Power, Foucault

by Bart Nooteboom

50. Power   published 4-11-2012

A customary definition of power is: the ability to influence the actions of others, by influencing the options from which they can choose or the choice they make. Such power can be negative in reducing options or by imposing the choice, but it can also be positive in creating more options by offering others new insights, means and room for choice. Power becomes negative when it becomes coercive, eliminating freedom by lock-in or exclusion. A monopoly excludes competing producers and thereby locks in consumers.

The exercise of influence on others is inevitable and happens all the time and everywhere. It contributes to subjugation but also to creative tension and the flourishing of life. Nietszche's philosophy is a celebration of that. A debate without power for which Jürgen Habermas strove is an illusion and is undesirable. People need each other's opposition and opposition also is power. However, power relations must not be pre-determined, institutionalised or unassailable, and there must remain the opportunity of opposition, for the creation of counter-power or escape from power.

Power arises not only on the level of individuals but also on the level of collectives such as markets, professions, industries, regions, and states. In other words, power is also a matter of systems. In a preceding item (nr. 48) in this blog I showed how people get swept up in collective interests. It goes further. People are carried along in tacit presumptions, notions, visions, habits, practices, norms, values, and expectations that are part of cultures on different levels. These are what Said in his *Humanism and democratic criticism* called the 'cultural structures of reference and attitude', and what Foucault in his *technologies of the self* called 'power of habit'. Repression or exploitation are culturally sanctioned and made immune to criticism, expelled from the arena of legitimate discourse. Foucault showed how cultural systems are internalised, how both those who exert power and those subjected to it may take it as self-evident.

What now? First of all, absolute freedom and justice cannot exist. One cannot abolish all limitation of means and possibilities. Everything that enables people to think and act also entails limits to them. One cannot look in one direction and at all others at the same time. That limitation one also imposes on oneself. There is no life without constraint.

How, then, can one escape from negative power? One can try to form countervailing power with arguments or with coalitions. That is the way of democracy. However, often arguments will not work because they go against what is taken as self-evident. Under the Soviet regime critics were seen as lunatics and put away in asylums. In democratic countries one is not imprisoned but simply ignored. Only if one commands a significant package of votes can one command attention. Ultimately, one can step outside and walk a path of one's own. That is what entrepreneurs, intellectuals and writers do. In the end that was also the way out for Michel Foucault: build your own life as a work of art.

51. Will to power

Plato said that reason must manage a team of wild horses: the horse of passion (*eros*) and the horse of self-manifestation (*thymos*). Now (as happened before in history) reason has let loose, the horses have bolted and the chariot bounces behind in shambles.

Many philosophers, Spinoza among them, claimed that the fundamental drive of nature is *conatus*, the drive to survive and manifest the self.

Nietzsche argued that the fundamental drive of nature is *will to power*, not survival. People often risk survival in order to manifest their will to power. For him, Christian morality is perverse in overruling the flourishing of life, and the demand for self-sacrifice is a ruse of the weak to control the strong.

So let us see. Does a teacher exert power over a pupil? The developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed the notion of the *Zone of proximal development*. A teacher draws a pupil into the next ('proximal') stage of development, to which the pupil by itself would not be capable. That can be negative, in forcing a child in certain direction, but mostly it is beneficial.

In the preceding piece I distinguished between positive and negative power, but the line between them is not always easy to draw. Suppose one wants to criticize a friend, because it seems needed to draw him away from trouble. How can one be sure that one is genuinely helping the friend, rather than, as Nietzsche predicts, asserting oneself, competing, or trying to establish superiority? To begin with, one should ask oneself that question, but crucial is the opportunity for the friend to disagree and set one right.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her plea for *A morality of ambiguity* asked: should one try to restrain someone at the point of suicide, by force if needed? Her conclusion is positive, provided one then also shares responsibility in what happens next. One may not then just leave the other to itself. Negative power to restrain the other should be accompanied by positive power to help find a new perspective.

