

# **“Power” in International Relations: concept formation between conceptual analysis and conceptual history**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will try to take the reader on a journey from conceptual analysis, used as a means for variable construction, to concept formation as conceptual history through a series of stops which will add different contextual layers to the analysis. This step by step introduction is meant to show the basic connectedness, and indeed crucial importance, of all this layers for constructivism-inspired scholarship where concept formation is not simply a means but an important end in our knowledge. Throughout the journey, references will be made to the concept of power which, in this indirect way – so I hope – will be shown as variable, as core concept in a social theory, as well as a performative speech act, embedded in a certain historical and cultural context, with the effect of “politicising” issues.

In principle, conceptual analyses in IR have to start with an apologetic note that their endeavour, although being also semantic - is not only so (see the start of many of Baldwin’s articles collected in Baldwin 1989). Strictly “scholarly” speaking, this is not warranted. But some clarity on the purposes of conceptual analysis might help.

Concepts are crucial in two ways: they are both means and also an end of scholarly endeavour. On the one hand, concepts are necessary for understanding. As Kant put it: categories are the condition for the possibility of knowledge. Seen in this way, science is intersubjectively controlled understanding made possible through concepts. Such a control usually comes in the form of checking the internal logic of existing explanations or interpretations and of comparing different ones. The internal check is only possible with a clear language. The comparison is even more demanding: to allow hence for an intersubjective control, however, scholars need to reflect on the very way these concepts are

formed on the basis of which the interpretations/explanations are made. Concepts and their formation are to be explained themselves. In other words, concepts are not only a means to understanding, their own understanding is an aim of scholarly endeavour. Although conceptual analysis geared towards concept formation is hence in the core of making scholarly sense of the world, and not ephemeral or purely semantic, it, in turn, can only be done through other concepts. Thus, looking at concept formation exposes the hermeneutic circle of all our understanding.

Then, how do we analyse concepts and their formation? What is usually packaged as “conceptual analysis” comes in three versions, if distinguished according to their main purpose. A first approach attempts at producing a language so clear, that nearly mathematics-like sentences become possible. Here, conceptual analysis serves the purpose to find as unambiguous core meanings as possible such as to allow best possible scientific statements, hypothesis formation and reproducible empirical analysis. Here, concepts are mainly a means for explanation, a tool that needs to be continuously sharpened at the empirical front. A second approach already enlarges this picture by looking at the way how concepts are embedded in particular social theories. Here concept formation runs parallel to theory formation more generally, where theories are understood as frameworks of analysis. Finally, conceptual analysis, then called conceptual history can be carried out for the sake of better understanding history, including its present.

This paper will try to take the reader on a journey from conceptual analysis, used as a means for variable construction to concept formation as conceptual history through a series of stops which will add different contextual layers to the analysis. This step by step introduction is meant to show the basic connectedness, and indeed crucial importance, of all this layers for constructivism-inspired scholarship where concept formation is not simply a means but an important end in our knowledge. Throughout the journey, references will be made to the concept of power which, in this indirect way – so I hope – will be shown as variable, as core concept in a social theory, as well as a performative speech act, embedded in a certain historical and cultural context, with the effect of “politicising” issues.

## 1. Conceptual analysis as a tool for enhancing scholarly argument and communication

Communication works smoothly as long as the meaning of a term is more or less shared and taken for granted. This presupposes that there is for every point in time a relatively stable meaning of the term. A first type of conceptual analysis sets in when this understanding seems to produce misunderstandings or when the communication assumes a common and clear meaning, while, at the closer look of an observer, there is none. At this point, conceptual analysis tries to clarify the different meanings of a concept or groups of concepts to get communication going again and/or to make it “sensible talk”. In other words, the more general purpose of this type of conceptual analysis is to discipline talk thus thought, to be more precise, or, indeed, to allow for distinct statements in the first place. Conceptual analysis avoids “loose talk” and enables a focussed scholarly communication.

Drawing on examples of such conceptual analyses of power, this section will argue that they are a useful tool for clarifying thought, but eventually fall short of making justice to the richness of conceptual analysis and, if their methodology not revised, of even elucidating the concept they look at.

### **1.1. Conceptual analysis as a means: descriptive neutrality for better explanation and communication**

In its most extreme version, such a conceptual analysis aims at fixing *the* meaning of a term. Here, the analysis tries to dig until it finds what the word “really means”, the supposedly essential meaning of the concept. This essentialist approach has been widely disregarded today.

Less ambitiously, but far more common, some scholars try to reconstruct a “descriptive”, i.e. neutral, meaning of the concept(s) to avoid incoherent usage and misunderstandings. This reconstruction is meant to make the concepts useable for philosophical discourse (Oppenheim 1981).

It aims at a possibly neutral reconstruction that can thereafter be used in different explanatory theories. The result is often a series of taxonomic definitions. Since Oppenheim explicitly uses power, his approach can provide an inroad into this kind of approach.

