

Reconstituting the centrality of power in management and organization studies

Chris Carter¹  | Richard Badham²  | Andrea Whittle³  | Stewart Clegg^{2,4} 

¹University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom

²University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, New South Wales, Australia

³University of Newcastle, Newcastle, England, United Kingdom

⁴University of Sydney and University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Frameworks of power redux: Navigating to a better future

Chris Carter 

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom

Abstract

This dialogue engages in some reflection on the role of power in management and organization studies, prompted by the publication of the second edition of *Frameworks of Power*, by Stewart R. Clegg (2023). The dialogue includes contributions by Chris Carter, Richard Badham and Andrea Whittle and some thoughts in response by Stewart Clegg. The dialogue begins with an overview by Chris Carter, and then the further contributions both denounce the ‘forgetting of power’ in current views of organizational phenomena—such as leadership, team behaviour and resilience—in which differences in interests and in freedom of choice seem to be missing in action. Andrea Whittle first introduces the relationship between power and leadership, as a neglected topic, followed by Richard Badham, recalling lessons from the past that should not be forgotten. Reflecting on the dialogue, Stewart Clegg responds by relating power’s salient dimensions and types to the model of circuits of power and calls for a resuscitation of some classically European management and organization theory ways of thinking about power and democracy.

Keywords: circuits of power, democracy, dimensions of power, future-making, leadership, organizations, power relations

Absences

Over the past 30 years, management and organization studies’ theory has expanded considerably, becoming more sophisticated in its theoretical and methodological range. Yet, it often sidesteps crucial aspects of power and politics. Given the undeniable and urgent presence of power and politics in everyday organizational life, this oversight is surprising. Whether it is a profitable business school facing budget cuts from the central university in which it is situated, a government slashing arts’ spending to balance the books, a significant supermarket chain squeezing the margins on one of its suppliers, or wealthy polluting countries blocking strong measures to mitigate climate change, these are all demonstrations of power and politics. Power creates winners and losers. Within the broad canon of organization and management theory, there are researchers addressing these issues, but it is rarely the go-to explanation. Instead, our research often fails to confront issues of power and politics directly. As

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Hardy & Clegg (1996) once said, 'some dare call it power', yet three decades on, most researchers prefer to remain quiet on this issue. The complex architectonics of institutional theories' logics and works or the mystical chicanery of process theory often trump the focus on power and politics. Or it might be a case that power hides in plain sight. Early theorists of the modern era of organization theory, which arguably commenced in the 1960s, were more attuned to researching power and politics (Clegg 1975; Pettigrew 1972). Their contributions remain relevant 50 years after their publication.

Antecedents

This new generation of scholars mirrored developments within social science's central boulevards of theorizing, which were busily escaping Parsons' intellectual straitjacket. Giddens (1971) rediscovered the sociological classics, examining the implications of Marx, Weber and Durkheim for modern society. In particular, he was acutely aware of how social structures reproduce themselves. The community power debates emanating from North America provided significant conceptual and empirical contributions. Most notably, Bachrach & Baratz (1970) highlighted the second face of power, exploring how power works best when behind the scenes. They showed how elites could stop uncomfortable issues from coming to the fore or kill off reforms through non-decision-making and the mobilization of bias. This critical insight is as relevant today as it was then. Fellow travellers, such as Crenson (1971), examined how corporate power prevented anti-pollution ordinances from being adopted, all without the need to intervene formally in politics. This work was produced at a time of political tumult in the United States, and the analysis focused on how power works in practical terms.

Steven Lukes (1974) extended the community power debate and coined the term the third dimension of power in his concise but brilliant book. His argument echoed fashionable structuralist analyses of the day. It made the point that power works best when there is no conflict because social agents accept the status quo as inevitable and beyond challenge. This is relevant to understanding why the peasantry or proletariat failed effectively to challenge their conditions in the 18th and 19th centuries or why employees are quiescent in the face of modern-day corporate culture programmes. Similarly, Gaventa (1980) demonstrated how the third dimension of power functioned in the traditional coal mining occupational communities of the Appalachian Valley.

Debates come and go (Clegg et al. 2022). Lukes' (1974) introduction of Gramsci's (1971) concept of 'hegemony' to a wider audience and his extension of Bachrach & Baratz's (1970) two faces of power into three dimensions led not only to a second edition of the book (Lukes, 2005) in which he discussed some of the response

to the first edition. Mark Haugaard developed the three-dimensional model further, adding a fourth dimension of power (Haugaard 2020). Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* proved fruitful for the labour process debate that characterized much work from that date until the present day, although with a declining relevance in recent times. The inheritors of Braverman's conception of power in the workplace are arguably the critical realists, who have, inter alia, made important contributions to understanding workplace resistance (Ackroyd & Thompson 1999) and elites (Reed 2012).