In markets there is both competition and collaboration. In competition there is negative power in constraining the other's options, in collaboration there is positive power to develop new shared options. In collaboration there is power in creating mutual dependence, and even in the best of collaboration there seldom is a precise equilibrium of dependence, but there is a willingness to go far in a process of give and take, renouncing opportunities to exploit imbalance of power. I will come back to this in a later discussion of trust.

Imperialism, the striving to apply over there what one has developed over here can be a step on a path to transformation and learning, as I argued in item 31 in this blog, but it succeeds only when it fails, when it cannot impose itself on others and is forced to adapt or break through familiar structures and assumptions that were taken for granted. Imperialism triumphs only when it is defeated.

212. Pervasive power   published 17-8-2015

Here I start a series on power, using the work of Michel Foucault, with some additions, criticism and modifications.

Michel Foucault used the customary definition of power as 'actions upon actions'. Power is the potential, and its exercise, to affect the choices and actions of people. I also adopted that notion, in item nr. 50 of this blog. Thus, power can be positive, in creating novel options, eliminating constraints on choice, or negative, in reducing options or imposing choice.

When novel options for choice are not just offered but imposed, coerced, power turns from positive to negative. Force of imposition need not be physical. It can lie in threats of position, property, reputation or social acceptance, or in ideological exhortation or seduction, insidious because covert, and presented as all to the good of the self or a collective.

According to Michel Foucault, knowledge is tied up in relationships, social systems, institutions, which constitute and exert power. He famously analysed such systems in psychiatric wards, health clinics, and prisons.

I find this useful, but I do run into the following problem. Institutions are 'enabling constraints'. They are humanly constructed rules, guidelines, values, models, etc. that enable and guide actions but in doing so necessarily also constrain them. A path through a swamp enables its crossing but also constrains walk to the path, not to drown. A teacher offers a perspective and in so doing focuses and thus narrows attention. Since institutions both enable and constrain actions they entail both positive and negative elements of power. They enact power of normalization.

Heidegger talked of the need and difficulty of getting away from 'Das Man', the force of convention.

Then all institutions entail power. Language, traffic signs, advertising, values, … Since there can be no society without institutions, and no self without society, and institutions are everywhere, power is everywhere. Then, what do we do with the idea that knowledge is tied up with power?

The notion works only when we differentiate specific types (positive, negative) of power, the structure of a system, levels and concentration of power, forms and degrees of subordination and coercion, and bring in associated notions of authority, legitimacy, forms of force, debate, appeal, redress, ….

Foucault in fact did that, by focusing on specific cases (madness, illness, imprisonment). He was, in fact, against intellectual universalism and demanded analysis to apply to specific cases. Here, I do want to add more general considerations. I reject absolute universals but want to maintain generalization by abstraction, as a method of science.

Foucault made a distinction between 'connaissance' as state of knowledge, and 'savoir' as the process of its constitution[i]. From that I make a distinction between 'substantive knowledge' and 'procedural knowledge' or 'being in the know'.[ii] This connects with a distinction between 'scientific' and 'political rationality'. Being 'in the know' one knows who is what, in what roles, who are accepted as 'legitimate speakers', who has authority in what, what legitimate

discourse is, on what subjects, with what terms, with what meanings, according to what logic, on what occasions, and on what locations. Foucault conducted such analysis, as I will discuss in later items in this blog.

Not being 'in the know', one will be marginalized, ignored, or disciplined, no matter how much relevant substantive knowledge one has. This is how intellectuals often become ineffective. When in political wrangling a plan of action has finally been arrived at, at great cost of lobbying and compromise, those 'in the know' are not going to let themselves be side-tracked by some lone, errant intellectual or band of outsiders. Or even voters.

Earlier, in item 206, I suggested that in the Greek crisis, what happened was that, as I would now say, 'the Greeks were not in the know'.

213. The causality of power   published 28-8-2015

If power is indeed a matter of 'actions on actions', as assumed in foregoing items in this blog, then perhaps one can analyse it further on the basis of a causality of action. As earlier in this blog, in items 96-100, here I use the multiple causality of action proposed by Aristotle. The *efficient cause* is who/what acts, with the *material cause* of means, according to the *formal cause* of knowledge/skill/technology, with the *final cause* as the goal of action, under the *conditional cause* of circumstances (that enable or constrain the other causes), possibly following some *model* (the *exemplary cause*).