To construct such a “neutral” term, Oppenheim wants to carefully include the findings of earlier conceptual analysis so that his proposal be acceptable (neutral). In the end he decides to stick to an understanding of power which puts it close to causation, such as in the work of Dahl (1968; 1976), without necessarily including the idea of intentionality, as already proposed by Wrong (1988 [1979]).

As a result, Oppenheim’s definition of power refers to the causal relation between one action and another. Oppenheim is careful to define action widely – it includes also “not doing an action” – so as not to be caught in the behaviouralist camp. He also avoids any reference to preferences, intentions, or interests, that would make the definition contentious. He shows cases where none of them is needed. Hence, his approach is one of a probabilistic causation. “[T]o assert that R’s action x was influenced by some action y of P is not merely describe what R did, but also to provide at least a partial *explanation* of P’s conduct. (Why did R do x? Because P influenced him to do x)” (Oppenheim 1981, p. 33).

The probabilistic causation of power is expressed in conditional sentences. Concepts of power can differ through the extent to which action x is either sufficient, or necessary and sufficient, for action y to happen or to be prevented. For instance, a possible condition for the coercion of an actor B, is that actor A possesses a revolver and the skill to use it. Acquiring both is not yet causing anything, and hence it is not an exercise of power. If actor A points the revolver to actor B (action x), and the latter is induced (1) to do an action which B did not thought of doing before, or (2) to refrain from an action B thought of doing (actions y), we have a causal nexus. Here, we have an exercise of power. Action x is a sufficient condition for action y. If one can presume that there are other ways to cause B to do y, this condition is not necessary for causing action y.

It comes at no surprise that the most widely used approach in empirical theorising is therefore to see concepts as synonymous with “variables”

whose content obviously needs to be severely fixed to allow for a rigorous analysis. This conception of an artificial language is in the tradition of positivism and the condition for the possibility of the mathematisation of hypotheses.

There are obviously good arguments to be conceptually precise in the construction of variables. Yet, this has a limit. Whenever the analysis gets to tackle bigger concepts, it starts unravelling. So does the concept of democracy or development, for instance, offer little uncontentious definition which would just need a bit more digging. Since talk on democracy keeps on using different meanings which are not easily reducible to each other, the analyst is tempted to replace it with something whose meaning seems less contentious (see e.g. the argument in Collier and Levitsky 1997). But then, of course, variables might not always fit from one analysis to another, communication being impaired (Rueschemeyer 1991). Indeed, the worst case can happen. Being aware of the difficulties to pin down a concept, scholars decide to go for more easily operationalisable aspects, thereby incurring the risk of neglecting the most significant aspects of the concept voiding the analysis of its pertinence.

Therefore, also less stringent approaches than Oppenheim's can be found. A slightly different tack consists in presupposing a common core of the different usages of the concept, without necessarily implying full-fledged taxonomic definitions and without implying a necessarily neutral one, either. Steven Lukes uses therefore a distinction taken from John Rawls, between a concept and its different conceptions.

What I propose to do instead is to offer a formal and abstract account of the *concepts* of power and authority respectively which inhere within the many conceptions of power and authority that have been used by particular thinkers within specific contexts, in development from and in reaction to one another. Any given conception of power and of authority (and of the relation between them) can be seen as an interpretation and application of its concept (Lukes 1979, p. 634).

Here, all concepts must ultimately have a common core. Otherwise, communication would not work. A term like "anarchy", for instance, might

mean in one context the “law of the jungle”, in another “rule without government”, in another still “social organisation without hierarchy”. Yet, to be able to refer to all as interpretation of anarchy presupposes a common core. This core can be apprehended also by making an analysis of meaning clusters. Assuming power to be a *cluster concept*, the meaning of power is always to be assessed with its link to related concepts. Thus, any analysis of power must locate the meaning within a net (or cluster) of related concepts. Also avoiding taxonomic approaches, Debnam proposes instead to define power through a cluster of references or properties, none of which is in a strict sense essential, but whose lack would seriously impair communication (Debnam 1984, p. 4).

But at this point, although ensuring communicability, the concept runs into a dilemma for ensuring its explanatory purpose. By having climbed up the “ladder of abstraction” to such daring heights, these concepts no longer function as viable “data-containers” (Sartori 1970; see also Collier and Mahon 1993). Hence, scholars in this tradition of conceptual analysis can face a dilemma at least when some concepts are concerned: they can either assure communicability or more rigorous variable construction, but not both.

## **1.2. Impossible neutrality and the meta-theoretical dependence of explanatory concepts**

That any definition of “power” can be “neutral” or “descriptive” (Nagel 1975) has been hotly contested in mainly two ways. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that “power” belongs to a family of “essentially contested” concepts. I will take up the discussion of this in the next section, since it will serve me as a springboard for a more contextual understanding of conceptual analysis.

