threat because you can avoid conflict by controlling the agenda.

*Is this the kind of power that media moguls have by selective reporting of events and topics?*

Yes. If you think about politics as being where the play of interest occurs, where people's interests are, people are defending or promoting their interests. If you can control the flow of information in a way that serves your interests, yes, that's a distinctive kind of power in which you're not exercising threats, you're controlling information.

*But is this more pernicious perhaps than the direct full-on confrontational sense of power?*

I don't know if it's more pernicious. Power can be pretty pernicious in all its

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dimensions. But I think it is more insidious. I think that the second dimension of power is people, when they're aware of it, they can try to combat it by contesting the control of the agenda, but it can be more difficult.

*Because it's so stealthy.*  
Yes.

*Thinking about this in relation to academic philosophy, some people would say that there is a controlling of the syllabus that is tantamount to excluding Eastern philosophy, and non-Western philosophy generally, from serious discussion in many university departments. If that's true, would that be an example of this second dimension of power in action?*

Yes, because that raises an interesting question. Whatever is being discussed or fought over in politics is going to be excluding something. And so, I think we call it power when we think that there's some excluding going on. There are all kinds of things that are not being discussed, but we don't always call those forms of power or exertions of power because they're just not being discussed. But where you could say, and that's why censorship is a good example, there's clearly a purpose, and somebody is actually doing the excluding, then I think that's the clearest case of what I call the second dimension.

I think this is where I'm interested in power. I think that it isn't always conscious. The first dimension is, I think, clearly conscious, where, if you make a threat and somebody submits

to the threat, you know what you're doing. In the second case, I think of ten powers-that-be, as it were, people in power, can act in a way to control the agenda and not even be aware that they're doing so.

*And then the third dimension, what's that?*

Well, this is where, for me anyway, it gets interesting, because the first dimension, you remember, involves conflict. The second dimension involves, in a way, the averting of conflict. But there's still some kind of implicit conflict there because you're excluding what other people would otherwise wish to discuss. For example, if people have grievances, and the grievances get sidelined because the agenda is being controlled, you've still got a conflict going on between the powerful and those whose grievances are being excluded.

In the third dimension, what I call the third dimension, what you get is compliance. That is to say, those subject to power actually go along with what they're being asked to believe or do: the conflict is averted because those subject to the power buy into the power relationship.

*Could you give me an example to illustrate that, so it's clear what you're talking about?*

One very well documented example today is – increasingly – is this whole *Me Too* movement that originated in the States, where I live. You have cases of what we call, correctly, sexual harassment, where the women

involved are actually sometimes compliant; not even regarding what's happening as objectionable, but just going along with it. And then, of course, at a certain point in time, that becomes clearer to everybody, and it gets labelled as sexual harassment. But at the time you have people, women in this case, who are actually complying voluntarily in a power relationship.

*Could you just go into a bit of detail on how they're complying; who is the powerful person? The person who is harassing them as we would now see it? Or is there a structural thing, the structural elements of society which tolerate this as a power over them?*

I think both of these things are at work. All power exists within structures. So, I think one of the useful ways of thinking about power is to see it as related to agents, to people doing stuff or not doing stuff. But I think if we just think about it as a cultural process in which everybody, the agents, are all just in some way objects of something impersonal called culture then we lose the notion of power.

Power has to be thought of as something which people have and exercise or exert over others. And I was going to add another example. Another example might be cases, in very traditional societies, let's take the case in the Indian caste system: both relationships between men and women and, indeed, relationships between higher and lower castes, might have been fully accepted by everyone involved, and so there's no obvious resistance.

**In the third dimension... you get compliance. That is to say, those subject to power actually go along with what they're being asked to believe or do.**

What I'm interested in with the third dimension is the extent to which there isn't resistance; the extent to which people comply with relationships of dependency and they don't resist; they buy into the relationship.

*Without even thinking about it, possibly?*

Insofar as thinking about it, they accept it. They see it as natural. There are different versions of this. There are cases where people accept a relationship of dependency, they comply with its demands, because they think it's right and proper that they should be subordinate, and thus comply. But there are also cases where people think there's nothing to be done about it; there's no way out, so you might as well comply. You don't see any alternatives. The first kind is a full endorsing by the subordinate or the dependent, the second is "what can I do about it... this is my lot, my fate".

*We have these three dimensions, and they are significantly different, but overlap to some extent. It may not feel very good to be on the receiving end of a powerful person's will. But is there something intrinsically bad about the exertion of power? Is it something we should always be wary of? Or is it a necessary feature of human relations, that there are powerful and weaker people, and these are roles that someone's got to adopt, that's just the way society works?*

I think this is why everything is so complex and why we need to think about all this so deeply. Some relationships of authority and hierarchy are benevolent. For instance, if you think about the relationships between parents and children, and indeed other kinds of authority relationships where there is a recognition by those who are dependent on the superior experience or knowledge or entitlement of the powerful to secure their compliance – that can be to everybody's benefit.

That can be regarded as positive. But the point of using this very concept of power, especially if you think about it as power over other people, carries with it the idea that we should question it, that we should wonder if it is actually in the interests of those who comply to do something.

*With the third dimension of power, it's not obvious how you could get to a position of realising that you're even being subjected to power. Is having this way of understanding power intended to be a route to that kind of realisation that you might be in this position of being subjugated in the third dimension, as it were?*

Whether it's subjugated or not depends on how everything turns out. The feminist movement used to talk about "consciousness raising", and still do. In some way what we've been seeing with the *Me Too* movement has been that – that's to say people come to see that the relationships of

dependency and treatment by men in their lives and in the workplace, they come to see what they previously accepted as either fine, desirable even, or as inevitable, they've come to see this as unacceptable and indeed become really angry and denounce it, and resist it and fight it. That's a process that happens and whether that happens or not is in a way a test of whether the power was objectionable or not.

We shouldn't always think about power as being exercised deliberately and consciously. It's a dependency-relationship, which the powerful engage in without realising it; without deliberately intending it. That's the deepest part of the third dimension that I can see. The most insidious kind of power may be where you don't need to exercise it – you have a relationship of dependency and you don't have to lift a finger, you don't have to do anything about it because it seems natural to everybody. ▣



*"Toppling patriarchy is on my to do list."*