In one of his publications[iii] Foucault considered 'how to analyse the power relationship', and *proposed the following elements:*
1. *The efficient cause* concerns who is able to act. That seems to appear in what Foucault called *The system of differentiations* that *permit one to act*, in 'differences of status or privileges, economic differences in the appropriation of wealth or goods, differing positions within processes of production, linguistic or cultural differences, differences in know-how and competence, etc.'
2. The *final cause* concerns why people exert power. That seems to appear in *The types of objectives* 'pursued by those who act upon the actions of others: maintenance of privileges, accumulation of profits, the exercise of statutory authority, the exercise of a function or trade'.
3. The *formal cause* concerns how power is exerted. It seems to appear in *Instrumental modes* such as 'threat of arms, … speech, … economic disparities, .. means of control, systems of surveillance, .. rules, .. means of enforcement'.
4. The *conditional cause* concerns the conditions under which power is exerted. That seems to appear in *Forms of institutionalization* such as 'legal structures, .. habit or fashion, .. hierarchical structures, .. the state …' I would add: the structure of networks and one's position in them. I discussed this in item 209.

In Foucault's account I see no clear material cause. That might include information used to exert power.

Why is this multiple causality useful here? If it is valid, it renders Foucault's analysis less arbitrary or ad-hoc, more systematic, thus linking it to other issues and analytical perspectives.

While power can be positive, widening options and freedom of choice, the analysis focuses on the negative side. To include the positive side, in the final cause one might include a striving for justice, equity, legitimacy, etc. In the formal cause: development of capabilities, forms of complaint and redress, debate, opposition, etc. In the conditional cause: democratic procedures, elections, plebiscites, laws and regulations of labour, competition, reporting, civic responsibility, etc.

Also, a causality of action might be used it for the other side of the coin: of actions of those who are subjected to power, in an analysis of counter-power. This would yield something like the following.

1. Efficient cause: Coalition formation, …
2. Final cause: Justice, equity, countervailing power, ..
3. Formal cause: capabilities, know-how ('being in the know', as discussed in the preceding item in this blog), forms of control (e.g. the 'horizontal control' discussed in item ….), whistle blowing, protection against ostracism or retribution, …
4. Conditional cause: democratic procedures, a culture of trust, …
5. Material cause: access to information, …
6. Exemplary cause: role models such as Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, …..

Finally, one should also consider the phenomenon of 'involuntary power', where people, organizations, or governments are caught in prisoners' dilemmas. I discussed this as part of 'system tragedy', in items 109, 113, 159, 187, 190.

The example was banking, where employees and banks, or some of them, see the unethical nature of their conduct, and may honestly want to change but cannot afford to do so unless the others do so as well, and governments do not intervene to impose proper conduct out of fear of driving out their banking sector. Here, the final cause is institutionally imposed rather than chosen. The conditional cause determines the final cause.

214. Language games of power   published 31-8-2015

Here I make a connection between Foucault's notion of knowledge embedded in structures of power, and Wittgenstein's notion of language games. Perhaps the two notions are complementary, enriching each other.

According to Wittgenstein, if you want to know what the meaning of a word is, see how it is used. Then you see that it is connected with meanings of other words, in a *language game*. If you do not play by the rules, or are unfamiliar with them, you are out of the game. The meanings of the words you use are not those of the game, and you get excluded or ignored. This connects, I propose, with Foucault's notion of 'savoir', knowing the system and how it works, needed to be seen and accepted as a legitimate participant. Knowing how to play he language game.

As suggested earlier in this blog (in item 206), this seems to be part of the Greek crisis: the Greeks were not 'in the know' and did not play by the rules of the dominant language game imposed by the officials and politicians of the EU.

