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Simon Susen  
City University London

## 15 Theses on Power

**Abstract** *This article seeks to contribute to a critical understanding of the multifaceted nature of power, emphasizing its capacity to shape the development of society by permeating constitutive aspects of human reality. To this end, the article proposes an outline of a multidimensional approach to power. It does so by identifying and examining several – arguably universal – features and functions of power. On the basis of 15 theses, it is argued that, within the social world, the power of power derives from the fact that it is (1) ubiquitous, (2) productive, (3) relational, (4) intangible, (5) habitual, (6) discursive, (7) corporeal, (8) polycentric, (9) performative, (10) normative, (11) spatial, (12) temporal, (13) disciplinary, (14) circular, and (15) transcendental. By way of conclusion, the article provides a comprehensive summary of the main insights gained and challenges arising from such a multidimensional approach to power.*

**Keywords:** *ability, agency, capability, capacity, complexity, control, disempowerment, domination, emancipation, empowerment, influence, power, society*

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## Introduction

„Power“ is one of the most fundamental, but also one of the most controversial, concepts in social and political thought. This article is an attempt to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted nature of power, particularly in terms of its capacity to shape the development of society by permeating constitutive aspects of human reality. No attempt shall be made here to summarize, let alone to examine, the various theoretical and empirical accounts of power that have been developed – within different intellectual traditions and from different paradigmatic angles – over the past decades and, indeed, over the past centuries.<sup>1</sup> Rather,

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1 The literature on the concept of power is vast. For useful discussions, see, for example: Bachrach and Baratz (1971 [1962]); Baumgartner, Buckley, Burns, and Schuster (1976); Bendix and Lipset (1967); Bentham (1971 [1843]); Boltanski (2009); Bourdieu (1976); Bourdieu (1979); Bourdieu (1992); Browne and Susen (2014); Burns and Buckley (1976); Champlin (1971a); Champlin (1971b); Clegg (1979); Clegg (1989); Clegg and Haugaard (2009); Cox, Furlong, and Page (1985); Dowding (1996); Dowding (2011); Emmet (1971 [1954]); Foucault (1979 [1975]); Foucault (1980); Goldman (1986 [1972]); Habermas (1981a); Habermas (1981b); Habermas (1987 [1985]); Haugaard (1997); Haugaard (2002); Hearn (2012); Hearse (2007); Hindess (1996); Hobbes (1971 [1651]); Holloway (2005 [2002]); Holloway and Susen (2013); Honneth (1991 [1986]); Isaac (1987); Lukes (1974); Lukes (1986a); Lukes (1986b); MacKenzie (1999); March (1971 [1966]); Martin (1977); Marx (1972 [1852]); McClelland (1971 [1966]); Mendieta y Nuñez (1969); Miller (1987); Morgenthau (1971 [1958]); Morriss (2002 [1987]); Poggi (2001); Poulantzas (1980 [1978]);

on the basis of 15 theses, the following analysis provides an outline of a multidimensional approach to power, thereby shedding light on the complexity underlying the tension-laden construction of social realities.

## 1. The Ubiquity of Power

8 Power is *ubiquitous*. To recognize that power is an ever-present element of human life is to acknowledge that there are no social relations without power relations. In fact, *all* social relations are impregnated with power relations, no matter how subtle, hidden, or seemingly insignificant the former's dependence upon the latter may be. To be sure, the *omnipresence* of power is not necessarily symptomatic of its *omnipotence*. Power can be a constitutive component of human life without having to be one of its decisive determinants. Whilst social actions are unavoidably *power-laden*, they are not always *power-driven*. Put differently, all social practices are *power-permeated*, but not all of them are *power-motivated*. Every person's purposive, normative, and expressive actions are – directly or indirectly – *shaped* by power relations. This does not mean, however, that everyone's actions are – consciously or unconsciously – *intended* either to reinforce or to subvert the legitimacy of a given set of social arrangements. The fact that all our doings are embedded in social relations implies that we can act upon the world only as *immersive* creatures whose situated practices are *suffused with* power. The fact that some of our doings are driven by dynamics of social positioning, often through struggles over symbolic or material resources, illustrates that we are equipped with the capacity to act upon the world as *performative* entities whose calculative practices are *influenced by* power. Regardless of the extent to which particular human practices are pervaded, or even determined, by conflicts over people's ability to act upon the world, the construction of social arrangements cannot be divorced from the creation of power relations.