From the late 1970s, the influence of Foucault's (1977) ideas percolated widely. Foucault represented a very different way of thinking about power to the more structural emphasis of either Lukes or Braverman and seemed wholly disconnected from the American debates about community power that had been so significant in political science. The European debates seemed to be forming around different key texts, with the occasional synthesis of two or more strands, such as Knights & Willmott's (1989) marriage of labour process theory and Foucault (1977), pioneering a post-structural study of the workplace. Their focus was the rapidly changing financial services industry, which they interpreted using a Foucauldian reading of power and resistance, stimulating an innovative research programme (Grey 1994; Hodgson 2003; Knights et al. 1994; Knights & McCabe 1998).

In American organization theory, the debate continued to centre on resource dependence, as promulgated by Pfeffer and Salancik (Hillman et al. 2009). Curiously, while institutional theory, the US Academy of Management's major intellectual enterprise of the last 30 years, has had much to say on most things, it has fallen eerily silent on the question of power (Clegg 2010). These strands, the community power debate and the dimensions of power (Haugaard 2012), the significance of resources and organizational dependence, especially on those that were strategically contingent (Hickson et al. 1971), the labour process debates (Delbridge 2007; Knights & Willmott 2016; O'Doherty & Willmott 2001) and Foucault on power (Foucault 2019), seemed not to be interacting or addressed in the same frame.

Frameworks of power

The achievements of the writers profiled above presented a rich smorgasbord of ingredients to study power and politics for Stewart Clegg, now a central figure in power debates, when a young sociologist of organizations studying at the University of Bradford, immersed himself in these resources as well as broader interests in music, film, history, literature and politics. His career took him from crisis-hit 1976 Britain to Brisbane in the 'Deep North' of Australia. An unintended consequence of this move was that he found himself the sole organization theorist in an interdisciplinary School of Humanities,

providing a lively environment for young scholars of many disciplines, forming part of Brisbane's edgy underground scene.¹

Every theoretical framework is a product of its time and space; Clegg's (1989/2023) work is no different. His framework is a synthesis, in the same way as is Giddens's (1984) seminal *Constitution of Society*; he reprised the classics of power and embraced new developments, including Foucault, new institutionalism and actor-network theory, breaking new ground. Seemingly retaining a commitment to different levels of power, his work did so in a way that was both processual and interpretive, rather than structural. It centred on flows rather than structural determinations. Clegg's framework conjures up power as a series of interlocking circuits, it points to the interconnections, contingencies and the pervasiveness of power. Clegg's work is deeply concerned with the ethics and morality of power, something he views as stripped out of overly rationalized accounts, or those relying on engineering or biological metaphors. But his analysis is interested in the world as it is, not as it should be, voiced in a constant dialogue between theoretical concepts, history and the present. Little goes unanalysed. The premise of his work is simple: if one wants to understand organizations and their actions, it is crucial to understand power and politics. If the message was simple, the content was somewhat more complex.

Clegg's book quickly became a classic; it caught the zeitgeist of a changing world and added new concepts to complement the old. It put power firmly on the agenda for the study of organizations in the 1990s and contributed more widely to debates on power across the social sciences. For instance, Flyvbjerg (1998) and Haugaard's (1997) theorizations of power, shared a close resonance with Clegg's work. These works offered an agenda for the future. Organization Theorists, primarily in Europe and Australia, set on a new path, which, in time, took on the form of Critical Management Studies. Clegg's work was one of the foundation stones of this movement. In 1996, Clegg co-edited the *Sage Handbook of Organization Studies* (Clegg et al. 1996). This was a radical statement, as it reshaped the canon of organization studies, providing a new centre of gravity for the field. It also signalled the post-war generation's control of the discipline. It provided a much-needed re-set. The 1990s and noughties were a fertile period for sociologically oriented, organization studies. There was a flowering of creative and critical work. Clegg was undoubtedly one of the central figures of this period, with younger researchers following the path he outlined (Clegg et al. 2007; Cunha et al. 2006; Gordon et al. 2009; Kornberger et al. 2006; Kornberger &

Clegg 2011; Pitsis et al. 2003). This author was one of them (Carter et al. 2008 & 2011), heavily influenced not only by his ideas but also the *joie de vivre* associated with their expression (Clegg 1996, 2002; Clegg et al. 2000, 2004). From the vantage point of 2024, this now looks like a golden age: creativity and passion are now dwarfed by a desiccated form of institutionalism coupled with an obsession with publishing in 'A' journals (Carter & Spence 2019).