According to Foucault, discourse is embedded in a non-discursive context. In the Greek case this included, among other things, the condition that EU politicians feel the electoral pressure from rightist, nationalist populist parties, which presses them to resist further financial aid, let alone any cancelling of Greek debt. The IMF, being less, or less directly, political, did plead for substantial cancelling of debt.

Apart from the more or less visible structures, of participants, discourse, interests, positions, resources, etc., Foucault recognized the importance of the 'deep structures', the unconscious, of thought. Those are embedded in language, I add.

In his *Archaeology of knowledge* Foucault assigned several types of rules to 'discursive formations', as follows[iv]:

1. *Rules for the formation of objects*, i.e. what the discourse is about, including their source, in a selection from a social context, to be transferred to the discourse, those who have the authority to decide what objects are admitted. For example, in the Greek case the discourse is about financial viability, not about social justice.
2. *Rules for regulating discourse*, in determining who has the right to use a given mode of speech, the site where legitimate discourse takes place, the position of someone making a statement about the objects of discourse. In the Greek case: members of the established constellation of the EU (with the IMF more peripheral), Brussels as the site of discourse, and whether the participant in the discourse is a minister of finance, head of state in the EU, head of the central bank of the EU, or official from the IMF.
3. *Rules concerning who governs the formation of concepts*, i.e. the basic logic, methodology, range of accepted statements, statements admissible from other discursive formations, and relevant memories from history associated with accepted statements, and 'procedures for intervention' in the approximation and delimitation of statements and the generation of new ones. In the Greek case, I propose that this is largely a rhetoric of globalized markets, statements from (mainstream) economics and finance, the history of capitalism, and the management of meetings and reports.
4. *Rules for the formation of strategies*, i.e. specific doctrines, principles and guidance for the efforts of individual participants, the possible branching out of discourse into different, possibly mutually conflicting directions, and influences from non-discursive. Here, the Greeks tried to open up the discourse to issues of European solidarity, social justice, and historical antecedents. A branching occurred between the positions of the EU and of the IMF.

Is this analysis helpful to better understand the Greek case? Or, conversely, is it helpful for a further elucidation and specification of Wittgensteinian language games?

215. Ideology, power and knowledge   published 7-9-2015

Ideology loads actions and knowledge with strongly held, prejudicial convictions of interest, purpose, and perspective. It used to be thought that ideology may be avoided, certainly in science, in disinterested, objective knowledge. That is an illusion, according to Nietzsche and Foucault, and I agree. Is every knowledge ideology, then? I don't think so.

Ideology immunizes itself against critical discourse, blinding itself, deliberately or not. While knowledge is inevitably biased it can yet be open to debate, pursuing what earlier in this blog (item 104) I called *warranted assertibility*, where one accepts the obligation to substantiate

one's view with arguments and facts, even though those are never objectively or 'rock-bottom' true. So, if there is anything left in the way of a universal principle of scientific morality, it is that.

Karl Popper laid down the principle that scientists should seek falsification, not corroboration of theory. Instead of looking out for facts that confirm, they should look out for 'forbidden events' at odds with the theory.

In fact, in science there is bias, dodging forbidden events and criticism, posturing, clamour, painting caricatures, ridiculing the opposition, setting up straw men to flog, in order to draw attention, or to protect established reputation and authority. So, Nietzsche and Foucault are right to say that knowledge entails battle, fight for power.

Counter to Popper's scientific morality, in fact scientists routinely seek confirmation rather than falsification.

Progress in knowledge is seldom up to an openness of the individual scientist to criticism or falsification, and more a matter of battle, in rivalry and competition, in arenas of publication and debate, within and between disciplines. Scientists try to falsify not their own theories but those of colleagues.

That may not be so bad, but the process is affected, indeed shaped, by positions and roles of authority, in editorial teams and boards, and by dominant styles and practices of research and publication .

Presently, scientific authority derives from one's number of citations or publications in highly cited journals, and then gives access to positions of gatekeeping in editorial positions of journals. Countries with a large audience, such as the US, yield the advantage of a larger basis for citation. One gets cited more often as an American. People gain advantage by investing, diligently and diplomatically, in positions in networks, building on and citing the work of the 'top dogs', the gatekeepers, imitating their style and acquiring their patronage.