## 2. The Productivity of Power

Power is *productive*. The suggestion that power is a productive element of human life has two major implications: power produces subjects, and subjects produce power. Power is never simply a repressive source of

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Russell (1986 [1938]); Scott (1990); Scott (1996); Scott (2001); Simmel (1986 [1950]); Stewart (2001); Susen (2007); Susen (2008a); Susen (2008b); Susen (2009); Susen (2011); Susen (2012a); Susen (2012b); Susen (2013a); Susen (2013b); Susen (2014); Susen (2015); Susen and Turner (2011); Susen and Turner (2014); Weber (1980 [1922]); Wolin (1988); Wrong (1995 [1979]).

coercion but always also a productive force of creation, even when it is mobilized in order to consolidate the preponderance of social domination over individual or collective processes of emancipation. Every „power-over“ presupposes a „power-to“. For the „power-over-something“ is possible only as a „power-to-do-something“. We can *be in* the world only insofar as we are able to *act upon* it, including in situations in which our activity is based on autonomously chosen, or circumstantially imposed, passivity. To accept that productive dynamics of empowerment enjoy ontological primacy over repressive mechanisms of disempowerment requires conceding that the latter are parasitical upon the former. Yet, the derivative status of oppressive, or even exploitative, modes of functioning by no means implies that ephemeral or structural forms of social domination have an emancipatory origin. In a more fundamental sense, the fact that repressive articulations of „power-over“ are rooted in the productive potential of „power-to“ manifests itself in the quotidian unfolding of social life: the efficacy of power depends on its capability to convert itself into the motor of both conformative and transformative expressions of agency.

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Far from being reducible to a static given, power constitutes a dynamic force, which, in order to demonstrate its socio-ontological relevance, needs to be produced and reproduced by both human and non-human agents. Power asserts the reality of its persistence by mobilizing the performative resources of worldly existence. The daily production and reproduction of power on the basis of diverse kinds of agency is vital to the construction of social realities. It is not primarily the imposition of power „from the top down“ but, above all, the creation of power „from the bottom up“ that is crucial to its capacity to colonize the most mundane spheres of society. Systemic macro-physics of steering cannot do without lifeworldly micro-physics of doing. The pervasive presence of power in society is contingent upon its ability to imbue our subjective and intersubjective practices with a sense of playful agency, which is indispensable to our day-to-day search for authorship and authenticity. The more we are immersed in the quotidian production of power, the less likely we are to notice its existence, unless we find ourselves *either* in the privileged position of disposing of a surplus of power *or* in the marginalized position of suffering from a lack of power. Paradoxically, both the excess of power and the shortage of power tend to make social performers aware of its very existence: those whose sense of agency is strengthened by the obvious or subtle oversupply of power are likely to become conscious of its significance because their advantageous position in society sets them apart from those who are deprived

of substantial access to symbolic and material resources; those whose sense of agency is weakened by the complete or relative absence of power are likely to become conscious of its significance because their disadvantageous position in society separates them from those who are granted substantial access to symbolic and material resources. Notwithstanding the historical specificity of a small-scale or large-scale social setting, the power of power emanates from the empowerment of agents, irrespective of whether they are human or non-human, and even if this involves the partial or total disempowerment of other agents. We cannot make use of power without producing it.

### 3. The Relationality of Power

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Power is *relational*. Comprehension of the fact that power is a *relational* element of human life is based on one central insight: social ontologies are conceivable only as ensembles of *interconnected* components and processes. Unavoidably, societies generate sets of power relations. Power is not a monolithically constituted source of agency, exercised around the epicentre of one particular subject, structure, or institution. On the contrary, it is produced and reproduced through multiple *networks* created between different potencies, that is, between numerous symbolic and material forces, including both human and non-human agents. In this sense, power is both relationally constructed and relationally contingent. As a *relationally constructed* source of agency, power is generated by virtue of the interactions established between different human and non-human entities. As a *relationally contingent* source of agency, the constitution of power changes in accordance with the constantly shifting arrangements formed by and within spatiotemporally specific networks and situations.

The ineluctable presence of power, then, is indicative of the fact that agents – regardless of whether they are human or non-human – exist not in and for themselves, as isolated beings with incommensurable properties, but always in relation to one another, as directly or indirectly interconnected assemblages with performative potentialities. Power, in order to assert its existence, needs to be sustained by the *relations* created between agents. Every time we relate to one another, we relate to power. For every social relation is a power relation. Every time we relate to the world, we relate to power. For every worldly relation is a power relation. The ways in which we relate to one another are conditioned by the ways in which we are *positioned* to one another. The ways in which we relate

to the world are conditioned by the ways in which we are *situated* in the world. Human actors occupy various positions in the social space, which are shaped by multiple sociological variables, such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability. Access to resources of social power hinges upon access to social positions. To the extent that social positions are relationally consolidated, social power is relationally constructed. In short, power is a relationally constituted source of agency.