Further adventures in organization theory

The concept of power is fundamental to understanding the world but paradoxically is not so academically central to contemporary management and organization studies. While in the golden period of 1990s/2000s organization studies, there was a growing appreciation of the importance of studying power, this has dissipated. Whether this is a result of decisions taken by key actors running journals, changing fashions or a bias against analysing difficult issues during a crisis, it is apparently more difficult for many to write about power and politics in organizations.² Nonetheless, while the world has changed profoundly from these earlier times, power and politics remain central and are to be found in newer areas of research such as the burgeoning *Historical Organization Studies* movement (Maclean et al. 2016, 2018, 2021) and an increasing interest in humanizing and socializing the study of *megaprojects* (van Marrewijk et al. 2008). There are central historical debates on power, tracing the genealogies of the Hobbesian and Machiavellian traditions in social science. These traditions are important because they underlie much contemporary theoretical work. An interest in power did not just begin with the resource dependence theorists of the 1970s, or even with Crozier (1964). Power is important for understanding the past—as well as the future:

We do not have to live in the pasts that have been made in the futures still to be created ... If we are to change the world we need to change power relations. Before we can change the world then we must understand how that world was made and that requires substantial engagement with the role that conceptions of power have played in its making.

(Clegg 2023: 31)

Present histories such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Climate Emergency test the huge explanatory capacity of organization studies, something we should pursue further within broader and deep analysis founded in the craft expertise of the organization theorist, rather than the fast media pronouncements of strutting business school panjandrums,

¹Brisbane in the 1970s was deeply conservative, with endemic corruption. The flipside to this was a lively underground scene, described in Knight's account of the radical media in Queensland (in which Clegg was involved as the Jazz DJ on the Community Radio Station 4ZZZ) and Stafford's analysis of Brisbane's lively music scene, from which much memorable music, including that of The Go-Betweens, emerged.

²Peter Fleming and Andre Spicer are notable exceptions, making important and distinctive contributions to the study of power. Interestingly, at the request of Ralph Stablein, Clegg interacted with them for a short while in the University of Otago, New Zealand, in seminars when they were students in New Zealand.

pontificating about the hot topic *du jour*. It is important to remember that ‘while the future will always be uncertain, what we do and strive for in the present frames its possibilities’ (Clegg 2023: 318). This is a crucial point and one that organizational theorists should heed. The world is in a perilous state and requires scholars of all stripes to engage with its problems. To not do so is an abrogation of scholarly responsibility. In three decades from now, if the climate emergency has been mitigated, democratic institutions are thriving, inequalities have been eliminated, culture is flourishing, and people are living healthy and prosperous lives it will be a result of power and politics being mobilized for good. This is the challenge, one that must be embraced.

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ORCID

Chris Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-7577>

Richard Badham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4755-4775>

Andrea Whittle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0837-7403>

Stewart Clegg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6083-4283>

Power and leadership

Andrea Whittle 

University of Newcastle Business School, Newcastle upon Tyne, England, United Kingdom

Most researchers tend to settle on their preferred unit of analysis early on in their careers and stick to honing their craft at that level. Some researchers specialize in ‘zooming in’ to the micro-level who explore the micro-dynamics of interaction (I count myself here) or the intricacies of individual cognition in organizations. Some researchers operate more comfortably at the meso level, examining the interactions between organizations and their environments. We also have researchers who specialize in ‘zooming out’ to broader or grander issues at the macro level and explore the functions and dysfunctions of markets, institutions, societies and historical epochs. Few scholars try to work across all these levels, for obvious reasons given how challenging they are to link together in a meaningful way.

Power can be found in the most mundane circumstances, as is evident when Clegg (2023) invites the reader to ‘zoom in’ on a snippet of a tape-recorded conversation. The conversation is between men on a building site discussing ‘normal clay’ and is taken from Clegg’s earlier book *Power, Rule and Domination* (Clegg 1975: 146). It turned out that project managers were skilled at squeezing additional payments out of their clients when they succeeded in arguing that the clay into which they were digging bore holes was not ‘normal’. The fact that the men were discussing the digging of holes in the ground was, it turns out, most apt because it provided an opportunity to examine how this one micro-instance of conversation at the ‘surface’ level could provide insights into what was going on ‘below the surface’. The ‘surface’ conversation could be interpreted not only as a set of power plays in its own right but also as a manifestation of ‘deeper’ structural levels to which the analysis of power relations could then ‘zoom out’. These ‘deeper’ structural levels concerned the modes of rationality used in the workplace and the broader capitalist structures of profit maximization shaping the relations between the men and their building site managers and these managers and their clients, as well as the organizations and their owners and beneficiaries. By forging these links between the ‘surface’ and ‘deeper’ structures, a novel set of conceptual links were forged between the micro-level theories of interpretation and interaction grounded in phenomenology and ethnomethodology and

the macro-level theorists of society and economy, such as Weber.

