

POWER AND CULTURAL EVOLUTION

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Abstract: While power has long been a philosophical topic and is one of the central concepts in the social sciences, it is virtually absent from cultural evolutionary theory, which has been presented as suitable and promising for explaining human culture and sociality, their change and complexity. There are, however, two concepts that cultural evolutionary theory employs and that are arguably related to that of power: *dominance* and *prestige*. I argue that these concepts are not fit for the task and advocate a pluralistic approach to the study of our social reality, including the power relations essential to it.

Keywords: *cultural evolution, power, dominance, prestige, pluralism.*

Resumen: Si bien el poder ha sido un tema filosófico desde hace mucho tiempo y uno de los conceptos centrales de las ciencias sociales, está prácticamente ausente de la teoría de la evolución cultural, que se ha presentado como idónea y prometedora para explicar la cultura y la sociabilidad humanas, su cambio y complejidad. Sin embargo, existen dos conceptos que la teoría de la evolución cultural emplea y que podrían estar relacionados con el de poder: dominio y prestigio. Sostengo que estos conceptos no son adecuados para esta tarea y defiendo un enfoque pluralista para el estudio de nuestra realidad social, incluyendo las relaciones de poder que la caracterizan.

Palabras clave: *evolución cultural, poder, dominio, prestigio, pluralismo.*

Received: 4 July 2025 **Accepted:** 27 January 2026 **Published:** 21 February 2026

1. INTRODUCTION

Power has a long history as a philosophers' occupation. It was discussed by Plato in the *Sophist*, by Locke in the *Essay concerning human understanding* (1689), by Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (1651), and by Spinoza in the *Tractatus politicus* (1670), to name just some of the classic works on the subject (for a good historical overview of theorising on power see Wartenberg 1990, p.20-6). More contemporary works include Max Weber's *Economy and society* (1922), Bertrand Russell's *Power: A new social analysis* (1938), Hannah Arendt's *On violence* (1970), and Michel Foucault's *Power* (2000).

Power is also one of the central concepts in the social sciences. During centuries of debate, power has been conceptualised in a diverse variety of ways and used for a number of purposes. One of the main divisions in the literature is the one between the concept of power-over, often linked to domination, and power-to, often linked to empowerment. Another important point of disagreement relates to the question whether power is a property of an agent, a relationship between agents, a property of social structures and systems, or some combination of these. In more agent-oriented accounts, the question arises of what counts as an agent: individual humans, structured human groups, or some other entities. Power has also been thought of as existing in several "dimensions", the first dimension including the power to get another to do something he otherwise would not (Dahl 1969), the second dimension including keeping something from happening (Bachrach & Baratz 1969), the third including cases when an agent affects another's interest without the less powerful agent being aware that is so (Lukes 2005; see also Wartenberg 1990). Other important developments in sociological tradition include Talcott Parsons' concept of specifically political power as analogous to money and a phenomenon of both coercion and consensus (Parsons 1963), Anthony Giddens' theory according to which two main sources of power are dominion over material facilities and dominion over activities of human beings (Giddens 1985), and Michael Mann's, identification of four different sources of power: ideological, economic, military and political (Mann 1986). Various forms of power and their workings have also been addressed by scholars working in critical sociology in relation to, for instance, education and religion (e.g. Apple 1996, Hjelm 2013), postcolonial studies (e.g. Said 1978, Sharp 2022), and feminist theory (e.g. Allen 1999, Hartsock 1983, Fraser 1989)¹. This short overview provides just a taste of the vast diversity of forms, bases and uses of power. Their important differences notwithstanding, there is a broad consensus among social theorists on the importance of the concept of power in the social sciences, for theoretical, practical, moral and political purposes.

It may come as a surprise, then, that the concept of power is virtually absent from the approaches to the study of human sociality known as cultural evolutionary theory. Cultural evolutionary theory is a research programme that aims to apply methods and concepts from evolutionary theory in biology to the study of human culture and sociality. In this article, I will be primarily interested in cultural evolutionary theory in the tradition of authors such as Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981), Boyd and Richerson (1985, 2005), Henrich (2015) and Mesoudi (2011) (even though, needless to say, the arguments and concerns raised will apply to any other approach with similar theoretical commitments). This kind of approach has grown in popularity in recent decades, with its practitioners expanding their study and applying it to a

¹ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for pointing me to this diverse literature.

broad variety of social, cultural and historical phenomena. Its apparent success has prompted some of its proponents to proclaim it *the* framework to “explain human culture” and “synthesise the social sciences” (Mesoudi 2011). Even if most other claims regarding the proper place and use of cultural evolutionary theories have been (overtly) more modest, ambitious proposals abound: from using cultural evolutionary methods to explain the development of science and technology (Mesoudi et al. 2013) to using it to model the rise and fall of empires (Turchin 2003). In brief, cultural evolutionary theory is presented as a suitable and promising framework for explaining human cultural and social phenomena, including their change and complexity, yet when it comes to power it remains silent. This cultural evolutionists’ issue with power has already been noted several times (Fracchia & Lewontin 1999, 2005; Cofnas 2018; see also Lewens 2015, ch.7 and Valković 2023).