#### 4. The Intangibility of Power

Power is *intangible*. One of the reasons why power is hard to define is that we cannot put our finger on it. The fact that power cannot be observed, let alone be measured, as if it were a physical object makes it difficult to grasp the pivotal role it plays in the unfolding of everyday life. In the social world, power is all over the place, but the fact that it constitutes a ubiquitous force does not convert it into a tangible source of, or palpable obstacle to, human agency. Certainly, there are multiple substantive *manifestations* of power. This does not mean, however, that power itself is tangible. Power is reducible neither to a quantifiable conglomerate of material constituents nor to a mere construct of ideological imaginaries. Power *does* exist, but its presence cannot be directly observed or empirically proven. The intangibility of power forms an integral part of the potential complexity characterizing the seemingly most rudimentary expressions of human agency.

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One of the main challenges to be confronted when theorizing power is to shed light on the *tangible consequences of its intangible constitution*. Even though power is not a phenomenologically or empirically graspable entity, its existence shapes the constitution of both symbolic and material aspects of social reality. One of the essential tasks of a critical social science consists in exploring both the *micro-physics* and the *macro-physics* of power. To be clear, attending to this task does not require inventing a *meta-physics* of power. To the extent that power pervades both the quotidian domains and the systemic spheres of society, it is erroneous to convert it into a hyperreality that escapes the worldly parameters of affective or rational comprehensibility. Whilst the existence of power is reflected in the concrete impact it has upon the symbolic and material organization of reality, its intangible constitution does not allow for its conceptual reduction to a delineated or delineable element of society. As critical sociologists, we need to take on the challenge of examining the tangible consequences of intangible powers.

## 5. The Habituality of Power

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Power is *habitual*. Just as we are habitual beings, power is a habitual source of action. To be exact, power is both a habitualized and a habitualizing force. As a *habitualized* force, it is structured by our daily routines. As a *habitualizing* force, it structures our daily routines. The more ingrained power is in our everyday practices, the less obvious its existence turns out to be to those involved in its creation and normalization. The more crucial power is to our performances, the more difficult it is to undermine its structuring influence on our activities. What is habitual is practical; what is habitualized is practised; and what is habitualizing is practising. We are eternal practitioners of changeable, but power-laden, habits. Even when we make a conscious effort to challenge power, we cannot escape our – largely unconscious – predisposition to contribute to the reproduction of its existence. The habituality of power is vital to the day-to-day functioning of social life. We tend not to question what we are accustomed to, and we tend to get accustomed to what we do not question. The habituality of power ensures that the power of habituality, although it can be studied, remains largely unnoticed by those who are caught up in its quotidian production and reproduction.

## 6. The Discursivity of Power

Power is *discursive*. As a discursive force, power pervades both our symbolic and our material practices. Our symbolic practices are imbued with power, since all constative, normative, and expressive claims to validity are embedded in social struggles over legitimacy. Our material practices are impregnated with power, since both the cultivation and the realization of bodily actions are contingent upon access to social resources, without whose performative potentiality there would be no development of distinctly human capacities. The socio-ontological significance of discourses manifests itself both in the construction of *interpretive* representations, which mediate our relation to the world by virtue of meaning-laden practices, and in the construction of *substantive* realities, which shape our relation to the world by virtue of bodily constituted activities.

Facing up to the discursivity of power requires accepting the power of discursivity: any aspect of reality that has the capability to consolidate itself as a symbolically and materially organized discourse in a given field of society has the potential of converting itself into a legitimate resource

of power. The elasticity of a particular interactional reality depends on its capacity to colonize the discursive dimensions imbuing the modes of agency that guarantee its short- or long-term viability. For the stability of every society is conditional upon the creation of interpretively and substantively constituted pillars of validity. Power that fails to pervade our discursive practices remains essentially powerless. By contrast, power that succeeds in permeating our discursive practices is effectively powerful. Owing to the centrality of discursive dimensions for the unfolding of everyday life, power in the social world cannot be exercised without mobilizing the symbolic and material resources of human actors.