This fascination with the linkages between the ‘small detail’ of actions and interactions and the ‘big picture’ of societies and their structures pervades some of the best work in our field. In critically assessing theories of power from across the social sciences, analysis needs to draw on political science discussions about the workings of sovereign power, community power and elites; it needs to address theories from sociology of the rules, norms and values generating social structure and order; theories from science studies on the workings of networks; theories of ideology and hegemony from neo-Marxist thinkers; and theories from post-structuralist thinkers about historical shifts in the construction of systems of thought and the subject positions they open up. It was such insights that were integrated into a theoretical model of a ‘circuit’ of power relations by Clegg (2023), akin to an electrical circuit board directing flows of electricity around the components of the circuit. The first circuit is the ‘causal’ power relations, comprising episodic power struggles (i.e. particular episodes where conflict or power plays can be observed). The second circuit is the ‘dispositional’ circuit. Here, overt conflict and struggle is not observed because this circuit provides the social rules and ‘passage points’, which create relations of meaning and membership and which creates social integration. The third circuit is the ‘facilitative’ circuit, comprising the systems of domination enacted through techniques of discipline, such as the system of surveillance.

The study of power: Taking stock

I will address the present status of teaching and research into power and organizations in business schools. The present state is both reassuring and alarming at the same time, in my opinion. The reassuring aspect is that discussions about power remain alive and kicking, albeit in some regions, some journals and some subject areas more than others. *European Management Review* has been among those journals playing a key role in pushing the frontiers of knowledge about power forward, with articles exploring power relations in settings as diverse as change initiatives in multinational corporations (Drori & Ellis 2011) and the employment of knowledge workers (Panico 2010).

That said, scholars differ on the extent to which managerialism is uncritically accepted, with its tendency to regard power as an illegitimate ‘dirty’ word and its tendency to view managerial and corporate actions as ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ unless they breach established laws or expectations. Scholars also differ on the extent to which ‘critical’ ideas about managerial and corporate power are tolerated or permitted. It is therefore not always easy for researchers or educators working in particular institutions or writing in particular journals to speak of ‘power’.

One such ‘alarm bell’, in my eyes, is found in the current state of teaching and research into *leadership*—a topic I have been exploring in recent years in my own research. Leadership is arguably one of the most popular and alluring concepts circulating in business schools today. Business school academics are told they are not educating future managers, but rather the ‘business leaders of the future’. PhD students and research associates around the world are being funded to advance knowledge about how to create more, or better, leaders. Even long-established journals are being re-titled to remove the word ‘manager’ and replace it with the term ‘leader’ or ‘leadership’.³

One effect of this discourse of leadership is that scholars seem to sidestep the fact that those in ‘leadership positions’ in organizations—in other words the ‘managers’, ‘superordinates’ or ‘administrators’ as organizational scholars used to call them in the past (Mautner & Learmonth 2020)—exercise particular forms of power that their authority position in the organizational hierarchy and the system of formal laws and established meaning systems in society enables them to exercise. Bosses can sack, discipline or demote workers, but it is considerably harder for the reverse to occur, for instance.

The result is that discussion of power is absent from all but a few critical texts on leadership (Learmonth & Morrell 2019).⁴ It is as if these other writers imagine that employees at work are just like the protestors who join Greta Thunberg on a climate protest: inspired and motivated by their leader’s vision and values but never subjected to any systems of surveillance or forms of implicit or explicit threat found in contemporary organizations. It is also as if these writers imagine that employees could simply change their minds and decide not to ‘follow’ what their bosses tell them to do, with no repercussions on them and their families and their communities, in the same way as someone could decide that morning not to bother joining Greta on her protest march and stay at home instead.

By removing power from the discourse of organizational leadership, a somewhat curious language game is at play. Gone are the descriptions of managerial control, discipline and authority. Gone are the descriptions of employee voice, resistance, misbehaviour and workplace conflict. Instead, we have ‘followers’ (not ‘employees’) who “choose to unfollow” (not ‘resist’ or ‘defy’) their ‘leaders’ (not ‘managers’) when they dislike their behaviour or disagree with them (Milosevic et al. 2020: 117), for instance.

Why the inability or unwillingness amongst contemporary leadership scholars to state what used to be so obvious that it was taken for granted, namely, that managers and employees are entwined in a *power relationship*? Learmonth & Morrell (2019) have some interesting theories about this, which also resonate with many of the arguments made elsewhere (Clegg 2023). It is perhaps a convenient fiction for contemporary capitalists and their apologists, they argue, to believe that all forms of control and authority have been removed from the workplace to be replaced with a consensual and voluntaristic process of individuals being ‘chosen’ or ‘emerging’ as leaders.