The remarkable absence of a concept of power in a theory with such an aim notwithstanding, there *are* two concepts that cultural evolutionary theory does employ and that are arguably related to the concept of power. These concepts are dominance and prestige. Dominance is taken to include the use of threat, intimidation or coercion in order to gain influence, while prestige refers to the influence, admiration and respect gained by having skills and knowledge that others wish to gain (Brand & Mesoudi 2019, Jimenez & Mesoudi 2021, Maner & Case 2016). These two concepts are used to account for cultural change in which different kinds of social hierarchy play a role. However, they clearly come short of the variety of meanings and purposes associated with the concept of power in the social sciences.

In this paper I will argue that these concepts are not fit for many of the tasks that social scientists use the concept of power for and that retaining a rich concept of power is essential for understanding and explaining cultural and social phenomena, including processes of change and other phenomena of a central interest to the cultural evolutionist. My aim in this article is not to privilege or argue for one particular definition of power, but instead to showcase the richness of the concept(s) and to show how none of these classic and common notions of power have an analogue in cultural evolutionary theory. One of the implications of this discussion is that cultural evolutionary theories are not fit for at least some of their stated purposes. Whether this kind of theory presents a useful simplification of some areas of human social reality or a fundamentally mistaken approach to it remains an open question. In light of this conclusion, a pluralistic approach to the study of human social reality, including the power relations that are essential to it, is recommended in place of any hasty attempts at a synthesis.

In what follows, I will first present the accounts of prestige and dominance, the concepts most closely related to that of power, as developed by cultural evolutionists working on the subject (Henrich & Gil-White 2001, Brand & Mesoudi 2019, Jimenez & Mesoudi 2021, Maner & Case 2016). Then I will use some of the social scientific insights on power to show what is missed by the dominance-prestige dichotomy. Here I will focus mostly on the discussion of power as it developed from the influential debate on the subject among American sociologists in the second half of the last century (Dahl 1957, Bachrach & Baratz 1962, 1969, Lukes 2005, Wartenberg 1990). I will conclude by briefly discussing two potential remedies available to cultural evolutionary theorists and a call for pluralism in the study of power and society and culture more generally.

Reasons to focus on the authors in this so-called power debate are multiple.

First, this literature had a considerable influence on thinking about power in sociology and outside it, and the authors remain central to the debate. Second, the notions of power outside of this debate tend to be more complex (and often more controversial) than within this literature. This means that, if cultural evolutionary theory cannot even handle these notions of power, then it could even less handle other, more complex ones. Finally, this literature is remarkably clear and accessible, and the way in which the concepts and phenomena of power are approached makes it particularly appropriate when making comparisons with cultural evolutionary theory.

2. DOMINANCE AND PRESTIGE IN CULTURAL EVOLUTION

As already mentioned, even though authors working in the field of cultural evolution do not use the term “power” or represent and analyse various power relationships as relations of power, they do make use of the two seemingly related concepts: *dominance* and *prestige*. Most authors working on the subject base their understanding of these concepts on Henrich & Gil-White (2001), where they are described as emergent products of two distinct sets of evolved psychological dispositions. In what follows I will further clarify the content and use of these concepts as found in this literature.

2.1 DOMINANCE

According to the most prominent cultural evolutionists working on the subject, dominance is one of the strategies for achieving status, which is understood as receiving, rather than giving, deference displays (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001, p.166). Dominance we have in common with other animals, in particular chimpanzees, in which behaviour such as “aggression, intimidation, violence, etc. – that is, force or force threat” are predominant and result in “dominance hierarchies” (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001, p.166). These dominance-based hierarchies require ordering of individuals according to their ability to win fights or coerce and intimidate others, and in this way it is a form of social ranking imposed on individuals, with the top of the hierarchy typically reserved for those possessing traits useful in fighting and intimidation, such as “greater strength, higher fighting skills, greater coalitional support, and the possession of more and/or better weapons or other resources that could be used to inflict costs” (Jimenez and Mesoudi 2021, p.190). Dominance results from a set of “cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioural mechanisms designed to assert one’s social rank through agonistic means and to seize positions of high social rank” (Maner and Case 2016, p.14).

As a result of these dominance-based social asymmetries, the claim goes, dominant (chimpanzee) individuals come to acquire a number of privileges, which in males include “preferential reproductive access to females, food, and spaces, as well as a disproportionate amount of grooming from others” and in females all of the above with the exception of access to females (Henrich and Gil-White 2001, p.167). In humans, having high social rank (obtained either through dominance or prestige) means being able to attain one’s goals, control resources and other individuals, among other benefits (Maner and Case 2016, p.133). This does not mean, however, that these are the reasons why one might strive toward achieving a high social rank. For instance, people may pursue such positions because in our evolutionary history they were

immensely important in ensuring our reproductive success, with the result that we have evolved specific motivational systems pushing us towards achieving high social rank (Maner and Case 2016, p.133-4).