## 7. The Corporeality of Power

Power is *corporeal*. As such, it is inscribed in our bodies. The bodily nature of power is the functional basis of its ubiquity in human reality. In order to have an impact upon social life, power needs to run through people's bodies. Human subjects are interacting bodies: even the symbolic force of linguistic communication does not permit us to transcend the physical limitations of our corporeal determination. Only insofar as it is reproduced through the daily practices exercised by our bodies can power become an integral component of our everyday realities. What is assimilated by our bodies is what seems most natural to us. The socialization of the natural cannot be dissociated from the naturalization of the social. Whilst being socialized into apparently natural ways of doing things, we tend to naturalize genuinely social ways of constructing ourselves and our environments. The human body is the physical vehicle of social power. Codified modes of sociality illustrate our need to create spheres of normativity, which can be sustained by orthodox, or undermined by heterodox, forms of corporeal activity. Both our intuitive and our reflexive capacities to distinguish between „standard“ and „deviant“ variants of agency are based on the fabrication of relatively arbitrary normative binaries. The human body is the locus of social power. For power relations between living actors are essentially codified arrangements between bodies. Power needs to inhabit our bodies in order to permeate our reality, because every society is an ensemble of interconnected and interacting physical entities. The more we internalize power relations, the more prone we are to externalize them unconsciously in our daily interactions taking place within potentially diverse regions of reality. The collective unconscious of society cannot be separated from the individual unconscious of the human body.



## 8. The Polycentricity of Power

Power is *polycentric*. Far from being concentrated in, or originating from, a single social domain, power has numerous centres in multiple fields of action. Since it lacks a foundational realm in society, one may even describe power as a *centreless* component of human existence. Hence, power is not a monolithic force occupying a position that is reducible to one particular element in the human universe. Rather, due to its polycentric nature, it plays a pivotal role in shaping, and constantly reshaping, *social constellations*, which are relatively arbitrary and ceaselessly transformed throughout history. Monolithic conceptions of power fail to do justice to the multidimensional constitution of social interactions, which are spread across time and space.

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Different interactional fields produce different types of power: *social* power, *economic* power, *political* power, *judicial* power, *cultural* power, *ethnic* power, *artistic* power, *erotic* power, *sexual* power, *generational* power, *temporal* power, *spatial* power, *ideological* power, *religious* power, *scientific* power, or *epistemic* power – to mention only a few. The more interactional fields emerge in a given society, the more forms of power will impact upon the symbolic and material dimensions underlying the daily construction of its reality. The polycentric constitution of power obliges us to face up to its irreducibility, which may be studied in terms of – inevitably contentious – sociological typologies. Every mode of power possesses an idiosyncratic logic of functioning. In other words, the structural and processual aspects of one specific form of power cannot be reduced to those of any other form of power, no matter how similar the social settings in which they are embedded may appear at first glance. To the extent that society is shaped by different interactional fields, its development cannot be explained in terms of an ultimately determining source of power. In the course of everyday life, individuals are exposed to a multiplicity of power games, none of which can claim to possess a monopoly on the unfolding of human agency. In brief, human societies are differentially organized realities, which are reproduced and transformed by polycentrally structured and multicontextually performed power games.

## 9. The Performativity of Power

Power is *performative*. If power were not performative, our performances would be powerless. Indeed, to perform means to assert power. As the German word *Macht* indicates, to have „power“ implies to be able to „make“ or „do“ (*machen*) something. As the French word *pouvoir*, the

Spanish word *poder*, and the Italian word *potere* suggest, to have „power“ presupposes the *capacity* to act upon the world in a particular way. The „power to do something“, then, is the „power to power“. In order for it to be effective, power needs to influence our daily practices. What we do habitually, and thus on a daily basis, is what we are less likely to reflect upon or question. Efficient systems of social domination have the capacity to colonize our quotidian activities in such a way that the latter are completely absorbed by the imperatives of the former. Structural forms of domination – notably those based on class, ethnicity, gender, age, or ability – are not simply imposed „from the top down“ but also produced and reproduced „from the bottom up“.

Every time we engage in social performances, we are situated in grammars and processes of power-laden realities. Inasmuch as the existence of power hinges on the existence of our performances, the existence of our performances is subject to the existence of power. Power can be sustained only insofar as it succeeds in pervading our performances, just as our performances can be carried out only insofar as we mobilize resources of power. Power tells us to „do this“ and to „do that“, whilst our actions remind us that „we need power for this“ and „we need power for that“. Daily power cannot do without quotidian performances, and daily performances cannot dispense with quotidian power. Before we perform, we are always already accomplices of power, even if and when we aim to subvert it. Only to the degree that we exercise power *within*, *through*, or *against* the background of society are we able to participate in the construction of reality. In order to be involved in the symbolic and material construction of the world, we need to immerse ourselves in performative practices by drawing upon the interpretive and substantive resources of power.