On the other hand, any neutral definition of “power” seems elusive, exactly because power is used as an explanatory variable. Since social theory is under-determined by evidence, available evidence may be compatible with a variety of different, or even incompatible, theories. Contrary to

the natural science, there exists, moreover, a mutual interaction between observer and observed agents. Marxism is maybe the most noticeable case in point. As a result, there is no neutral concept of power for the dependence of theory, empirical and conceptual analyses, on *meta-theoretical commitments*. John Gray, for instance, compares individualist (voluntarist) and structuralist (determinist) frameworks of explanation and concludes that “since judgements about power and structure are theory-dependent operations, actionists and structuralists will approach their common subject-matter – what goes on in society – using divergent paradigms in such a fashion that incompatible explanations (and descriptions) will be produced (Gray 1983, p. 94). He argues that these are incommensurable views of man and society which elude a rational choice. Indeed, for some, the basic individualist-intersubjectivist divide is so great that it is merely sufficient to register that a “considerable distance separates a notion of power understood as the exercise by A of power over B, contrary to B’s preferences, and a notion of power as a multiplicity of practices for the promotion and regulation of subjectivity” (Miller 1987, p. 10), referring to the difference between a classical Weberian and a Foucaultian understanding of power.

I will illustrate in this section that such a meta-theoretical dependence exists and use the exact individualist-intersubjective divide as background for confronting Oppenheim’s claim of a neutral concept with a radical holistic theory and embedded concept of power, namely Luhmann’s system theory.

Oppenheim’s definition of power is so wide that he has been criticised to confound power with social causation. Yet, he excludes explicitly all those situations “in which R’s behaviour, while determined by the behavior of others, cannot be causally linked to the behavior of a *determinate* person or group”, but in which the causal chain must, at least for practical purposes, stop at impersonal factors such as inflation, unemployment, overpopulation, lack of resources “to take just a few calamitous examples” (Oppenheim 1981, p. 31).

This exclusion, while probably necessary for the social theory underlying Oppenheim’s approach, is not neutral, though. It *does* exclude some



understandings of power. Indeed, by relying on the idea of an artificial language, this type of a conceptual analysis has little to counter any other definition of power, as long as it makes sense within another context, as the following comparison with Niklas Luhmann's conceptualisation of power (for a more detailed analysis, see Guzzini 2001a) will testify.

Although Luhmann's understanding of power has been shifting over time, there are some continuities. He defines power as a symbolically generated medium of communication which reduces complexity and allows calculus. Power is in the communication, not in action. It is not causal, but it functions by attributing causality to a particularly steered communication. Let me explain this definition step by step.

Luhmann social theory is a theory of systems. He distinguishes physical, psychic and social systems. Systems have an internal side and an environment, made up mainly by other systems. Between some social systems there can be special relationships, which Luhmann's theory calls "structural coupling", such as for instance between the systems of politics and of law. For all their differences, psychic and social systems are conceptualised in an isomorphic way. Systems come to exist when (1) they reproduce themselves, by (2) following an internal logic driven by a system-specific binary code. For instance, the social system "science" which has become autonomous in well differentiated societies, functions according to the code "true/untrue" (Luhmann 1990). The system builds up certain expectations about its environment which it then sees confirmed or not, in a binary way. This quite ingenious conceptualisation allows Luhmann to have the cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, it permits an inner logic through an operational closure, since there is one binary code which steers "understanding" from inside the system. On the other hand, the system is open and not deterministic, since the feedback from the environment, deciphered in the binary way of the code, influences its reproduction.

Communication plays a major role in this theory: it consists in the linking-up of systems (coupling) where the "external" is included into the internal reproduction processes. This process can be conditioned by particular media of communication. A medium of communication is a code of generalised symbols that steer the transmission of inputs into the respective

selection processes of systems. Power is such a medium of communication.

Media of communication, like power or money, are seen to have developed as a response to the rising complexity of modern societies. As in his entire theorising, Luhmann is interested in the ways systems have been able to cope with (and, in turn, generate) increasing complexity. With the development of written communication and its accrued distance between information, understanding and acceptance/refusal, symbolically generated media of communication become necessary for their function of reducing complexity, of reducing the uncertainty of selection processes (Luhmann 1975, pp. 12-13). They create motivations for the acceptance of communication. They thus avoid this distance to make communication too complicated, or even impossible (this view is constant throughout, see Luhmann 1990, p. 179).

These media are hence a supplementary institution of language. They represent a “code of generalised symbols” that steer communication and, through this, the transmission of “selection impulses”. In our case, for instance, does power affect alter’s selection of alternatives through the implicit or explicit threat of negative sanctions. For communication exists only if systems are affected in their “selections” – what an individualist would perhaps call “choices” or “decisions” but which lack the conscious or explicit component of the latter two concepts. Other media of communication, like money, truth and love, also affect selections, but on the basis of something else.