Conclusion: Moving forward in the study of power

This convenient fiction must be demystified and debunked if we are to move forward in our understanding of power in (and of) contemporary organizations. If we maintain and feed the fiction, there is no need to research the exploitation of workers on zero hours contracts, the systems of surveillance used to control Uber drivers and Amazon factory workers, or the practices of global outsourcing that multinational companies use to drive down wages and working conditions. Calling these people ‘followers’ is surely an insult, is not it? There is also no need to research pollution and environmental damage, government lobbying, tax evasion or corruption. Calling the executives behind these schemes ‘leaders’ is perhaps a bit generous and somewhat affirmative, is it not?

I am inclined to agree with Learmonth & Morrell (2019) that removing the word ‘power’ from discussions of relationships between managers and employees by relabelling them ‘leaders and followers’ is a cunning but insidious trick designed to curtail the debate about the very practices that should be most concerning us about organizations today. We need to bring power front and centre in the analysis of management and organizations today. I therefore join the other commentators in this dialogue in hoping that a renewed interest in power in organizational life, as well as the theoretical tools with which to make sense of it, will be re-sparked in these troubled 2020s.

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³For instance, in February 2022, *The Psychologist-Manager Journal* changed its title to *Psychology of Leaders and Leadership*. Source: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/mgr> (accessed 18/12/23).

⁴An important exception is Cuhna et al. (2021), which places power at front and centre of the analysis of leadership.

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ORCID

Chris Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-7577>

Richard Badham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4755-4775>

Andrea Whittle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0837-7403>

Stewart Clegg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6083-4283>

Forward to the past

Richard Badham 

University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo, New South Wales, Australia

Introduction

At a recent Academy conference, I was attending sessions on organizational learning and team resilience. Gradually, a background nagging disquiet began to build into a serious concern. There was **no** mention of power. An implicit managerialist ‘we are all in this together’ pervaded the discussion, as data, tactics and strategies about furthering the common good prevailed. There were discussions about how organizations succeeded or failed to learn without any consideration of deliberate, or institutionalized, suppression of voice. Team resilience was upheld as an ideal, without any discussion of the different and diverse aspirations, interests and career trajectories of team members that underlay the ‘collective’ endeavour. When members of the audience gently raised such issues as something to consider as part of the picture, they received an irritated dismissal from some and blank looks from others. I am not sure which was worse!

Thinking about power and organizations, my thoughts went back to this little incident. I was reminded of the title of one of James March’s (1992) papers, ‘The War is Over, the Victors have Lost’. In this paper, March noted behavioural insights were now standard fodder in microeconomics, but when one explored other areas of

management research, such as strategy, governance, human resource management and so on, these were often neglected or rationalized away. We might observe the same phenomenon with power. When researching or studying organizational behaviour, a specialized consideration of theory and data on power and politics is standard fare, albeit usually discussed in terms of exchange theory or resource dependency. But when it comes to studying other areas, of strategy, innovation and institutional dynamic, power phenomena are frequently ignored, under-emphasized and/or treated superficially.

The whole area of power, how to conceptualize it, how to study it and how to address it in its importance, its complexity, its changing forms and its frequent neglect or suppression, is captured adroitly in the classic concept of circuits of power that summarizes many of the traditional insights and debates that have lost none of their relevance. The surface play of power is invariably evident in conflicts of intentions, interests and resources. The deeper levels of institutionalized non-decision making and mobilization of bias, the social construction of interests and realms of manoeuvre are enabled and constrained by established habits, rules and discourses. A number of

power theorists, including Zanko et al. (2008) and Clegg (2023), take issue with Steven Lukes' (2025) three-dimensional view of power while drawing on its insights yet transcending them in a stimulating way that remains of immense contemporary relevance. The subject of power is very difficult to research and use in studying and seeking to influence decision-making in practice, as became apparent when I sought to apply such insights to human resource management (Zanko et al. 2008). In doing such analysis, Machiavelli's pragmatic approach to power and politics (Cunha & Clegg 2013) was of particular interest for contemporary discussions of the processes and practices of management, by weaving an appreciation of political virtuosity into discussions of leadership capabilities, strategic virtues and institutional dynamics. 'I just wish', I thought, 'that people would read this material again and reflect on its contemporary relevance'.

Mainstreaming power in management and organization studies

Despite expert discourses on power and politics (see also Buchanan & Badham, 2020; Clegg & Haugaard, 2009), the complexities and contributions of power are often more often present in their absence than taken up and properly considered in mainstream organizational studies of other topics. When it comes to the topic of managing and leading change, for example, discussions of power and politics are all too often restricted to surface 'stakeholder analyses', and one-dimensional and overly agentic treatments of 'resistance to change' (whether as a source of negative 'irrational' opposition or positive 'heroic' sabotage) (see Badham & Santiago, 2023, 'Appendix: A Resource Guide').