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## 10. The Normativity of Power

Power is *normative*. To be precise, power is both a normalized and a normalizing force. As a *normalized* force, we take its existence for granted. As a *normalizing* force, it takes our existence, and potential compliance, for granted. Owing to its regulative capability, power impacts, often crucially, upon the course of agency. The power of power is contingent upon its capacity to convert itself into a dominant mode of normativity. By definition, social practices are normalizing performances. Even when we make a deliberate and sustained effort to break with the legitimacy of an established domain of reality, we can do so only by creating – no matter how implicitly – new parameters of validity and, hence, either transient

or enduring regimes of normativity. Just as we cannot escape the reproduction of power relations, we cannot elude the construction of normative arrangements. Normativity is a product of contestable and interest-laden, rather than neutral and disinterested, social actions. For the constitution of normative arrangements is shaped by the constellation of power relations: what is considered right or wrong depends largely on what is *supposed* to be considered right or wrong *within* a given context. Whenever a specific form of power impacts upon the construction of social reality, it produces corresponding codes of normativity.

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Power makes us be, belong, behave, and believe *in particular ways*. Relations of power generate normative agendas, on the basis of which we distinguish between „normal“ and „deviant“, „legitimate“ and „illegitimate“, „acceptable“ and „unacceptable“ criteria and principles. Different societies develop diverging sets of normativity with idiosyncratic codes of legitimacy. The normativity of power is paradoxical in that it is both empowering and disempowering. On the one hand, it is *empowering* in that it *provides* us with behavioural and ideological standards, which form common grounds strong enough to *facilitate* social interactions. On the other hand, it is *disempowering* in that it *imposes* behavioural and ideological canons upon us, which constitute implicitly shared imperatives designed to *dominate* social interactions. Forceful forms of power manifest themselves in influential modes of normativity. The more profoundly we are immersed in regimes of normativity, the less likely we are to question their legitimacy. The more we contribute to the reproduction of instituted sets of power structures, the less likely we are to undermine them. The more „normal“ a particular distribution of power appears to us, the less likely we are to challenge, let alone to subvert, it. The normalizing force of power illustrates the regulative capacity of society.

## 11. The Spatiality of Power

Power is *spatial*. Even if power may appear to transcend physical boundaries by virtue of deterritorializing information and transportation technologies, it cannot be abstracted from spatially constituted determinacies. Just as power relations shape spatial arrangements, spatial arrangements impact upon power relations. To be exact, spatial relations *are* power relations. If power relations were not embedded in spatial arrangements, they would lack the capacity to influence physical constellations and embodied actions. It is because power is spatially distributed that power

*matters*. In other words, in view of the fact that power relations have a tangible impact upon the physical constitution of reality, the unfolding of human and non-human forms of agency cannot be dissociated from the relational organization of spatiality.

To the extent that different social spaces generate different power relations, different power relations generate different social spaces. As we navigate our way through particular social spaces, we find ourselves exposed to specific sets of power relations. Different types of authority draw upon different sources of legitimacy and mobilize different resources of agency in different spaces of sociality. Since human existence is unavoidably located in space, individual and collective forms of power can have an influence on society only as spatially situated modes of agency. Relations of space are always relations of power: the question of how spaces are distributed in society is intimately interrelated with the question of how power is dispersed in multifaceted constructions of reality. To the extent that social practices take place in a physically constituted universe, human capacities – including the ability to exercise power – develop in relation to spatially organized realms of possibilities.

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## **12. The Temporality of Power**

Power is *temporal*. Who or what may be powerful in the present may not have been so in the past and may cease to be so in the future. The evanescence of power is symptomatic of the spatiotemporal contingency underlying every source of legitimacy. In principle, every human or non-human entity equipped with power can be deprived of it, and vice versa. Whoever or whatever has the capacity to determine a course of action, a set of beliefs, or a series of circumstances may be robbed of this privilege, notwithstanding the question of whether this occurs due to endogenous or exogenous factors. Given that it is both *situated in* and *permeated by* time, power is never forever. The very notion of „the seizure of power“ implies that the individual or collective capacity to act upon the world in a particular way is temporally contingent. For what can be seized can also be taken away from someone and passed on to somebody else. The temporality of power, which inhabits all – including the most solidified – regimes of domination, remains – even in the most difficult circumstances – the ultimate hope of the powerless: partially or almost totally deprived of access to power in the present, they may be granted access to power in the future. Correspondingly, the temporality of power remains, even in social formations characterized by high degrees of legitimacy and systemic

stability, the ultimate threat to the powerful: bestowed with access to power in the present, they may be denied the right to dispose of it in the future.