Power is a symbolically generated medium of communication which presupposes that *both* partners see alternatives whose realisation they want to avoid. The initial Weberian formulation is, however, recast into the conceptual framework of functionalism. The realisation of power (*Machtausübung*) arises, when the relation of the communication partners to their alternatives to be avoided (*Vermeidungsalternativen*) is such that ego wants to avoid them relatively more than alter. In a more individualist framework, that would sound very close to Keohane and Nye’s (1977) concept of power through asymmetrical interdependence. Power as a medium links up one combination of alternatives to be avoided with another, yet preferred one. It ensures that this be visible to the communication partners. For

Luhmann (1975, p. 22), the code of power communicates an asymmetrical relation, a causal relationship, and motivates the transmission of selections of action from the more powerful to the less powerful one. It is based on the control of access to negative sanctions (Luhmann 1990 [1981], p. 157).

The medium achieves this by the means of two mechanisms. One are *reductions*. Since the exact weighing of alternatives is not possible, communication develops substitutes for the medium (with the same function of stabilising expectations) that, in turn, become a symbolically generated code of power. These substitutes are, for instance, *hierarchies* (presupposing already a ranking) or *history* (attributing power through past events). Linked to the latter are symbols of *prestige/status and keeping up to significant events*. Finally, there are *rules deriving from contracts*. In all these cases the direct communicative recourse to power is replaced by a reference to symbols, that oblige normatively all parties and take account of the presupposed power ranking (Luhmann 1975, p. 10). The second mechanism are rules to facilitate the calculus of alternatives, as for instance, the zero-sum (or constant-sum) principle (Luhmann 1975, p. 52).

At this point it might be good to synthesise the differences between Luhmann's and Oppenheim's concept of power. Power is not in action, but in communication. "Will" and motives, i.e. traditional attributes for the explanation of action are not important for the assessment of action and for power. "Will" is not prior to power, in the sense that power would overrule a preexisting will. In a code-steered communication, expectations can be such that the will of an actor for a specific action never arises. Will is neutralised by power, not broken. Power-steered communication constitutes the will of one partner by *attributing* to his actions successes, expectations, and respective motives.

"Power does not instrumentalise an already present will, it constitutes that will and can oblige it, bind it, make it absorb risks and uncertainties, can tempt it and make it fail" (Luhmann 1975, p. 21, my translation). "Motives" are not an origin or cause of action. The communication process, in the execution of power, attributes motives to systems. This allows the communicative system to socially understand action. Motives are necessary not for action, but for its understanding (Luhmann 1975, pp. 20-21). In other words,

“power” is a possibility that communication attributes to actors, as their capacity and characteristics, as much as “decisions” are attributed to the process of selection (Luhmann 1975, pp. 25, 46). In a nutshell: Power does not cause an outcome, but communicatively regulates the attribution of causality for understanding that outcome (Luhmann 1990 [1981], p. 157).

Oppenheim claims that his definition of power does not exclude particular ways of conceiving a social theory. As Luhmann’s approach, his conceptual analysis is not committed to keep the meanings of ordinary language. It is meant to provide social theory with a conceptual clarification. For Oppenheim, since social sciences lack a full-fledged theoretical system, academics are put before the choice either to leave political concepts unexplained or “explicating them independently of any theories with the purpose of clarifying whatever isolated generalizations have been made or may be asserted.” The task is the preparation of a conceptual scheme in which a theory in the stronger sense will one day be developed, even if this might never happen. “Again, I have no better justification than to point to the results of this study” (Oppenheim 1981, p. 189).

But this is not enough. Luhmann’s concept of power cannot be accounted for by the conceptual frame that Oppenheim prepared. It is a form of power which has an agent referent, whose causality, however, does not derive from the agent, but from the communication process. Luhmann’s holistic epistemology and system theory has no place for an action-concept of power, like Oppenheim’s – except as being itself a construct of communication. Some of our central concepts, in particular if they have an explanatory value for social theories, like power, cannot escape a basic meta-theoretical dependence: they make sense within their respective meta-theories which are not always compatible. This calls for a position of explanatory perspectivism (for my early statement on this, see Guzzini 1993).

### **1.3. A first partial conclusion: explanatory perspectivism and the confusion of conceptual analysis and variable construction**

Summing up on conceptual analysis as a means for understanding, there are

two points worth repeating. First, it has to be noted, that although conceptual analysis is important for variable construction, variable construction is not all what there is to conceptual analysis (as it tends to be even in King, Keohane et al. 1994). This section has concentrated on the need of conceptual clarity in explanations. But it has also tried to show that making variables fit for empirical analysis is, at least with regard to some significant issues, not all what there is to “concept formation”. A less stringent version, more interested in communication, tends usually to look at conceptual analysis in terms of “cluster” analysis in which a set of concepts is put into relation.

However, taking seriously Kant’s dictum (that categories are the condition for the possibility of knowledge) also means that one needs to look at the way these categories are meta-theoretically embedded. Scholars need to control the assumptions upon which they made their variable construction and this will inevitably lead to question concepts in themselves. For these concepts are a means to re-embed our knowledge into its social or political context, as the following section is going to show.