Why is this the case? This is a big question, and one is tempted to return to the importance and complexities of power itself. Would you really expect an institutionalized academic discourse that is attempting to be *for* managers as well as *about* them to fully consider the ethical ambiguity and insidious significance of politics-in-practice and the damning indictment of modern organizations created by the inefficiencies, contradictions and social injustices created by the persistent (and growing) inequalities of wealth and power? It would be naïve to think so. There is also another more pragmatic partial explanation. Power is notoriously difficult to study, let alone capture, in the research we undertake and the practices we embark upon. This is made even more challenging in the late modern era. In his 'Post-modern postscript', Clegg raises the issue of whether the 'forgetting of power' may be the 'fate of the times', as the traditional more simple and observable forms of causal power ('A getting B to do something he would not otherwise do') appear less significant than the power exerted by the ephemeral and shifting dispositional and productive 'black hole' of an increasingly dominant market and its consumerist 'seductions'.

Conclusion

This is an argument about what is taking place, however, not a justification. I would like to imagine a world in which organizational studies academics and those they influence, place power in its proper place, as a central guiding theme in the understanding of organizations. I would like to see researchers, teachers, students and practitioners reading about circuits of power and Machiavellianism and possessing an in-depth knowledge of the theoretical foundations and debates that ground the analysis of power. I would like, personally, to return to a discussion of the shifting nature of power and its exercise in late modern conditions when considering strategy, human resource management, innovation and change, while also paying serious attention to such traditional notions of nondecision-making, mobilization of bias and organizational outflanking. (Buchanan & Badham 2020; Clegg 2023; Zanko et al. 2008). The key significance of politics and power in all dimensions of organizational life, as well as the intellectual resources we have available to address it, should not be forgotten. Would a new and reinvigorated discussion of the theoretical foundations and empirical relevance of 'circuits of power' be too much to hope for as part of this enterprise?

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ORCID

Chris Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-7577>

Richard Badham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4755-4775>

Andrea Whittle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0837-7403>

Stewart Clegg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6083-4283>

Reflections on the dialogue

Stewart Clegg 

University of Sydney, Forest Lodge, New South Wales, Australia

Differences in North American and European approaches to power and leadership

Standard North American organization theory and that influenced by it differs greatly in its approach to the analysis of power in organizations from much that is characteristically European social science. The former's approach to power has been largely premised on resource dependence and exchange theory (Cook et al. 2018; Hillman et al. 2009), fields that, since their inception, have barely developed in tandem with the theorization of power in the wider social science literature. Lukes' (1974) work and the debates it prompted in European political and organization theory (Haugaard, 2020; Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998) seem to exist in a parallel but separate sphere to these organization theories of power. Much the same might be said of the relation of power to leadership, as the other participants to this dialogue note. Both Richard Badham and Andrea Whittle discuss leadership as largely absent in its relation to mainstream management and organization studies' discussions of power. That power is so obviously central to leadership and so skirted around is quite noticeable. When applied to leadership, some bizarre consequences arise from a theory of power only focused on imperative command, power over. Recent discussions of the 'dark' traits of leadership have been popularized by some management and organization writers on power. The organization power theorist, Jeffrey Pfeffer (2021), argues for the 'dark triad' of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy as a leadership tool based on exercising power over people and situations. Cunha et al. (2024) argue that teaching leadership as a practice of imperative command through use of the dark triad constitutes extremely bad management practice, with toxic results. It cements the legitimacy of illegitimate uses of power as a leadership tool.

Conceptualizing power in different ways

While the basic episodic and behavioural conception of power over, indicated by an A getting a B to do what they would not otherwise do, is a conception that has guided much of management and organization studies research into power in the past, there are other ways of conceptualizing power. Elsewhere, distinctions between the most usual form of power, represented as 'power over', and the less dominant conceptions of 'power to' and 'power with' have been developed (Cunha et al.

2022). Power can be conceptualized as a positive rather than a negative and constraining concept, which one can trace through works by Mary Parker Follet (1987), Talcott Parsons (1963) and Hannah Arendt (1979) and into contemporary debates, such as Gallarotti (2022) and Pansardi & Bindi (2022). The types of power known as 'power to' and 'power with' come into focus in these contributions (Pansardi 2011), in confluences and differences traced genealogically by Pansardi & Bindi (2022: 68) when they note that the three types of power seem 'to have institutionalized themselves into three different, freestanding conceptions of power'. Notably, the central structural debates about power as dimensions, à la Lukes (1974, 2005), and power as types, à la Pansardi & Bindi (2022), have remained separate. Table 1 brings them together.