18 Yet, power is temporal not only in that its very existence is historically contingent, but also in that its presence has the capacity to affect the social structuration of time. Different regimes of power require different organizations of time. The control over our time is inextricably linked to the constitution of our social positions. The positions we occupy in relationally constructed spaces – especially those defined by class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability – are sources of interactional structuration that shape the possibilities for our self-realization. Every regime of power generates a particular regime of time: the regulation of individual and collective actions is inconceivable without the control over the time in and through which they take place. Domination is a mechanism within and through which the normalization of time is imposed upon actors „from above“; emancipation is a process in which the organization of time is determined by actors „from below“. The more one’s practices are dictated by systemic structures, the more one’s sense of agency is dominated by the instrumental imperatives of a partly or totally administered regime of time. The more one’s practices are undertaken in accordance with one’s own needs, the more one’s sense of agency unfolds as an expression of an autonomously controlled vitality. Either way, power is situated in time, whilst having the capacity to shape our situatedness in time.

### 13. The Disciplinarity of Power

Power is *disciplinary*. The reproduction of power in the micro-spheres of society depends on the regulation of bodily practices through overt or subtle forms of disciplining human agency. Relatively stable systems of social reproduction cannot be maintained without the creation of habitualized and habituating modes of action. The sets of rules and norms established to guarantee the cohesiveness underlying the practices within a particular community require a minimal degree of disciplinarity, in order to assure the smooth functioning of social interactionality. Even the most subversive activities take place against a background of disciplinary codes and taken-for-granted assemblages. As a ubiquitous force, power possesses the capacity to imbue every realm of society. Consequently, even adversaries of power are accomplices of power. It is due to our need for education that we cannot prescind from the socializing functions of disciplination. To be clear, even *laissez-faire* types of education cannot do away with the anthropological significance of social discipline. For the

absorption of culturally specific codes of perception and action involves assimilating socially contingent regimes of bodily regulation.

In order to be able to function within a particular culture, we need to develop the competence to interact with our socially conditioned environment. Irrespective of whether we consider physical, behavioural, ideological, moral, or aesthetic standards – *all* codified modes of relating to, acting upon, and making sense of the world entail the emergence of disciplinary practices. The more successful a given regime of power in determining the disciplinary codes of a given community or society, the more forceful its ability to regulate the course of human agency within the boundaries set by relationally constituted spaces of possibilities. The power of disciplinary practices derives from their capacity to colonize the dispositional resources located in our subjectivities. Our bodies tell us what to do without telling us. Nothing seems more natural to us than the daily routines reproduced by means of our corporeal apparatus. In any type of society, the disciplinary effects of cultural realities are reflected in the regulatory components shaping the course of human agency.

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#### **14. The Circularity of Power**

Power is *circular*. As such, it is in a constant state of flux, travelling through multiple and interconnected spheres of reality. Lacking an epicentre from which to impose itself – unilaterally and vertically – upon the whole of society, power is all over the place. Literally, power moves from place to place, and so do the agents who produce, reproduce, and transform it. Whilst both human and non-human entities navigate within and through the universe, power circulates within and through diverse fields of action. The centreless performativity of power stems from the heterogeneous dispersion of practices: different types of action generate, and are generated by, different types of power relations. As a circular force, power is both individualizing and totalizing: as an *individualizing* force, it is mobilized endowing persons with a sense of agency based on their performative capacities; as a *totalizing* force, it pervades every realm of society.

Power circulates and produces accomplices, just as accomplices circulate and produce power. In order to circulate, power needs accomplices; in order to have accomplices, power needs to circulate. The circularity of power is what makes any project oriented towards the radical transformation of reality a challenging task, in both theoretical and practical terms. Since power is a scattered component of human life, the

emancipatory reinvention of society is doomed to failure if it is motivated by the attempt to monopolize one influential force or domain of reality. Highly differentiated societies are characterized by the existence of multiple interactional fields shaped by struggles over context-specific forms of power: *social* power, *economic* power, *political* power, *judicial* power, *cultural* power, *ethnic* power, *artistic* power, *erotic* power, *sexual* power, *generational* power, *temporal* power, *spatial* power, *ideological* power, *religious* power, *scientific* power, or *epistemic* power – all of which have been mentioned above. Given its polycentric constitution, society is composed of irreducible sets of power structures, which circulate and thereby permeate our lives through the flow of directly or indirectly interconnected practices. To the extent that power circulates in any kind of society, it can never be totally controlled, let alone be monopolized, by one subject, structure, or institution. As long as agents circulate, the power they produce, reproduce, or transform will circulate too.