2.2 PRESTIGE

The second strategy towards achieving a high social status, prestige, is according to these writers uniquely human and of a later evolutionary origin, a consequence of the evolution of distinct human abilities for direct social learning. It differs from dominance in that deference here is freely conferred, rather than extorted through violence, threat or fear. Prestige stands for “noncoerced, interindividual, within-group, human status asymmetries” (Henrich & Gil-White 2001, p.166), in which high status is due to excellence in some domain of activity, or rather on the merit in the eyes of others. Prestigious people, in this sense, are not feared but admired, and unlike dominant individuals they provoke a desire for proximity and observation, rather than distance. They are listened to and, while not necessarily obeyed, their opinions are more seriously taken in consideration due to them enjoying estimation and high standing in general opinion; they are also relieved of certain obligations and awarded certain other privileges (Henrich & Gil-White 2001, p.168). As an example of a very high-status individual who achieved his “rank” by excelling in a valued domain and therefore has prestige, Henrich and Gil-White name physicist Stephen Hawking.

Hierarchies based on prestige include the ordering of social group members by the respect, esteem and admiration that other members voluntarily give to them, typically because they are competent in some group-valued domain (Jimenez and Mesoudi 2001, p.190). In this kind of hierarchy, the claim goes, subordinates too receive benefits, such as opportunities for social learning to acquire valuable knowledge and skills, with the accompanying fitness benefits. While in dominance hierarchies changes in social rank are the result of losing fights, changes in prestige hierarchies result from events such as former teachers being surpassed by their students, or by prestigious individuals behaving as if entitled to others’ attention, instead of being grateful for it (Henrich & Gil-White 2001, p.170-1). People can seek to move up in prestige hierarchies by developing and displaying skills and knowledge valued by the group, such as hunting and tool-building in early humans and practicing to be a professional athlete or running for a political office in modern humans (Maner and Case 2016, p.139).

In their “tentative ethology of prestige” Henrich and Gil-White (p.170) include that “low-status” individuals seek to spend time interacting with the high-status ones, during which time they rarely speak (relative to their “superior”), they praise the high-status individual and escalate these praises as others join in. High-status individuals, on the other hand, are confident but without grandstanding, raising voice or making violent gestures; they express gratitude for and offer self-deprecating denials of the praise conferred upon them by the lower-status individuals.

2.3 DOMINANCE AND PRESTIGE – SUMMARY

To briefly recap, in cultural evolutionary theory the concept of power does not appear and power relations themselves are not analysed or employed as such. The most closely related concepts used instead are dominance and prestige. Both of these are

used to explain social asymmetries, hierarchies and social rank. The claim is that these can be based on dominance, prestige or on the combination of the two.

The concepts of dominance and prestige are based on observable behaviour (e.g. approaching, staring, attacking, imitating...), yet this is taken to be just outward expression of particular postulated psychology. That is, these observable behaviours are thought of as being based on particular sets of motivations and inclinations, which in turn are given an evolutionary explanation. So, the general basic claim is that social hierarchies are a result of particular sets of psychological traits, which are adaptations to the conditions our ancestors lived in thousands of years ago. In this way, theories espousing dominance and prestige are committed to a certain view of human nature according to which our psychology, and social organisation that is assumed to be its result, is in an important way a result of adaptive pressures faced by our ancestors.

Seen from this perspective, dominance and prestige accounts are remarkably lean: they do not take into consideration anything like intentionality, agency, ideology, values or even “lack” of behaviour in their attempt to explain social hierarchies. There is no mention of agents’ subjective and objective interests, except in the sense of fitness or reproductive benefits. And this is unusual because, again, the target of the explanation are human social hierarchies and asymmetries, differences in status, and in the end the various effects of these on human societies and cultures. In our everyday language, as well as in most of philosophy and the social sciences, terms such as these above are almost unavoidable when we talk about social inequalities and hierarchies. Therefore the question remains whether this lean, or perhaps impoverished, view misses some crucial insights on the workings of human social hierarchies and related phenomena. It is to this question that we will turn next, by turning to the so-called power debate in American sociology.

3. POWER IN ITS VARIETY – THREE DIMENSIONS AND BEYOND

One of the most extensive and detailed contemporary debates on specifically *social* power, if not *the* most extensive and detailed one, took place in the second half of the last century mainly among American sociologists and political scientists (Wartenberg 1990, p.51-70; Lukes 2005, p.I). While the debate centred around how to theorise about power and how to empirically study it, it was to an important degree motivated by the need to characterise American politics, that is, to decide whether America was a pluralist democracy or ruled by an elite. Some of the merits of the debate are that it is highly comprehensive, it both builds on and criticises earlier philosophical accounts of power, and it has an explicit empirical focus. In the presentation that follows, I will rely on Lukes’ dimension-based division of views on power. The primary reason behind this choice is that Lukes traces the development of the debate from more simple, basic concepts of power such as that of Dahl, through more complex one such as the one of Bacharach and Baratz and, finally, his own, which is based on the analysis and criticism of less demanding concepts preceding it. Furthermore, Lukes does this with exceptional clarity, his development of richer concepts of power being easy to follow and understand even for an uninitiated reader. In section 3.4, I will present Wartenberg’s criticism of Lukes and Wartenberg’s own view of power, in order to show how the debate did not end with Lukes, but continued to develop, with introduction of more complex (and often more controversial) views of power.

