



Book review

Torben Bech Dyrberg, *The Circular Structure of Power: Politics, Identity, Community*. New York: Verso, ISBN: 1–85984–846–X (hardcover), ISBN: 1–85984–152–X (paperback), 1997.

No concept has been more central to contemporary discussions of politics than power, yet it remains a concept resistant to theoretical analysis. Disposed to reject the view that power admits of abstract definition or contains an underlying essence, Torben Bech Dyrberg provides an analysis of power that focuses upon its operation in the constitution of identity and in processes of identification within the realm of the political. Dyrberg's approach eschews several dichotomies contained within mainstream analyses of power, including that between agency- and structure-based views, and aims to carry forward Michel Foucault's analysis with the final aim of drawing out the political consequences of a postmodern conception of power.

Dyrberg rejects theories of power that in essentialist fashion analyze power as a causal mechanism rooted in either agency or structure, including liberal, pluralist, and behaviorist accounts. What such theories mistakenly assume, Dyrberg asserts, is a conception of agents and structures as "externally related" entities fully constituted prior to the advent of power relations rather than, in nonessentialist and postmodern fashion, as always already constituted by power. The latter analysis Dyrberg defends, taking Foucault's analysis of power as better suited to comprehend the ubiquity and growing contextualization of power together with the latter's rejection of the dichotomization of the social and the political, power and subjectivity, and so on.

A theory of power, according to Dyrberg, must not attempt to ground or derive power from something other than itself but elaborate a nonderivative conception. Invariably regarded as an "ability" of one or another description, what is in question is the basic manner in which such an ability is constituted. The notion of ability belongs to the constitution of subjectivity – a subject that "has" power – yet what, the author inquires, is the nature of this "having:" "how do we theorize or come to understand the very conditions within which ability is made possible, particularly when the concept of agency as such is being challenged?" (p. 8) Power is a ubiquitous feature of human relations and of agency itself, inscribing itself within identity through processes of

identification. Yet processes of identification themselves occur within a complex order of power relations, producing a paradoxical analysis of power as a form of ability that is itself constituted by relations of power.

“[T]he most effective way to understand power,” Dyrberg argues, “is to approach it in terms of processes of identification.” (p. 13) Upon analysis these very processes are steeped in political power struggles of varying kinds – hence the “circular structure” of power. “[T]he *ability* to make a difference is itself constituted by the making of differences, meaning that power as ability poses itself as if it was presupposed.” (p. 28) Dyrberg examines the political mechanisms at work in the formation of identity, again taking Foucault’s work as a point of departure and supplementing this with an attempt to spell out the political implications of a theory of power thus conceived.

If power is no longer to be viewed as an external relation between fully constituted identities but as internal to identity itself, our view of democratic politics must be modified accordingly. The principal question facing democratic politics can no longer be how to eliminate power (given its ineliminability in the fashioning of identity and ubiquity in human relations) but how to democratize it or render its exercise compatible with democratic values.

How are notions of community, the common good, and the public interest to be conceived in the light of a nonessentialist conception of power? Here Dyrberg takes up the notion of “radical democracy” as a critical principle for the exercise of power within political settings. Democracy so conceived is a pluralistic, egalitarian, and inclusivist principle, one ostensibly opposed to all forms of political hegemony. From a democratic point of view, the public interest and common good are not a substantive set of shared preferences but a pluralistic acceptance of difference, where an acceptable difference is taken to be “an action, practice, value, utterance, rule or a form of life that is publicly reasonable *vis-à-vis* the ethico-political horizons of a political community.” (p. 199)

The circularity contained in this definition of politically acceptable differences is, Dyrberg maintains, unavoidable and even necessary since any noncircular definition would invariably have recourse to a substantive and potentially hegemonic conception of the good. A nonhegemonic notion must aim at a condition of inclusive pluralism, one in which conflicting interests, values, and worldviews are able to coexist. The public interest is neither a common element underlying all private interests nor a mere imposition by political rulers, but is fashioned argumentatively in public forms of reasoning. Interests that qualify as public are characterized by inclusivity and universality, are opposed to private interests which by contrast are particular in nature and mutually exclusive, and give rise to an egalitarian political order. The best hope of derailing hegemonic power strategies, the author believes, is “to radicalize democracy by deepening and spreading the egalitarian imaginary to wider and wider segments of the political community.” (p. 208)

Where Dyrberg's analysis falls short is in failing to delimit in precise terms the just scope of democratic principles. Within its rightful domain democratic values furnish uncontroversially just procedures of settling political conflicts, yet precisely how far this domain properly extends and wherein lies its limit are unavoidable questions for democratic politics. After Foucault (indeed, after Nietzsche – or, indeed, after Hobbes), the question of power can no longer be how to secure its democratization. How power may be constrained, including the power of democratic majorities (and including those that are avowedly egalitarian and inclusivist), in order that democratic practice may not itself become hegemonic, as James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, and others have long warned, is a matter that Dyrberg's "radical democracy" fails adequately to address.

Finally, if a brief note on writing style is not out of order, it bears mention that Dyrberg's manner of expression is frequently marked by a rather advanced degree of unclarity. While a propensity for lucidity and disdain for technical buzz-words are not altogether what one has come to expect from certain contemporary schools of thought, including Dyrberg's, the author's use of language, while eminently fashionable, is often unnecessarily cryptic and occasionally tortured.

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