## 15. The Transcendentality of Power

Power is *transcendental*. Its transcendental nature implies that power emerges in *any* form of society, regardless of its historical specificity. *All* societies – irrespective of whether they may be characterized as „primitive“ or „complex“, „undeveloped“ or „developed“, „tight“ or „loose“, „horizontally structured“ or „vertically structured“, „control-based“ or „freedom-based“, „collectivist“ or „individualist“ – are permeated by power relations. Indeed, wherever there are social relations, there are power relations. The transcendental power of power is rooted in its universal capacity to shape – or, in some cases, even to determine – the constitution of social relations. Whenever we engage in a social act, we raise power claims: the power to do, the power to act, the power to exist.

To be precise, power constitutes an integral component of our *tripartite* immersion in reality. Every human being exists in relation to „the“ objective world, „our“ normative world, and „his“ or „her“ subjective world. All three worlds – which constitute the three existential cornerstones of the human universe – are impregnated with the ineluctable presence of power. In fact, our objective, normative, and subjective spheres of existence are both vehicles and sources of power: as *vehicles* of power, the objective, normative, and subjective realms of our existence permit us to relate to the world by *immersing ourselves within* physical, social, and personal domains; as *sources* of power, the objective,

normative, and subjective realms of our existence enable us to act upon the world by *drawing upon* physical, social, and personal resources. In short, without access to power we lack the capacity to relate to and act upon reality. Given its transcendental nature, power is a *conditio sine qua non* of human existence.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to contribute to a critical understanding of the multifaceted nature of power, emphasizing its capacity to shape the development of society by permeating constitutive aspects of human reality. No attempt has been undertaken here to embark on a discussion of the numerous theoretical and empirical approaches to power that have been developed in social and political thought. Furthermore, the foregoing enquiry has not intended to formulate a shorthand definition of power, since such an endeavour runs the risk of falling into the trap of conceptual reductionism and, hence, of failing to do justice to both the abstract and the concrete challenges resulting from the polymorphous constitution of power. Rather, the previous analysis has aimed to propose an outline of a multidimensional approach to power.

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A comprehensive sociological account of power needs to provide an explanatory framework capable of shedding light on the complexity underlying the tension-laden construction of social realities. Whilst the preceding investigation has sought to identify several – arguably universal – features and functions of power, it raises a number of questions about the theoretical and practical implications of such a multidimensional approach. It is the task of this conclusion to synthesize the main insights gained from the previous study, in addition to reflecting upon the principal challenges arising from it. These insights and challenges can be summarized as follows:

1. Power is *ubiquitous*. There are no social relations without power relations. Even if, however, we draw a distinction between „power-permeated“ and „power-motivated“, it is far from straightforward to differentiate between practices that are *shaped* by power and practices that are *driven* by power. Motivational driving forces are not only *not* immediately visible, let alone measurable; moreover, they can be, and often are, largely unconscious.
2. Power is *productive*. Just as power produces subjects, subjects produce power. Yet, whilst the distinction between „power-to“ and



„power-over“ may enable us to account for diametrically opposed modes of human agency, the more challenging task is to explore the normative preconditions for fostering processes of emancipation and undermining mechanisms of domination.

3. Power is *relational*. It emerges primarily from the networks established between agents, rather than from the properties allegedly inherent in subjects and objects. To the extent, though, that the social universe is a realm of directly and indirectly interconnected *beings*, we need to study the degree to which the constitution of reality is shaped not only by relations between different entities but also by interpretive *epistemologies* and substantive *ontologies*. Agency is irreducible to an arbitrary assemblage derived from mere relationality.
4. Power is *intangible*. Yet, when scrutinizing both the *micro*-physics and the *macro*-physics of power, we must resist the temptation to invent a *meta*-physics of power. Rather than speculating about the secrets of agency in terms of magic-like hyperrealities, we need to examine the tangible consequences of intangible powers.
5. Power is *habitual*. As both a habitualized and a habitualizing force, power is both a structured and a structuring motor built into our daily routines. We must not forget, however, that what goes without saying comes without saying only to the extent that habitual legitimacy is not symbolically or materially undermined in moments of crisis, which can trigger, and which can be triggered by, cognitive reflexivity. Just as we are used to buying into the logic underlying different regimes of power, we are equipped with the critical capacity to question the validity of habitualized and habitualizing realities.
6. Power is *discursive*. As such, it permeates both our symbolic and our material practices. Yet, whilst interpretation and imagination can challenge the givenness of reality, action and intervention can change it. Social discourses can be orthodox and conservative, just as they can be heterodox and subversive.
7. Power is *corporeal*. It is due to the ineluctable preponderance of our bodily immersion in the world that power is always already part of who we are, not only as accomplices, but also – at least potentially – as creative actors with a sense of authorship. Power relations are inconceivable without interacting bodies.