3.1 POWER IN ONE DIMENSION: DAHL

One of the earliest contributions to this power debate was that of Robert Dahl (1957). Dahl thinks of power as a relation among people which “involve[s] a successful attempt by *A* to get *a* to do something he would not otherwise do” (p.204). In his treatment of power, Dahl focuses on observable behaviour, that is, on actions of one agent which result from the actions of the other agent in the power relationship. In this respect, his approach is similar to that of cultural evolutionists, who also build their concepts of dominance and prestige on the observed behaviour.

Lukes (2005) refers to Dahl’s and similar views as “one-dimensional” (p.16-19), due to its sole focus on observable behaviour. Lukes is among a large number of critics who have objected to this kind of view which uses conflict between agent’s subjective interests as an empirical test of power, as giving an incomplete and too narrow portrayal of power relations.

3.2 POWER IN TWO DIMENSIONS: BACHRACH AND BARATZ

Dahl’s view has been criticised by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, too, for its sole focus on concrete decisions. In their (1962) article, they make a case for the existence of two faces of power: decision-making and non-decision making. While Dahl focuses on decision-making, his model, Bacharach and Baratz argue, ignores “the fact that power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision-making to relatively “safe” issues” (p.948).

Bachrach and Baratz argue that a “sound” concept of power cannot be based on the assumption that power is completely embodied and reflected in concrete decisions. Power is not only exercised when *A* participates in the making of decisions that affect *B*, but also when “*A* devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to *A*” (p.948). To the extent that *A*’s attempts are successful, *B* is practically prevented for raising any issues the resolution of which could be detrimental to *A*’s preferences (p.948). This is the central point of Bachrach and Baratz’s contribution to the power debate: “to the extent that a person or a group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power” (p.949).

Dahl’s error, therefore, is in assuming that power is completely reflected in concrete decisions, which excludes the possibility that there is a subgroup in the community able to prevent contests of power to arise in the first place (p.949). Bachrach and Baratz, in contrast, call for investigating the dynamics of nondecision-making, that is, examining “the extent to which and the manner in which the *status quo* oriented persons and groups influence those community values and those political institutions (...) which tend to limit the scope of actual decision-making to ‘safe’ issues” (p.952).

Lukes (2005) refers to the Bachrach and Baratz’ approach as the two-dimensional view of power. To the first-dimension view, where power is seen through the terms of concrete decisions and actions, this second dimension adds a negative kind of power, power to suppress or thwart challenges. It is a power contained in *non-behaviour*, so to say, and there is no parallel to it in cultural evolutionary accounts

of dominance and prestige.

3.3 POWER IN THREE DIMENSIONS: LUKES

While Lukes (2005) welcomes Bachrach and Baratz's "qualified critique" of the behavioural focus of the first-dimension view of power (p.24-5), he claims their critique does not go far enough. Lukes' own, "third-dimensional", view on power is developed in response to the them.

To begin with, Bacharach and Baratz's critique of behaviourism is *too* qualified for Lukes' taste: he claims they are still too committed to behaviourism since they try to "assimilate all cases of exclusion of potential issues from the political agenda to the paradigm of a decision", thereby giving a misleading picture of how individuals, and especially groups and institutions, exclude potential issues from political consideration (p.25). The issue is that decisions are "choices consciously and intentionally made by individuals between alternatives, whereas the bias of the system can be mobilized, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices" (p.25)².

More importantly, the two-dimensional view does not take into account that the bias of the system is not only sustained by a series of individually chosen acts, but, crucially, "by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups, and practices of institutions, which may indeed be manifested by individuals' inaction" (p.26). Bacharach and Baratz mistakenly follow the first-dimensional view in adopting a too methodologically individualist view of power, whereas power, Lukes claims, especially the power to control the political agenda and exclude potential issues, "cannot be adequately analysed unless it is seen as a function of collective forces and social arrangements" (p.26). What Lukes has in mind here are two different cases: (1) collective action, where a collectivity's (i.e. group, class, institution, political party, industrial corporation...) policy or action cannot be attributed to particular individuals' decisions or behaviour; (2) systemic or organisational effects, where the mobilisation results from the form of organisation itself, the power of which cannot be conceptualised in terms of individuals' decisions and behaviour (p.26). Again, none of these processes have a parallel in the existing dominance and prestige theories.