## 2. Conceptual analysis as an end in sociological and historical knowledge

The foregoing discussion has looked at conceptual analysis when used as a means for understanding. Although a necessary tool in any analysis, this is not all what conceptual analysis can offer. This section explores those conceptual analyses for which the better understanding of a concept is part and parcel of an explanatory enterprise in itself.<sup>1</sup> When Max Weber (1980 [1921-22]) put a lengthy intro on “basic sociological concepts” at the start of his *Economy and Society*, this was no idle German scholarship, but already the fruit of much of his earlier analysis. The relation between these concepts provided the framework of his sociological work. As Martin

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the role of such conceptual analysis in IR theory and its teaching, see Guzzini (2001b).

Bulmer (1979, p. 658) writes, “concepts such as the ‘protestant ethic’ or ‘marginal utility’ derive their meaning from the part they play in the theory in which they are embedded, and from the role in that theory itself.” As a result, a conceptual analysis which isolates one concept necessarily slides into the task of assessing a whole theory.

This section will explore how conceptual analysis can be re-connected back to its social and political context. As a result, the analysis gets closer to linguistic pragmatics and sociology. It asks less questions about what the term might generally mean, but more what it means in particular contexts.

Again sliding slowly from more conventional conceptual analysis to other forms, I will start with a discussion on the purposes of “power” conducted in a way compatible to conceptual analysis as variable construction. This discussion on the purposes of power can then, in turn, be used to illustrate the need to move beyond this type of conceptual analysis for answering a different type of theoretical and empirical questions. This type of conceptual analysis is not so much about what exactly is meant by it, but what the concept achieves in communication. It is not about what concepts mean, but what their use *does*, as argued in IR long time ago by Ole Wæver (1989; see also Wæver 1995). It wants to unravel the normalised and “historically stratified” meaning shifts, to use Koselleck’s (2000) expression of *Zeitschichten*. It tries to explore the relationship between concepts, their meanings and their changing historical contexts.

## **2.1. Purposes of power: Peter Morriss’ three contexts of power**

Peter Morriss’ book “Power” (1987) has been celebrated for including the first systematic study of the question: why do we need “power”? He does so in an analytical-philosophical way which includes both a part on conceptual analysis as part of concept formation and a methodological one on conceptual analysis as variable construction. Morriss’ interlocutors are Oppenheim and others.

The background for Morriss’ study, just as for Oppenheim, is to bring order into the never ending power debates. For “power” is said to belong

to the special category of “essentially contested” concepts for which no account can compel rational assent (on this, see below).

In a first step, Morriss defines power as a dispositional concept, not a property concept (“capabilities”) nor a causal concept (implying already “influence”). “So, power, as a dispositional concept, is neither a *thing* (a resource or vehicle) nor an *event* (an exercise of power): it is a capacity” (Morriss 1987, p.19).<sup>2</sup> It is, in his terms, a capacity to “effect”. Then, Morriss suggests that power theoreticians generally concentrate on one of the different contexts, for which power concepts are used, claiming this one to be the only one. According to him, needless argument could be avoided if the plurality of contexts were recognised in which “power” operates. Morriss proposes three and discards two of such contexts.

Morriss (1987, pp. 37-42) distinguishes the practical, the moral, and the evaluative contexts. In the practical context, we are interested in power because we want to know which things we can bring about (“effect”). Agents want to know their powers in order to realise their opportunities. Knowing their abilities, they might also decide which to enhance. People are also interested in power, because they want to know what other agents can bring about. If we want to reach an outcome, and it is not in ours but in some other agent’s reach, this knowledge could be the beginning of getting a deal done. Finally, the most important interest might perhaps be to avoid being harmed by the effect of powers. Therefore, one has to know them.

We are interested in power, secondly, because through its assessment, moral responsibility can be attributed or avoided. “Ought” implies “can”. Accused persons need to show that they could not bring about an action, or that they could not prevent it.

Finally, Morriss finds a third context, the evaluative one. Here people are interested in concepts of power in order to judge not individuals, but social systems. The power debate took largely place in this context. “What is wrong with being powerless is that you *are* powerless that is lacking in power. And if people are powerless because they live in a certain sort of

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of both the event and the vehicle fallacy of power in IR and IPE, see Daniel Garst (1989, pp. 20-22).

society – that is, they would have more power if the social arrangements were changed – then that, itself, is a condemnation of that society.”

## **2.2. The effect of “power”: from essentially contested concept to the definition of political space<sup>3</sup>**

In other words, Morriss uses the distinction between different contexts of power as a way to show that we are not always interested in the same sub-category of power concepts. In the practical context, we might be particularly interested in non-intentional power, for instance, since we want to guard against any adverse effects, whether intended or not.<sup>4</sup> In the moral context, intention plays a more important role, although one can distinguish between responsibility (where intentionality is important) and liability, where it is less so. Hence, power debates would be less heated if only we followed him.

Yet perhaps this is not exactly as easy as Morriss presents it. I will use the detour about the discussion of the concept of power as an “essentially contested” concept to open up another way of addressing the “purposes” of power. I will use a critique of the way this debate has been carried out as a way to introduce a wider notion of contextual conceptual analysis, which takes language more seriously. This, in turn, prepares the ground for an opening to conceptual history.