Top dogs serve as role models, and dominant styles get established. For example, from the US, the norm of producing 'single-issue' papers, not ranging too widely, going for incremental, recognizable and easy to place results, rather than ambitious breakthroughs, and aiming for the high-impact journals, which often means US journals. In the rat race for careers Europeans argue that 'If you can't beat them, join them'.

Top economic journals select according to the 'spirit of geometry' enshrined in mainstream economics. I once submitted a paper to such a journal and received the following one line of response: 'This paper does not maximize utility subject to constraints, therefore it is not science'.

 Here, science indeed comes perilously close to ideology.

217. How power can destroy itself   published 21-9-2015

Power seems attractive but when excessive can turn against itself, in several ways.

Excessive power can breed excessive distrust, to the point of paranoia. This appears to have happened to Stalin, for example. If one has absolute power, people have no other option than to obey, resign and submit. But trust is meaningful only when there is freedom of choice. When there is no option for people but to obey, the powerful one becomes suspicious of trustworthy behaviour: aren't people only obeying because there is no alternative, out of fear rather than loyalty, while in fact they are not to be trusted? Everyone becomes subject to suspicion.

When people fear to criticize, the bearer of power lacks opposition, which is needed to correct errors, and sinks away in delusion.

A similar problem arises for the rich or beautiful: one suspects being liked for that rather than for one's self.

If in entering a new, foreign field of action, one can impose one's familiar views and practices, without the need to adjust to local views and conditions, then one robs oneself of the opportunity to learn by adopting and incorporating local ideas or practices. The path to innovative 'novel combinations' is blocked.

This has happened, for example, to Western firms in the early development of China, where they had the power of offering superior technology, design, employment and access to markets, which enabled them to impose their conditions.

Imperialism can cripple itself.

In item 206 of this blog I asked whether this also happened, perhaps, when the EU imposed its will and regime on Greece.

A second way in which power can destroy itself is the following. Nietzsche defined will to power as the enjoyment of overcoming resistance. That can also turn against itself. Nietzsche proposed that the will to power of the losers, the weak, the oppressed (the 'slaves') can command pity and a morality that restrain the powerful ('the masters'), and then the will to power of the latter, failing to get purchase on the surrounding weak, may turn in upon itself, devouring itself in guilt.

I think this is what Ayn Rand[v] had in mind with her Nietzschean plea for the masters not to give in.

However, turning will to power inside, against inertia, resistance in oneself, may also yield a mastering, a transformation, transcendence, growth of the self, as Nietzsche (but not Ayn Rand) recognized. But where would one get the insight, the material for that? How does one know towards what to transcend, and how? For this, I have argued in this blog (item 60) that one needs opposition from others, to make manifest how one's ideas and practices fail and in what direction one might find a way to change them. So, here also power fails unless it opens up to others.

This connects with the distinction between negative and positive power. In negative power, one restricts access of others to opportunities, including access to oneself, to criticism against oneself, thus locking oneself up in oneself. Positive power opens up opportunities, including

opportunities to criticism and deviance, which can enrich oneself, opening opportunities for oneself.

Beyond individual power, how about power embodied in social systems of knowledge, positions, relations, dependence, authority, and institutions, discussed in preceding items in this blog? System power can also turn against itself, in similar ways, getting mired in distrust and paranoia against the outside world, robbing itself of challenges to adapt.

Here also, one needs to open up to influence, to variety of outside views. That, after all, is the virtue of democracy.

Hopefully, the financial sector will catch on to this, before it destroys itself from its own power.

244. Žižek and Foucault   published 1-2-2016

In the preceding item of this blog (242), on Heidegger and Levinas, I discussed possible ways around finitude, inevitable death. Here I discuss possible ways out from collectivity.

Foucault showed how practices and thought are caught in social systems (of the prison, clinic, psychiatric ward, etc.) that damage people and are yet tacitly, implicitly taken for granted, so that even the victims resign themselves to them.