A further problem with the two-dimensional view of power is that it associates power with observable conflict. Power, Lukes claims, does not have to involve conflict: for instance, manipulation and authority are kinds of power in which no conflict needs to be present: "A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants" (p.27). In fact, Lukes considers "the supreme exercise of power" to be getting another to have the desires that you want them to have, to "secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires" (p.27). This kind of "thought control" can assume many forms, including control of information, mass media and various processes of socialisation.

The final problem that Lukes identifies with the two-dimensional view is the claim that nondecision-making power only exists "where there are grievances which

² Lukes, however, does concede that Bachrach and Baratz themselves maintain a similar stance, in which the defenders of the status quo can be so secure and entrenched that they are unaware of any potential challengers and alternatives to the existing politics.

are denied entry into the political process in the form of issues", meaning that if one cannot discover any grievances, then she must assume that there is a genuine consensus, or that, if people feel no grievances, then their interests are unharmed (p.28). However, Lukes claims, assuming that the absence of grievance means there is a genuine consensus is "to rule out the possibility of a false or manipulated consensus by a definitional fiat" (p.28). Preventing people, to a larger or a lesser degree, from having grievances by shaping their perception, thoughts and preferences so that they accept their role in the existing order, because they cannot imagine an alternative, because they see the existing order as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as beneficial, is itself "the most insidious exercise of power" (p.28). Interesting to note here is that cultural evolutionary theories do talk about processes at least seemingly similar to these above, for instance in discussions of cultural transmission of beliefs, norms and institutions. However, the power inherent in these processes and the implications of it are not acknowledged or examined.

Lukes' three-dimensional view of power is a thorough critique of the first two approaches. It enables us to think of the ways in which potential issues are kept off table, through operation of "social forces", institutional practices and individuals' decisions, all of which can occur in the absence of actual observable conflict. He introduces a possibility of a latent conflict: "a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude", without the excluded ones needing to express or even to be aware of their interests (p.28).

Constraint and compliance are both necessary conditions for successful exercise of power: the powerful agent has the power only if the subject complies, willingly or not, with the imposed constraint. The agents exercising power can be individual or collective agents of various kinds: states, institutions, associations, alliances, social movements, groups, clubs... (p.72). Power, however, can only be attributed to structures, relations or processes that can be characterised as agents, that is, that are able to act. This means that the collectivities exercising power must overcome their co-ordination problems (if any) to be able to exercise it. The powerful do not always need to threaten the interests of others, sometimes they can advance them and sometimes the use of power can benefit everyone, although usually in an unequal manner (p.83).

As seen above, Lukes proceeds from the assumption that we need to take a broad rather than narrow look at power, in three dimensions rather than one or two, and that we need to pay attention to the least observable aspects of power. According to him, it is in these, most difficult to observe cases that power is at its most effective (p.1).

Lukes' view on power also differs from the two above in that he claims that how much power one sees in the social world and where exactly does one locate it depends on one's conception of power, the disagreements over which are, in part, inescapably moral and political (p.12). Because of this, Lukes claims, power is an "ineradicably value-dependent" concept, the definition and any use of which are "inextricably tied to a given set of (probably unacknowledged) value-assumptions which predetermine the range of its empirical application" (p.30). A consequence of this view is that power is "an essentially contested concept" and that to engage in disputes about power means to engage in politics (p.30). Conceptual and methodological questions in studying power are inescapably political and reasonable people who disagree on moral and

political matters can agree on the facts but disagree when it comes to the question of where power lies.

In addition, the notion of interests is itself an irreducibly evaluative notion, as well. Lukes claims that the one-dimensional view of power presupposes a liberal conception of interests, the two-dimensional view a reformist conception, and the three-dimensional view a radical conception, which maintains that people's wants can themselves be produced by a system working against their interests, in which case their interests are related to what they would want and prefer "were they able to make the choice" (p.38). Any view of power, Lukes claims, rests on a normatively specific conception of interests, and he considers his view radical in both the theoretical and the political sense, arguing that these are intimately related.

3.4 BEYOND THE THREE DIMENSIONS: WARTENBERG

But even this "radical" three-dimensional view of power does not go far enough for some. Thomas Wartenberg (1990) rejects Lukes' view on the same grounds as all the others in "the power debate": that they are formulated within an unsatisfactory ontological framework of human social agency (p.51). He claims this prevents them from (1) seeing that "the ascription of power to a social agent takes place within a framework of intentional concepts that cannot be reduced to any non-intentional basis"; (2) conceptualising "ongoing social relationships and social roles as fundamental domains in which power is exercised" (p.63). Because of this, Wartenberg concludes, an adequate conception of power needs to begin with a fundamental rethink of the general ontological framework of the power debate, which is precisely one of his aims.