### *From essentially contested concepts to speech acts*

The most often repeated reason for the essential contestability of power is the value-dependence of social theories. According to this view, if power is to play a role in social theory, its definition and interpretations will be inevitably value-laden.

<sup>3</sup> This section, even more than the others, draws heavily on Guzzini (1994, chapter 3)

<sup>4</sup> This aspect of non-intentional power is part of Susan Strange’s (1988) concept of “structural power”. For a discussion of the concept, see Guzzini (1993), and for its link to the purposes of power, see Guzzini (2000b).



[I]ts very definition and any given use of it, once defined, are inextricably tied to a given set of (probably unacknowledged) value-assumptions which predetermine the range of the empirical application ... Thus, any given way of conceiving of power (that is, any given way of defining the concept of power) in relation to the understanding of social life presupposes a criterion of significance, that is, an answer to the question what makes A's affecting B significant? ... but also ... any way of interpreting a given concept of power is likely to involve further particular and contestable judgements (Lukes 1974, p. 26; 1977, pp. 4-5, 6).

Unfortunately, Lukes' (and Connolly's) argument was both too easily embraced and too hastily rejected. On the one hand, value-dependence became quickly synonymous with being "ideological". From here, it is only one step to analyse Lukes three dimensions as the three expression of our well-known Anglo-American ideological triad of conservatism, liberalism and radicalism (Cox, Furlong et al. 1985). As in IR, questions of value dependence have been translated into well-known, yet all too facile triads (for a more detailed critique, see Guzzini 1998, chapter 8).

Being told that academic enterprise is politics (although nobody ever said, "nothing but politics"), and being offered this well-known menu for choice, another part of the discipline reacted with contempt. Since the implication of this argument seemed to be a form of radical relativism, the argument was judged incoherent.<sup>5</sup> Others argued that value-dependence is nothing which distinguishes power from other concepts in the social sciences. Thus, if the evaluative character was meant to establish a particular category of concepts in the social sciences, it is wrong. If it aims

<sup>5</sup> For this position, see Felix E. Oppenheim (1981, p. 185). For a position, which reads like a critique of essentially contested concepts, but which seems close to its precepts, see David A. Baldwin (1989, p. 8): "Without disputing the truth of this argument in some ultimate sense, there is still a case to be made for attempts to explicate a concept of power with as little ideological bias as possible. Just because perfect neutrality is impossible, it does not follow that 'anything goes'." This had never been disputed by Lukes or Connolly.

at describing a characteristic of all social science concepts, it is not “enlightening” (Giddens 1979, pp. 89-90).

Although this debate therefore seemed to open up conceptual analysis to political contexts in particular, it does it in a way which is ultimately not very fruitful for conceptual research. If ideologies are allowed to make conceptual discussions unbridgeable, a statement which can be justified in itself, then the opening to history and social contexts has been closed from early on: not much more analysis is needed.

Yet, the attempt to limit the issue to value-dependence is to underrate some other important facets of Lukes and Connolly’s argument. Connolly explicitly refers to the necessary connection between the idea of power and the idea of responsibility. This seems to fit nicely into one of Morriss contexts, the moral one. Yet, whereas for Morriss, this closes the analysis, for Lukes and Connolly, it does not. For they are not only interested in what the concept means and where it is used, but what it does when it is used.

When we see the conceptual connection between the idea of power and the idea of responsibility we can see more clearly why those who exercise power are not eager to acknowledge the fact, while those who take a critical perspective of existing social relationships are eager to attribute power to those in privileged positions. For to acknowledge power over others is to implicate oneself in responsibility for certain events and to put oneself in a position where *justification* for the limits placed on others is expected. To attribute power to another, then, is not simply to describe his role in some perfectly neutral sense, but is more like *accusing* him of something, which is then to be denied or justified (Connolly 1974, p. 97, original emphasis).

Connolly’s (1974) position seems to imply that the moral context, albeit not always the primary one, is necessarily implied when we use an idea of power. The argument to be discussed here is not about why we *look* for power, as Morriss does, but why we *call* something a phenomenon of power, as Connolly and Lukes do.

At this point, their position comes close to seeing in the attribution of power an illocutionary speech act.<sup>6</sup> A “speech act” refers to the simple idea that sometimes our speaking does, in itself, do something. Sometimes uttering sentences give just factual accounts. These statements are called locutionary speech acts. Yet, when we give an order or make a promise, for instance, we do something beyond the simple uttering of a sentence. This is an illocutionary speech act. Finally, a perlocutionary speech act happens, when we use speech to have an impact on the receiving agent. In short, there are three different acts: speaking; we act through speaking; to effect something through the fact that we act through speaking. The difference between the last two is sometimes difficult to establish. Habermas argues for restricting the perlocutionary act to all those situations where we want to effect something by hiding it within the speech act. It is a form of teleological action which has effect only because it is kept from view. Illocutionary acts, instead, must be open to have an effect. They have an effect through the conventions that are attached to the acts. If we accept an order, or register a promise, some conventional reactions can be expected.