The three-dimensional framework is undoubtedly useful but very structural. It has no sense of process of how one or other dimension might be established or changed, which is the key concern of the circuits of power model (Clegg 2023). What is most significant about the three dimensions cross-tabulated with the three types is what happens to three-dimensional power. In Lukes' (1974) work, it was seen largely as a form of individuals not recognizing their 'real interests', which in the 'power over' example is still largely the case (although the real interests' argument has been changed to accommodate the present wave of authoritarian populism as well as the more usual left-wing view of false consciousness). If we extend the third structural dimension to incorporate 'power to' and 'power with', then it is clear that we can only discuss these forms of power by engaging with the processes, the circuits of power, that are being constituted. For instance, the 'climate wars' of recent times depend on circuits of power being constructed as self-referential 'bubbles', as more or less closed circuits (Bromfield et al. 2021). Similarly, what the South African post-apartheid regime Truth and Reconciliation Commission did was to open up past circuits of 'power over', to encourage the 'power to' change and reconcile, to share 'power with' those that were previously only situated as the 'other' to the identity of the subjects in question (Seremani et al. 2021).

In contemporary terms, note that citizens and organizational subjects are increasingly being dealt with as recipients of 'power over' by big government and big

TABLE 1 Cross-tabulating dimensions and types of power.

	'Power over'	'Power to'	'Power with'
One-dimensional power	A exercises power over B by getting B to do something that they would not otherwise do <i>Example: A traffic policeman directing traffic</i>	Actors strive to use power to make a difference though offering specific benefits to interest constituencies <i>Example: Police authorities issuing a permit for a peaceful demonstration, on a planned route for traffic management, with future permits conditional on peacefulness</i>	Actors explicitly work by sharing power with others to achieve a common strategic purpose <i>Example: Police authorities work with education authorities to deliver road safety lessons to schoolchildren</i>
Two-dimensional power	Agendas and decision-making are organized in such a way as to create non-issues . When some things are defined as non-issues then non-decision-making applies <i>Example: Crenson's (1971) analysis of the comparative politics of non-decision-making in two steel-making towns, Gary and East Chicago, on the shores of Lake Michigan in the USA</i>	New issues can be introduced to the agenda by introducing new participants with the power to challenge implicit understandings in crucial decision-making arenas <i>Example: Legislation, such as the 2010 UK Equality Act which defines certain aspects of identity as 'protected characteristics', introducing EDI officers into organizations as a statutory requirement</i>	By sharing power with others from outside normal fields of practice, fresh issues and participants can enter strategic decision-making <i>Example: Power with facilitates personal development and growth through collaborative and democratic governance practices. Power with recognizes that working together will enable different interests to achieve mutual interest through co-determination</i>
Three-dimensional power	When subaltern interests are defined by elites, then the world is viewed in ways that reflect elite interests, establishing hegemony <i>Example: Connell's (1976) argument that media elites shape the ideas of mass publics. Initially a left-wing position, in the work of authoritarian populists, conventional media is positioned as 'fake news', imposing liberal elites' views on media consumers</i>	Power to points out fallacies in everyday thinking, when exposed to different theoretical understandings of what strategy might be and do <i>Example: broad public discourse in areas such as the 'culture wars' or 'climate wars', in which strongly divergent views are promoted with varying degrees of ideological commitment and scientific rationality in self-perpetuating circuits of discursive power that function as virtually closed 'bubbles'</i>	When diverse interests do not coincide, they can be reframed by sharing power with others through deliberative democracy <i>Example: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Seremani et al., 2019) and the work of Reconciliation Australia in promoting Truth Telling about past colonial conflict and dispossession of indigenous peoples and cultures and the need for present recognition of these</i>

organizations, using a form of 'post-human' power at an algorithmic distance, with the Australian Robodebt and UK Post Office scandals being only the most recent cases (Christie 2020; Naylor 2023). There are other ways to do things and one aspect of our craft might be to help organizations develop these ways. Although power relations and organizations are inseparable, that does not necessarily mean exercising power over people: we can create power-sharing organizations, such as citizen's assemblies (Courant 2021) that can inform the practice of strategy and mobilize debate and dialogue. We can argue that citizenship rights are not something segregated outside of organizations; organizations can be democracies as well, with all the imperfections and benefits that democracy can offer.