While admitting that Lukes has enlarged the ontology of human social agency to include the concept of interests that human social agents have, Wartenberg claims this is still not enough: Lukes' ontology remains too simple, forcing him "to adopt a notion of power according to which power can be exercised by an agent only when he affects the interests of another agent" (p.61). Additionally, Wartenberg criticises Lukes for omitting the intentional features of agents' situation, something which his own theory very much centres on, and which he claims is necessary for an adequate understanding of the nature of power and its function in society (p.65). Power, in other words, cannot be adequately conceptualised without being placed in the context of intentional human actions: it is located in "the sphere of intentional concepts" because power relationships importantly include agents' understanding of their situation (p.163).

Wartenberg asserts that one of the most fundamental uses of power in society is structuring the basic way in which social agents interact with each other (p.66-7). Power, according to Wartenberg, is not an "event in which one independent agent tries to affect another independent agent", but rather as "something that structures an ongoing relationship between two social agents in which the identity of each of them is established" (p.69). The nature of power relationships is that they are "long-term patterns of mutual interaction that are shaped by the power of one agent over another" and this kind of relationship is precisely one of the main things that a theory of power has to elaborate on.

Power cannot be analysed through a prism of particular actual events and it takes more than exercising power to attribute power to an agent (p.72). Power is, rather,

an ongoing result of interactions of social agents, that can be individual humans or collective agents such as social groups. Wartenberg's theory emphasises the role of the broad social context in the constitution of social power, as well as the temporal, dynamic aspects of power relationships. More precisely, his claim is that people always exist in a social and natural context which determines possible courses of action available to them, and that are determined by different factors, including the objective situation (e.g. physical abilities of the agent), as well as the agent's own assessment of her situation, which in turn consist in both understanding of the alternative courses of action and their evaluation (p.80). This structure within which an agent exists as a social actor Wartenberg terms the agent's *action-environment* (p.80-1).

Wartenberg then defines power that one agent has over another in the following way: "a social agent *A* has *power over* another social agent *B* if and only if *A* strategically constrains *B*'s action-environment" (p.85). An agent's power over another is constituted either by constraining the alternatives for action that the other agent faces or by impacting the agent's assessment of these alternatives (p.86). The attribution of power to an agent always presupposes the existence of a certain social context, which is always capable of changing, meaning that the very existence of the power relationship will always be dependent upon certain assumptions about how the social context functions and will continue to function (p.104).

Power, for Wartenberg, is a set of social phenomena that play different but related roles in constituting both individual social agents and society as a whole. He identifies three basic types of power: force, coercive power and influence. These are not mutually exclusive in that actual power relations can exhibit more than one of these types. They are also related to one another in the sense that each of them creates a "demand" that the subsequent one "fulfils", and one type of power can be used to ground others.

Force refers to one agent physically keeping the other from or causing him to perform the behaviour that he would avoid if possible. This type of power exists only through its exercise (actual intervention) and completely relies on physical ability. An example is a parent forcibly pouring the medicine down a child's throat. Force is the most basic way in which one agent can exercise power over another. It is, however, not a real form of relationship: it cannot be the grounds of a long-term interaction since it exists only in its exercise. Due to its uneconomic character, it is uncommon and inefficient, but its instrumental use, that is, that which is simultaneously an exercise of force and an attempt to constitute another kind of power relation, is a potent form of power.

Coercive power stands for the kind of power that an agent has over another if he (1) is able to affect him in a significant way, (2) threatens to do so unless he acts in a certain way, (3) the threatened agent accedes to the threat and changes his course of action. An example is a cancelled rally due to the fact that the government refused to issue the permit and threatened arrest for the potential demonstrators. Unlike force, this kind of power is of productive nature, in that the powerful agent has the ability to use the other agent's action for his own benefit. Like force, however, this kind of power is "incomplete": it provokes resistance, and the powerful agent has a reason to find a way to reduce this resistance. One way of doing so is obscuring the power relation, or developing misunderstandings among the subordinate agents in respect to whether they are actually being coerced.

This brings us to the third kind of power, which is *influence* and its various forms. It extends the two previous types of power in a more stable social situation in which the subordinate agent misunderstands his own situation. It is a purely discursive form of power, a pure form of communicative interaction: it occurs through the subordinate agent accepting something that the powerful agent tells her. Examples of such power are a professor influencing a student on career choice, charismatic political leaders and advertising. For a case of influence to count as an exercise of power it is necessary that the influenced agent's "action environment" is substantially affected. Manipulation is a special form of influence that is always morally suspect since it is a form of interaction in which the influencing agent is keeping secret the reasons for their attempt at influencing.

In addition, Wartenberg identifies various systematic *uses* to which power can be put in society, one of the most significant of which is *domination*: repeated, systematic exercises of power to the detriment of the dominated agent. In relationships of social domination, the relata are primarily social groups, instead of individual humans (p.118). In this sense, for instance, men socially dominate women and capitalists workers. It is within this framework of group domination that relations of domination between individuals must be conceptualised: Fred dominates Mary, for instance, as a result of men dominating women.

4. COMPARING THE APPROACHES

Now we can compare the notions of power as used by social scientists and that of dominance and prestige as used by cultural evolutionists.