8. Power is *polycentric*. No subject, structure, or institution in society can claim to possess a monopoly on the unfolding of worldly agency. Human beings create the conditions of their existence by shaping, and constantly reshaping, the parameters and contents of social constellations. Even if we accept, however, that society is not monolithically constituted and therefore lacks a praxeological epicentre, we need to explore why and when some sources of power are more influential than others.
9. Power is *performative*. Our performances would be powerless if power were not performative. It is far from clear, however, to what extent a world of performativity leaves room for real or imagined expressions of authenticity. If we reduce social acts to performative acts, we degrade everyday life to a power-laden stage of theatrical production, in which the struggle over symbolic and material *enjeux* amounts to little more than a ludic involvement in context-specific *jeux*.
10. Power is *normative*. Given its regulative functions, it makes us relate to and act upon the world in particular ways. Yet, power can also be a tool to subvert hegemonic mechanisms of instrumental reproduction and invent engaging processes of resourceful transformation. As social actors, we cannot exist without the ceaseless construction and reconstruction of *context-laden, value-laden, meaning-laden, perspective-laden, interest-laden, power-laden, and tension-laden* realities. As critical entities, however, we are equipped with the capacity to question the legitimacy, and expose the fragility, of totally normalized and totally normalizing normativities.
11. Power is *spatial*. The most deterritorialized realities cannot do away with the spatially contingent constitution of power. It is, after all, because resources are spatially distributed that power *matters*. The rise of increasingly globalized – and, hence, more and more interconnected – forms of sociality, however, obliges us to rethink traditional conceptions of spatiality. Power is of global significance because of, not despite, its local embeddedness.
12. Power is *temporal*. Although power will always remain an integral element of the social world, its constitution is malleable and changes across different contexts. As critical sociologists, we need to imagine ways in which our immersion in time can be converted from a *systemically regulated and instrumental mechanism*, which

escapes people's will in their everyday lives, into an *autonomously controlled and meaningful process*, which is both individually desirable *and* socially sustainable.

13. Power is *disciplinary*. The most libertarian society cannot survive without disciplinary practices. As cultural beings, we learn to control our bodies in order to be able to function within our social environments. The question is not whether or not cultural entities can escape dynamics of bodily regulation; rather, the question is to what extent these dynamics can be transformed into creative processes of emancipation, capable of undermining systemic mechanisms of domination.
14. Power is *circular*. Far from having a fixed point, power is in a constant state of flux. As a dynamic and amorphous force, it moves from place to place. Power is no less mobile than the human and non-human agents who mobilize it when navigating their way through the universe. Agents circulate by virtue of power, just as power circulates by virtue of agents.
15. Power is *transcendental*. Owing to its foundational role in the symbolic and material construction of reality, power constitutes a precondition for the development of society. Instead of posing the question of how to change the world without taking power, we should ask ourselves how to transform reality by subverting mechanisms of domination and creating social conditions capable of enhancing processes of emancipation. A minor, but not insignificant, contribution to such an ambitious endeavour would be to develop an outline of a multidimensional approach to power. The preceding reflections have sought to contribute to this journey.

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## Simon Susen

## Petnaest teza o moći

## Apstrakt

Rad nastoji da doprinese kritičkom razumevanju višeznačne prirode fenomena moći, naglašavajući njegovu mogućnost da oblikuje razvoj društva prožimanjem konstitutivnih aspekata ljudske stvarnosti. U tu svrhu, u radu se predstavlja nacrt višedimenzionalnog pristupa moći. Pristup se razvija identifikovanjem nekolicine univerzalnih karakteristika i funkcija moći. Na osnovu 15 teza, autor argumentuje da, unutar društvene stvarnosti, „moć“ moći proizilazi iz činjenice da je ona (1) sveprisutna, (2) produktivna, (3) relacionala, (4) neopipljiva, (5), habitualna, (6) diskurzivna, (7) utelovljena, (8) policentrična, (9) performativna, (10) normativna, (11) spacijalna, (12) temporalna, (13) disciplinarna, (14) cirkularna i (15) transcendentna. U smislu zaključka, rad predlaže jedan sveobuhvatan sažetak uvida koji se mogu steći, kao i izazova koji proizilaze iz pomenutog višedimenzionalnog pristupa moći.

**Ključne reči:** moć, mogućnost, delanje, sposobnost, kompleksnost, kontrola, onemogućavanje, dominacija, emancipacija, uticaj, društvo