

**Steven Lukes.**

**Power: A Radical View, Second Edition.**

Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 192 pp.

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Power is one of the most central—and contentious—concepts in the social sciences. In 1974, Stephen Lukes published a short essay that stimulated debate over the meaning of that concept: *Power: A Radical View*. Today, Lukes' essay is viewed as a classic reading in political sociology, and continues to be widely debated. Between January 1975 and June 2006, more than 1200 journal articles cited it, an impressive figure by any standard (*ISI Citation Index*, June 30, 2006). Perhaps because this essay remains broadly cited, Palgrave asked Stephen Lukes, now professor at New York University, to prepare a second edition. Now, more than thirty years after the publication of this “academic bestseller,” the new edition is finally available. Fortunately for scholars, this second edition is much more than an attempt by the publisher to make more money on of this brief essay—money, one can hope, that will help Palgrave publish the work of younger sociologists. Two new chapters supplement the original essay in this 2005 edition, which considerably enrich the analysis by providing readers with both recent literature and original insights on power. In fact, these two chapters amend the original arguments of *Power*, as Lukes is honest enough to recognize some of the limitations of his original essay. Reading the original essay and the two new chapters back to back is thus a fascinating experience.

Using the post-war debate over “power elite” (Mills) and “pluralism” (Dahl) as a starting point, the 1974 essay—reprinted without major modifications—explores the three dimensions of power. Associated with the work of Robert Dahl, the first dimension is related to “the study of concrete, observable *behavior*” (17, emphasis in original). From this angle, what matters is the analysis of observable conflicts between organized interests over concrete political issues. The second dimension of power is underlined as the result of political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz's critique of Dahl's pluralism. This critique points to the forces that prevent potentially controversial issues from generating “observable conflicts.” Consequently, in order to grasp this second dimension of power, “it is crucially important to identify potential issues which nondecision-making prevents from being actual” (23). Beyond the analysis of observable conflicts, political analysis is about studying hidden forces that constrain the agenda. Thus, according to Lukes, power has a third dimension, which is ideological in nature: “Is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?” (28). This quote clearly stresses the relationship between the third dimension of power and what Marxists have called “alienation” and “false consciousness.” Although Lukes's original essay is not Marxist in the strict sense of the term, it features the Marxist-inspired—and problematic—opposition between people's “real interests” and the ideological blindness that prevents many of them from grasping these interests, and consequently acting upon them.

The two supplementary chapters offer a more developed discussion on the meaning of the concept of power. Chapter 2 reviews different definitions of power present in the contemporary social science literature. Arguing against Bruno Latour's claim that “the notion of power should be abandoned,” Lukes convincingly shows that, in spite of its contested nature, power remains a useful analytical

tool. Borrowing from Spinoza, he distinguishes between two types of power: the capacity to impact the surrounding world (A) and the capacity to dominate other beings (B), which is a sub-category of A. Retrospectively, Lukes argues that the three dimensions of power discussed in his 1974 essay only dealt with power-as-domination. Following this remark, he embarks on a well-informed discussion about the existing scholarship on domination, with a focus on the work of Michel Foucault. Lukes argues that Foucault's writings have generated a great deal of interesting subsequent scholarship. However, he then shows that the vision of domination formulated in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is both extreme and misleading. Unfortunately, too many scholars have embraced this extreme vision of power-as-repression-and-production, which Foucault himself rejected toward the end of his life. Chapter 3 offers further discussion of the concept of domination that makes a strong case for the enduring relevance of the ideologically-based third dimension of power defined in his 1974 essay. The final chapter also provides interesting insight about the work of authors like Pierre Bourdieu and James C. Scott.

Concise and well written, this second edition of *Power: A Radical View* is a must read for political sociologists and sociological theorists. The book could serve as a stimulating reading in graduate seminars and advanced undergraduate courses alike. Yet, this excellent book is not without flaws. First, Lukes should have written a short conclusion to summarize his claims and, more important, sketch a clearer agenda for future scholarship on domination and power relations. Second, his claim that one can identify the "objective interests" of dominated actors remains problematic at best. This is a crucial issue, as his rejuvenated third dimension of power is grounded in the contrast between such "objective interests" and what Marxists label "false consciousness." Arguing that what counts as an "objective interest" varies from one theoretical approach to another is rather unconvincing. It does not solve the epistemological issues the concept of "objective interest" raises. Finally, it is surprising that an author who underlines the central role of ideas and representations in power relations fails to engage with the growing scholarship on agenda setting and framing processes (e.g. Cobb and Ross, 1997; Fischer, 2003; Somers and Block, 2005). This is unfortunate; such scholarship could considerably enrich our understanding of the ideological mechanisms of domination and resistance that Lukes underlines in his second edition of *Power: A Radical View*. Nevertheless, these shortcomings should not detract potential readers from engaging with this thought-provoking book, which deserves its classic status.

## References

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Daniel Béland  
University of Calgary  
dbeland@ucalgary.ca

Dr. Daniel Béland is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Calgary. A political sociologist studying politics and public policy from a comparative and historical perspective, he has published two books (*Une Sécurité libérale?* 2001; *Social Security* 2005) and more than two dozen articles in journals like *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *Sociological Theory*. You can find more

about Dr. Béland's work on his website: <http://www.danielbeland.org/>. In *CJS Online* he previously reviewed *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, by Corey Robin, *The Welfare Experiments*, by Robin H. Rogers-Dillon, and *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, by Seungsook Moon.

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