Power relations are the result of processes rather than being fixed inexorably in a structure as if they were a thing, and that is why the circuits of power model is so useful empirically (see, for instance, Davenport & Leitch 2005; Harrahill et al. 2023; Hutchinson et al. 2010; Ofe & Sandberg 2023; Oliviera & Clegg 2015; Silva & Backhouse 2003; Smith et al. 2010; Vaara et al. 2005). It is a tool for capturing the flux and flow of empirical power relations. For the future, thinking creatively about

designing circuits of power that can unblock three-dimensional 'power over', is something that management and organization studies can pursue as future-making that seeks to foster 'power to' and 'power with'. In the past, these were valid concerns of European management and organization studies, especially in Scandinavian debates about working life models (Abrahamson & Broström 1980). With the normalization of the field on North American models, these issues have faded, now not often considered a core part of organization and management theories. The concern is largely with what is, rather than what might be. As Follett argued, coactive 'power to' and 'power with' grow out of democracy. Why should democracy stop at the organizational door? Its complexities, its power relations, strategies and tactics, ought to be a major concern not only for everyday practice but also for theorizing about organizations and management.

Conclusion

Increasingly, the United Nations 17 Grand Challenges of Sustainable Development Goals (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) frame the thinking of conference organizers, journal editors and their contributors. It is easy to think of these as technical challenges, as issues for

engineers, planners, medical specialists, etc. Indeed, many such specialists will be and are being engaged. However, it should be apparent that technical understanding and explanation alone are insufficient. The problems are socio-technical, and wherever there are socio-technics, there will be politics and power relations. Realpolitik demands a real grasp of politics and how power relations work. Organization and management theories need to be in the position of offering advice on these matters; indeed, they ought to be offering such advice. The absence of real politics from much of their managerialism and technicism is a glaring omission; the world that management and organization studies scholars deal with is frequently one in which power relations appear not to figure—a surprising omission for people that have spent so much of their time in highly political, complex organizations, such as universities.

As a final note, let me recall from long ago, a conceptual coupling of ‘theorizing’ and ‘power’ as ‘theorizing power’ (Clegg 1975). ‘Theorizing power’ is a triple formulation: It postulates both a subject, ‘power’, and a practice that theorizes a subject, ‘theorizing power’, as well as indexing a process that may have more or less of a quality—‘theorizing power’. We need more attention to ‘theorizing power’ in all its meanings in the field of practice that defines the domains in which we work. The field of leadership is just the most glaring incidence of the absence of ‘theorizing power’. It is a field in which ‘zombie’ (Haslam et al. 2024; Niesche 2016) theories still strut their stuff, regarding leadership as a personal attribute of elites, rather than as a socially constructed account that legitimizes their ‘theorizing power’ and the lack thereof on the part of their ‘followers’ as a normal part of a reality, a reality reified heavily in the interests of those currently occupying obligatory passage points in power relations. Such approaches are theoretically lifeless, freezing social and organizational relations, bathing them in a timeless legitimacy. They make management and organization studies theory a servant of power. They do so both literally and figuratively in the latter case by minimizing the existence of those relations that elude their theoretical grasp.

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ORCID

Chris Carter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1610-7577>

Richard Badham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4755-4775>

Andrea Whittle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0837-7403>

Stewart Clegg  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6083-4283>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Chris Carter is an interdisciplinary scholar who combines organization and management theory and interdisciplinary accounting. He focuses on how people thrive in their organizations, how organizations strategize, and how they accomplish things. His major focus is on strategy and he researches and works closely with senior leaders in Scottish politics and business.

Richard Badham has been a professor at the several universities in Australia, including Macquarie, Wollongong and Sydney, where is now an honorary professor. He has developed and led innovation projects and leadership programmes for the European Commission, the West German Government, Datacom, Chris O'Brien Lifehouse at RPA, BHP Steel, Ford, James Hardies and Hoover, as well as numerous other government agencies and corporations in Australia and worldwide. He is the co-author of the best-selling academic texts, *Power, Politics and Organizational Change* (Sage Third Edition 2020) and *Ironies of Organizational Change* (Edward Elgar, 2022) as well as author of *Theories of Industrial Society* (Routledge Classics in Social Theory, 2014) as well as over 100 academic articles, book chapters and commissioned documentaries and short plays on organizational innovation and change.

Andrea Whittle's research is driven by a passion for understanding the role of language in management settings and is informed by theories and

methodologies from the fields of discourse analysis, narrative, discursive psychology, ethnography, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. She has conducted research on management consultants, identity, branding, organizational change, technology and strategy. Recent research has focused on sensemaking in official discourse and strategy discourse and narratives.

Stewart Clegg is a professor of project management at the University of Sydney and emeritus professor of the University of Technology Business School Sydney; a prolific contributor of over 600 publications to leading journals, encyclopaedias and edited collections; over 60 books, some of which have won prestigious awards from EURAM and the Academy of Management; a fellow of EURAM, Academy of Management, EGOS Honorary Member, Fellow of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM); and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences, among other honours. One of his latest books is the second edition of *Frameworks of Power* (2023).

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