The first thing to notice is the different lens which the two groups of researchers apply to social hierarchies. For cultural evolutionists, human social hierarchies, both dominance- and prestige-based, are the emergent result of our evolved psychology, which is an adaptation to living conditions of our species from thousands of years ago, largely if not completely gene-based. Prestige and dominance are reified as psychological traits which have a particular evolutionary history. In itself, this origin story presents us with a particular view of human nature³, according to which important parts of our psychological constitution are a result of adaptations dating from an era where humans lived lives considerably different from those of most modern members of our species, in such diverse aspects ranging from nutrition and material living conditions, to group structure and composition, linguistic and cultural heritage. It also presents us with a particular view of social structures such as groups and hierarchies, according to which these are the emergent products of human psychology. Social dynamics proper, i.e. those that cannot be reduced to individual human psychology, do not play a role in this kind of account, and neither do factors such as values, ideology and similar.

³ Human nature is a widely discussed and controversial notion (Roughley (2021), Hannon & Lewens (eds., 2018), Ramsey (2023)). As Ingold (2019) has pointed out in a different context, our ideas on human nature matter, not only for science, but also for their political and ethical consequences, some of which include the reproduction of particular power relations. Somewhat similarly, Lewens (2018) warns that the notion of human nature can be used to entrench what is in fact quite amenable to change, while Kronfeldner (2018) shows how the term has been used to mark one's research as of good quality and important, while at the same time gatekeeping the epistemic territory against intruders. Further development of these concerns goes beyond the scope of this article.

Social scientists do not base, or at least are not obliged to base, their theories on a particular view of innate or evolved human nature. They can, and largely do, remain agnostic on the exact psychological processes involved in human behaviour. Instead, they focus on the details of social interaction, taking a view from a “level above”, so to say. However, it could be argued that some of the sociologists do have at least some commitments to what human psychology is like. Some of the sociologists considered above, notably Lukes and Wartenberg, claim that individual human beings themselves are to an important extent constituted by cultural and social conditions they develop in, including those of power relations of their immediate social groups and societies in large. This could be seen as the claim opposite to the cultural evolutionists’ claim that social structures of power are emergent from individual human evolved psychology⁴. In this, socially-focused view, it is human psychology, in the sense of motivations, beliefs and desires that individuals have, that which is (possibly partially, but to an important degree) constituted by their societies and cultures. In other words, our beliefs and desires are essentially socially constituted, rather than being a result of adaptations to our ancestors’ living conditions.

Another, related difference between the two approaches is in their treatment of groups, that is, their nature, reality and agency. Whereas for cultural evolutionists groups are collections of individuals, for the majority of the social scientists here considered (Dahl being a notable exception), they can be agents in their own right. This reflects a certain ontological narrowness and poverty of cultural evolutionary approaches when it comes to phenomena of power and those related to it, with the accompanying methodological limitations.

A third difference is in the consideration of aspects of social structures such as values, value-judgments, ethics and politics. While Lukes sees power as an essentially contested concept and discussions about it as necessarily also discussions about ethical and political matters, and Wartenberg considers ethical (non)permissibility of domination an important part of the discussion on it, in cultural evolutionary accounts of dominance and prestige there are no such considerations. The discussion there remains remarkably amoral and apolitical. When discussing prestigious and dominant individuals whose high social rank brings them various privileges over lower ranked individuals and absolves them from various obligations toward them, the ethical and political aspects of these processes are not of interest to a cultural evolutionist. This very kind of apolitical stance is considered by Lukes, among others, as in fact very political in its own way.

Summing up, cultural evolutionary approaches to phenomena of power are wedded to particularly narrow concepts of prestige and dominance. The difficulties facing the concept of prestige and its role in cultural evolution have been described elsewhere (see e.g. Chellappoo 2021), and due to the constraints of space they will not be discussed here. But, even if we assume that dominance and prestige as described by cultural evolutionists actually exist as adapted complex psycho-social systems and are not mere theoretical artefacts, they would remain only two specific, narrow

⁴ Working from an evolutionary perspective, Sterelny (2018) similarly points out the bidirectionality of causation when it comes to social environments and characteristics of individual humans: over many time scales, social environments shape attributes of individuals just as these individual attributes shape social environments (p.120). This suggests that giving a privileged spot (justified by the supposed “evolved” status) to individual psychological traits is misleading: it obscures the way in which social arrangements themselves have an active role in shaping human psychology.

processes among a sea of others which constitute and influence human societies, culture, and in the end individuals themselves. In other words, when it comes to power asymmetries among members of a society, cultural evolutionists have only two tools in their toolbox. Famously, when you only have a hammer everything looks like a nail: the danger of cultural evolutionary dual paradigm of dominance and prestige as the explanation of social asymmetry in humans is not only that of seeing things which are not there, but also forcing ill-suited cases into this particular paradigm, ignoring or being unable to see more suitable factors and explanations⁵. Since social hierarchies are looked at through the prism of only two very specific and limited concepts, everything in human societies that is connected to power and influence becomes coloured and, to a considerable extent, distorted by it. For instance, dominance as a human trait is based on observing certain behaviours in animals such as chimpanzees, clustering them together and assigning them the label “dominance”, and then theorising about its evolutionary history and adaptive value. From there, the move is to identify similar behaviours in humans, to which the same label is applied together with all the accompanying history and implications.

