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Stewart R. Clegg is Research Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney and Director of CMOS Research.

Mark Haugaard is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Sociology at NUI, Galway.

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The SAGE Handbook of Power
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Power

Edited by
Stewart R. Clegg
and Mark Haugaard
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Introduction: Why Power is the Central Concept of the Social Sciences

Mark Haugaard and Stewart R. Clegg

The concept of power is absolutely central to any understanding of society. The ubiquity of the concept can be seen by a comparative Google search. The score for ‘social power’ is 376 million hits, for ‘political power’ 194 million which compares with 334 million for ‘society’, 253 million for ‘politics’, 52 million for ‘sociology’, ‘social class’ at 280 million and ‘political class’ at 111 million. Of course, such measures are crude but the fact that the combined 470 million social and political power hits outstrip any of the other categories, including the combined hits for ‘social’ and ‘political class’, indicates the absolute centrality of the concept. However, despite this ubiquity it is arguably one of the most difficult concepts to make sense of within the social sciences. Nonetheless, it has been a core concept for as long as there has been speculation about the nature of social order (Wolin 1960).

The Ancient Athenians distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate power in terms of a contrast between power that accorded to the dictates of law (nomos) and power which exalted the glorification of a specific individual (hubris). In the work of Aristotle, arguably the world’s first empirical political scientist, this became refined in terms of a sixfold classification of governments according to whose interests are served. Monarchy is the government of the many in the interests of all, Aristocracy by the few in the interests of all, constitutional government is by the majority in the interests of all, while the corrupt illegitimate versions of this are Tyranny, Oligarchy and Democracy, in which the one, the few or the majority each govern in their own interests, disregarding the interests of the whole.
In Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1981) we find images of power as domination and control, which work in subtle ways; the successful Prince manages society through the manipulation of flows and movements of power. The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power becomes subsumed under the dominant discourse of practical success and failure. Power is exercised over others and society constituted through the domination of the weak by the strong. If Niccolò Machiavelli offers one influential modern template for thinking about power, Thomas Hobbes offers another.

In Hobbes (1968), power flows from society to the individual. The political actor creates society as an architectonic product, which gives individuals a capacity for action. The ultimate backing for power is violence and coercion over which the Sovereign holds a monopoly. As represented in the frontispiece of the *Leviathan*, society is the sum of individuals who carry and constitute power. If Hobbes’ discourse was closely tied to the legitimacy of sovereign power as a presupposition of a commonwealth, by the late nineteenth century the terms of power’s address were changing radically.

For Nietzsche (1968), power is a capacity to define reality. If you can define the real and the moral, you create the conditions of legitimacy. The terms of trade of legitimacy have changed markedly: what is at issue now, of course, is not normative legitimacy, as in Aristotle, but legitimacy as a sociological fact of domination and, as it had been in Machiavelli, the fate of mankind. What sometimes may appear as an escape from power and domination is really the replacement of cruder forms of domination by more sophisticated and thus less visible forms. In Weber (1978), the English term ‘power’ covers both *Herrschaft* and *Macht*, which correspond to authority and coercion respectively; thus, power can either be legitimate or based upon the threat of violence.

The intricacies of legitimate versus illegitimate power; of coercion versus authority; of collective systemic versus individual agent specific power; of constitutive power versus power from which there is escape, and of power as autonomy versus constraint, are all aspects of power’s many faces which have shaped contemporary perceptions of power in the social sciences. Tangled up with these central perceptions of power’s empirical character are a great many normative issues, often encoded in different forms of address of the same topic. For instance, political philosophy or political theory were both more inclined to engage with power in normative terms, with what should be done, while political science and political sociology were more inclined to engage with power in empirical terms, looking at what is done rather than what should be done. Yet, for all this institutional separation, there has been a tendency for normative issues to intrude, except for the most self-consciously ascetically empiricist of practitioners. This is especially the case in more recent debates in which the threads of genealogy, that we have briefly sketched, have tended to weld their way into empirical analysis.

After World War II, the consensual view of power, as a capacity for action, as ‘power to’, came to the fore through the work of Hannah Arendt (1970), Talcott Parsons (1964) and Barry Barnes (1988). For these thinkers, power constitutes the opposite of coercion and violence, and is thus a prerequisite for agency. The Hobbesian view of power, as domination exercised by individuals, is reformulated by many including by Robert Dahl (1957, 1961, 2006), Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962, 1963, 1970) and Steven Lukes (1974, 1977, 1986, 2005). Foucault (1977) emerges as the prime rejuvenator of the Machiavellian and Nietzschean view of power as a systemic phenomenon which is constitutive of social reality. Following this, Stewart R. Clegg (1989), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985),