In earlier items of this blog I discussed the notion of 'system tragedy', where people are ensnared in structures of different levels of interlocking institutions, positions, roles, practices, prisoner's dilemma's and discourses, guided by ideologies that block their recognition

Žižek, following much of Lacan (though not always faithfully), similarly talks of the 'symbolic order', framed by ideology, which is difficult to escape or change from within. Instead of recognizing the inevitable imperfections and prejudices of any.such social order, those are attributed to outside causes or agents (races, religions, immigrants,…).

Earlier, in items 36 and 37 of this blog, I contrasted democracies with authoritarian regimes, with the former acknowledging its imperfections, with elections as a means to weed them out, and the latter projecting an image of infallibilty, hiding or denying failures or attributing them to outside causes. However, democracies also cannot escape the guidance of ideology, such as market ideology, that blind liberal democracies to the failures that are breeding revolt

How to get away from the collectivity, the symbolic order, as an individual?

In his late work, Foucault ended up proposing to 'shape the self as a work of art', somehow beyond the reach of the system. How can this be done without falling into solipsism, idiosynctaric isolation? Žižek[vi] proposed that one can only escape by a revolutionary 'act' that is blind, without argument or justification, throwing itself off the cliff of established order. Being constituted by the symbloic order, in escaping from it one commits symbolic suicide.

So, how to proceed?

Lacan and Žižek depart from a notion taken from de Saussure that 'a word means what others don't'. Thus, no word has meaning by itself (is 'empty', in one of the hyperboles of Lacan and Žižek), but only as part of the whole of the symbolic order. That produces the ineluctable system in which one is caught. Then the only way out is destruction of the whole of that order, or. symbolic suicide (Žižek), or solipsism (Foucault).

I think that perhaps there is another way out, in the indeterminacy and open-endedness, the vagueness of meaning. The symbolic order is 'gappy'. It is not a closed, rigorous logical order with necessary and sufficient conditions for something to fall under the ambit of the meaning of a word. For any definition that you may give of the notion of a 'chair', I can give you counterexample. This indeterminacy of meaning offers scope for deviance and transformation.

To be more precise and analytical[vii], I return to the account of meaning in terms of the 'hermeneutic circle' that I used before in this blog. One the one hand we have existing concepts, 'paradigms', wrapped in clouds of connotation that are partly idiosyncratic to the individual, from where words are cobbled together in sentences, 'syntagm', where relevant meanings are picked out from the cloud to fit the context, in conjunction with thos of the other words in that sentence. Novel contexts, yielding novel and odd looking phrases, may cause a shift of meaning of a concept used in the sentence, a reshuffling of the set of connotations That happens most prominently in poetry.

This yields room for freedom within the symbolic order. Perhaps this is also how one might understand Foucault's notion of 'creating your life as a work of art'. There is room for more or less odd, eccentric shifts of meaning. And sometimes those are adopted more widely, causing a ripple in the symbolic order.

Here I recall de Saussure's distinction , used before in this blog, between the given, intersubjective linguistic order, in 'langue', and the idiosyncratic living.practice of language, in 'parole', which may shift the order in time.

Of course, one will often be left holding an unassimilable oddity that may never be adopted in the established order. But even then one does not stand emptyhanded, necessitating žižek's blind dive or Foucauldian solipsism. One may persevere in trying to show how, crazy as it seems, the shift does work in the novel context.

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[i] In an interview conducted by D. Trombadori in 1978. See James D. Faubion (ed), *Essential works of Foucault* 1954-1984: *Power*, Gallimard 1994.
[ii] Among Dutch policy makers there is the expression of 'knowing which way the hares are running'.
[iii] *The subject and power*, first published in English as an appendix to Hubert Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow (eds.), '*Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*', 1982.
[iv] P. Gary Gutting, 1989, *Michel Foucault's archaeology of scientific reason*, Cambridge University Press, p. 234-239.
[v] Author of *Atlas shrugged* and *The fountainhead*.
[vi] In his *Enjoy your symptom,* 1992.
[vii] To use a word that may cause horror and trigger ostracism from post-modern discourse that sees itself as antithetical to analytical philosophy.