Cultural evolutionary theories are in a way late to the party. They consider only developments at late stages: they don’t, for instance, discuss those forms of power which are more evasive, often labelled “ideological”, like the power to determine what is considered normal, true, acceptable, or indeed the power to shape people’s perception and preferences in a way that they more or less willingly accept their assigned role in the society. In the case of prestige, for instance, they just define it as deference given to those perceived to excel in group-valued domains. They do not take a step back to ask *who* or *what* determines what is valued in a group and whether this in fact constitutes a form of power in itself. They do not consider anything like Bachrach and Baratz’ *status quo* keeping and nondecision-making or shaping of people’s perception and preferences so that they accept their societal roles to which Lukes draws our attention. It can appear almost as if cultural evolutionists do not consider these as important questions or as if they think group values and agenda are somehow “democratically” chosen, obvious or universal in a group, that there is no potential or actual conflict here that should be considered. This could be a result of oversimplification as well as of thinking about early human groups as egalitarian, which is as widespread as far from certain (see e.g. Boehm 2001). In other words, cultural evolutionary theories have a blind spot: the framework completely ignores a majority of forms of power.

While assumptions about the characteristics of early human societies could be one source of inadequacy, another are limiting ontological assumptions of cultural evolutionary theories and as limited methodological assumptions that follow from them (for more on this point, see Valković 2023). For instance, there is no mention of

⁵ Longino (2006, p.126-7) shows how a framework open to pluralism provides a better place for critical interactions between competing behavioural research programmes in which their features are made salient. Rather than looking for one uniquely correct approach, she writes, accepting the partiality of each approach and their inability to yield a complete account enables us to see that each approach can produce some knowledge by using its distinctive methods to answer the questions equally distinctive to it (Longino 2006, p.127). The critical interactions between proponents of different approaches articulate questions which each of the approaches is not designed to answer, which can lead to the limitations of each approach becoming clear, methodologies being refined, and concepts clarified, all of which ultimately results in better knowledge (p.127). I would like to thank Alison Wylie for drawing my attention to this point.

systematic effects or collective actions and policies that do not have to have anything to do with actions of particular individuals, as Lukes points out. And there is certainly no indication in cultural evolutionary treatments of prestige and dominance that anything like intentionality is considered relevant, contrary to Wartenberg who stresses that power relationships importantly include agents' understanding of their situation (see here Wartenberg's (1990, p.54-63) complaints to participants in the power debate for more general objections to behaviouralism, and Cofnas 2018, Fracchia & Lewontin 1999, and Lewens 2015 ch.7 for specifically cultural evolutionary theory in connection to power). Longino (2020) shows how focusing on individuals can unjustifiably limit the scope of scientific investigation and argues for increasing the scope of investigation by avoiding restrictive individualist thinking. Once we start looking at social behaviour in terms of interaction, rather than just an expression of individual dispositions, she claims, we are better able to see the full range of questions for investigation. Arguably the same holds when it comes to different kinds and aspects of power: focusing on power in all its facets would increase the scope of investigation and prevent the unwarranted limitation of inquiry to those forms which are more apt to be explained by focusing on individual characteristics and behaviour (and the consequences thereof).

5. CONCLUSION

To theorise about and study human societies and, arguably, individual humans, we should keep the broader and more inclusive assortment of concepts developed by social scientists. We need our toolbox as full as possible, so that we could approach each case of power imbalance in an adequate and balanced manner. Cultural evolutionary theory, as it stands, is limited in this respect, meaning that its application and usefulness is accordingly limited, as well. There are two theoretically possible remedies to this issue, each with different implications for cultural evolutionary theory, but neither particularly promising.

First, cultural evolutionary theory could be expanded in the way that it adopts, and possibly adapts, more of the "tools" developed by sociologists decades ago. This could likely, however, prove difficult, if not impossible, for the theory: it would mean many of the basic ontological and methodological assumptions would have to be modified, which might be too big of a step without abandoning the theoretical framework itself.

Another option could be to explicitly limit the application of cultural evolutionary theory to the study of human social phenomena, where the treatment of relations and processes such as power and influence would be left to other approaches. Opting for this approach could be equally problematic for the theory, however, if power is so pervasive in human social life that it turns out that the use of cultural evolutionary theory is very limited indeed, if not itself a distortion of human sociality (here see again Cofnas 2018, Fracchia & Lewontin 1999, Lewens 2015 ch.7). It could mean narrowing the scope of the theory to the point of obsolescence. In any case, a pluralistic approach to studying social reality and the power relations which are an essential part of it, is to be preferred to any rushed attempts to synthesise this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Karim Baraghith, Finn Jordan, Thomas Reydon, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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