Linking up conceptual analysis with the theory of speech acts most obviously make out of the concept an aim of the analysis, and not only a simple means. For it is not treated as a data container for further operationalisation, or a passive recipient of an empirically existing core meaning, carefully dug up. It is in itself an important object for the understanding of something else. For the concept of power, this something else seems to be the “political”.

*Power and the definition of “politics” or political space*

I think Lukes and Connolly made a very important point. “Power” implies an idea of counterfactuals, i.e. it could be also otherwise. The act of *attributing* power redefines the borders of what can be done. In the usual way we conceive of the term, this links power inextricably to “politics” in the sense of the “art of the possible”.

<sup>6</sup> For the following, see the discussion of Austin’s speech act theory in Jürgen Habermas (1985 [1981], pp. 388-397).

Accepting an attribution of power might result in particular actions. Lukes rightly noticed that Bacharach's and Baratz' (1970) conceptualisation of power sought to redefine what counts as a political issue. To be "political" means to be potentially changeable, i.e. not something natural, God-given, but something on which agency could potentially have an influence. In a similar vein, Daniel Frei notes that the concept of power is fundamentally identical with the concept of the "political"; to include something as a factor of power in one's calculus, means to "politicise" it (Frei 1969, p. 647; for a similar point, see Hoffmann 1988, pp. 7-8).

This gives a constructivist twist to conceptual analysis, and does this in a dual sense for the concept of power (Guzzini 2000a, 2001b). For a conceptual analysis of power as concept formation is part of the social construction of knowledge; and by its content, i.e. defining/assigning power, it is a power exercise or "political" itself and hence part of the social construction of reality

In some sense, "power" has the opposite effect of "securitisation" which ultimately tends to move decisions out of "politics" altogether (Wæver 1995; Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998). In return, those who might try to argue something out of politics, "depoliticisation", if one wants, will have to show that no power was involved. In the conceptual analysis, this has been taking place through the concept of "luck". The starting point for the discussion is the so-called "benefit fallacy" in power analysis (Barry 1988 [1987], p. 315). Nelson Polsby (1980, p. 208) explicitly mentions the case of free riders who might profit from something, but without being able to influence it. No power and no politics involved.

Opposing "power" to "luck" is, however, linked to a power holder-centered and causal understanding. And although scepticism about the links between power and benefits are warranted, it seems a reduction not to allow for a conceptual apparatus which can take account of systematic benefits in any other terms as "systematic luck" (Dowding 1991, p. 137). Because again, as a consequence, since power is not involved, we "have no alternative" but to live with this fateful state of affairs. By reducing a systematic bias to a question of luck, this approach leaves out of the picture the daily practices of agents that help to reproduce the very system and positions

from which these advantages were derived. Made conscious of it, raises questions of responsibility, and finally also of political choice. For this reason perhaps, Keith Dowding (1996, pp. 94ff.) now rephrases his approach and explicitly includes systematic luck into power *analysis*, although still not calling it power.

### **2.3. Conceptual history and the origins for understanding the effect of “power”**

The previous discussion has tried to show that Morriss’ discussion of contexts for determining the “purposes” of power, although illuminating, begs further questions of contexts. For Morriss does not reflect on a series of other contexts which underlie his analysis. I will touch on the linguistic/cultural first, so as to prepare the historical one in the end.

#### *The cultural linguistic context*

When Morriss took up his idea about the purposes of power, he first addressed the very question why the purposes of power have been so little studied. His explanation was that in common language, the term power resounds so significantly, that this question, although obvious for other terms, has never been systematically explored. Yet, one could also argue that this results from his definition of power, which was a dispositional concept about the “capacity to effect”. More importantly still, this is rather different from the French *pouvoir* (and closer to *puissance*, but not really either) and partly also the German *Macht*. Hence, contextualisations that might have happened elsewhere will have gone unnoticed.

In other words, one reason for this paucity on studies of the purposes of “power” is due to the different language conventions of power concepts which simply do not travel/translate well. The entry on “power” in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Faber, Ilting et al. 1982), for instance, is a combination of *Macht* and *Gewalt*, whereby the last one has a meaning which includes both *force*, *violence* and indeed sometimes *authority*, but usually in the sense of illegitimate rule/power. It is used closely also to

three other entries, namely *Herrschaft* (approx. “rule”) and *Regierung* (government, governance), and indeed *Politik* (politics). This shows that the word tends to be used in close terms to the nature of the political system.

This is most visible in French, where the classic reference book on “pouvoir”, also especially referred to by Faber et al. (1982), is Bertrand de Jouvenel’s *Du pouvoir. Histoire naturelle de sa croissance* (1972). Here, already the title indicates that we are talking about the concentration of power in government, “power” therefore being conceived as antithetical to other spheres of society. They also recommend Raymond Aron’s *Histoire et dialectique de la violence* where again *violence* implies but is not reducible to “violence” Both would point to possible, but not the core meaning of “power” in today’s English - let alone in Morriss’ very agent-centred concept.

#### *The historical semantic context*

This first opening into the different cultural/linguistic concepts should have prepared the ground for this final stop on our journey towards conceptual history. For all its importance, the preceding section has only opened the regress which starts when conceptual analysis looks at the purposes of a concept and the contexts in which it is used. Indeed, having concepts whose use arguably amount to speech acts inevitably beg the question: why/how do they do so? And since this is context dependent, do they always do so; did they always do so?

One can illustrate this by opening up yet another of the boxes the preceding analysis has put on the stage of scrutiny. The use of power as a “politicising” act was premised on the definition of politics as the “art of the possible”. Yet, this naturalised understanding is of rather late origin. In the entry on *Politik* of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Volker Sellin (1978) shows that the modern conception of politics was dual, a neo-Aristotelian one stressing the common good and a Machiavellian one based on the reason of state. Only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century an increasing reduction towards politics as *Machtkunst* (approx. the art/craft of power/governing) started.

Sellin then pursues, on the one hand, that in liberal and some conservative political theories, this reductionist move has been somewhat countered, yet mainly with regard to domestic constitutionalism. On the other hand, the shift to positive law and especially the idea of the reason of state and of power as the chief ingredient in *Staatskunst* (approx. statecraft) had a quite important group of followers in the German context of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. What he does not note is that the latter were member of, or influenced by, the German Historical School, starting with von Ranke, and leading up to von Treitschke, von Rochau's Treatise on *Realpolitik*, Friedrich Meinecke and Max Weber – all strongly, at times primarily, interested in the *international* status of Germany, nascent or newly unified.

At the very same time, however, Faber retraced the increasing de-coupling of *Macht* from the political sphere or the state on other social spheres (Faber, Ilting et al. 1982, pp. 898ff.). In other words, whereas politics is increasingly defined in terms of power in the German context of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in particular but not exclusively when applied to international affairs (which included German unification, after all) – power is decreasingly attached to the sphere of the state at the same time.

Such a look at the quite recent conceptual history in Germany allows to establish some hypotheses for answering the question why the use of power somewhat naturally “politicises” issues and why there is some confusion in its resistance. On the one hand, the “politicisation” is but the logical consequence of a historical development of tying power so closely to politics. On the other hand, power being increasingly diffused in society, implies that the increasing “politicisation” of different social spheres. This tendency is well established in social history – and sometimes deplored, as with Luhmann – both for the increasing enfranchising of larger portions of the society and the political struggles about the public control of previously “private” or “civil society” spheres like education or the economy. This, in turn, connects the political back to the state. Therefore, de Jouvenel (1972) retraces the history of *pouvoir* as one of expansion. Yet the reconnection is only part of the story and de Jouvenel therefore neglects all counter-

“powers” that liberal societies have developed in front of an ever increasing state.

Besides providing the historical context for studying the origins of the performative content of “power”, conceptual history also opens up for the possibility to develop hypotheses for possible tensions in existing usages. My illustration will use the foregoing argument and apply it to international relations. As noticed above, there has been a strong German tradition in “power politics”. Even a cursory reading of the early Morgenthau (1933; 1946) shows the import of this actually often idealist thinking (Palan and Blair 1993) onto the new environments of his emigration and later also onto a particularised field, the international realm. Yet, Morgenthau’s aim was to isolate a particular “morality” of the national interest, a reason of state, different from national morality, such as to establish the independence of the international realm in the first place. Today instead, the reconceptualisations of power, i.e. today’s “politicisations” in international relations, undermine this specificity (Guzzini 1993). What has come under the name of “structural power” signifies, in a certain sense, a return to the unitary vision of the political which existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and which was partly abandoned by its followers in the realist tradition in international relations. But this return comes at a price for “power politics”.

Power and politics have a strong mutual defining link in Realist theory, so much so as to be often used together as a single concept. For Realists, politics is about the individual (national) pursuit of power and its collective management. Or, expressed the other way round: outcomes in international politics are decided by power differentials and their distribution. Broadening the research agenda implied a critique of this approach or, at least, of its limits. In this critique, politics is done by other actors than states. States, in turn, have an international policy which in the time of “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982) encompasses more than strictly military or diplomatic security. This implies new forms of collective management of international politics, as through regimes for instance. Present international affairs have known the increased role of politics and power, more widely conceived.



Meanwhile, the transnationalisation of politics undermines the very control capacities of states and other international actors. A first look at the power differentials no longer explains the outcomes. It seems, as if “structural” factors are increasingly shaping and moving world events.

*It is this context of both an expansion of “politics” as a potential field of action, and a perceived contraction of “politics” as real room of manoeuvre that has triggered the various new power research programmes (Guzzini 1994, p. 14). These concentrate both on the new direct and indirect ways to control agendas and regimes and on the increasingly perceived impersonal rule of the international scene. In today’s IR, power analysis has become a critique of “power politics”.*

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