Chapter 5

Divided by a Common Language? Conceptualising Power

That political scientists remain divided by the common language of power is perhaps testimony to the centrality of the concept to political analysis. Indeed, for many, political analysis can be defined quite simply as the analysis of the nature, exercise and distribution of power (Dahl 1963; Duverger 1964/66; Lasswell 1936/50; M. Weber 1919/46; and, for a more recent view, Goodin and Klingemann 1996). For those who adopt such a view the definition of power serves to circumscribe the parameters of political analysis. Given this, it is perhaps unremarkable that the concept of power has attracted quite so much attention, contention and controversy. How is power distributed? Is it repressive or constitutive? Is it best conceptualised in purely structural terms or as a capacity of agents? Or, indeed, is it better conceived as a resource conferred upon actors by the context in which they find themselves? Is the identification of a power relation an analytical or a normative exercise? Is the identification of an inequality of power itself sufficient to imply a normative critique of those identified as possessing 'power over'? Can power be exercised responsibly? Can the powerful be held to account? Should power be counterposed to freedom and autonomy? Is a liberation from relations of power possible and/or desirable? These and other fundamental questions continue to divide political analysts, as we shall see. They form the subject of this chapter.

For many, power specifies the sphere of the political: *power is to political analysis what the economy is to economics*. Such authors would be quick to embrace Terence Ball's suggestion that 'power is arguably the single most important organising concept in social and political theory' (1992: 14). Though perhaps increasingly prevalent, this should not lead us to overlook those authors who would challenge such a view and with it the centrality of the concept of power to political analysis. These authors are generally of the view that political *scientists* (often in contrast to less encumbered political *analysts* and *theorists*) cannot afford to define their analytical sphere so broadly as to include all real and potential power relations. For by so doing they would have to embrace

a definition so all-encompassing as to exclude almost nothing (see, for instance, Heywood 1994: 25–6). However important the analysis of power to the conduct of political science, they suggest, the political domain cannot and should not be held coextensive with that of power itself. The result would be the in-discipline of an inchoate and unfocused discipline, unified not by its subject matter but by a power-centred approach to the analysis of the entire social sphere. As discussed in Chapter 2, such authors tend to advocate a relatively narrow and clearly delineated definition of the political as the *arena* of government as distinct from the *practice* or *exercise* of power.

This would perhaps suggest an irreconcilable gulf between proponents of an arena definition of the political, for whom an analysis of power is no more than a potentially useful aspect of the analysis of the political, and those advancing a process definition for whom power is to politics what time is to history. Yet this would be to present a somewhat misleading image. For there are a range of authors, many of them seminal figures in the development of political science as a discipline, who have sought to define power in such a way as to render it coextensive with the political while retaining an essentially arena definition of the latter. Chief among these is Robert Dahl himself (1957, 1963). What this suggests, a key theme of the present chapter, is that, like politics itself, power can be understood in a variety of more or less inclusive ways.

In this chapter I focus primarily on perhaps the key debate in the post-war period over the nature and definition of power – the so-called 'faces of power' controversy – before turning more briefly to a consideration of a very different exchange about the concept of power, the Foucault–Habermas debate. As we shall see, these debates reflect very different theoretical traditions and very different approaches to political analysis (Table 5.1).

The first, the faces of power or community studies controversy, is a classically anglophone (and Anglo-US) debate. It is concerned with the definition of the concept of power. Strangely, perhaps, it centres around the extent to which such definitional questions can and should be resolved methodologically – in short, whether power should be defined in such a way that it can be measured easily. The debate throws up a tension between, on the one hand, a definition of power so narrow, even banal, as to be uninteresting yet which is easy to operationalise in political analysis and, on the other, a more subtle and complex conception of power yet one which is almost impossible to measure and quantify. Throughout the debate, power is understood in rather pluralist and behaviouralist terms as an essentially inter-personal relationship.

The Foucault–Habermas debate is in fact something of a misnomer, as it was conducted for the most part, by protagonists other than

Table 5.1 ***Divided by a common language***

	The 'faces of power' debate	*The Foucault–Habermas debate*
Protagonists	Political scientists – Dahl; Bachrach and Baratz; Lukes	Social and political theorists – Foucault and Habermas
Key issues of controversy	How should power be defined? Should power be defined such that it is measurable?	Is power ubiquitous? If so, is a liberation from power possible? If emancipation is impossible then what point critical theory?
Nature of the debate	Proceeds by way of a modification of pluralist understandings of power; primacy of methodology (for Dahl and Bachrach and Baratz)	Primacy of ontology (how does power function? is it ubiquitous?) over methodology (how might we measure it?)

Foucault and Habermas. As Samantha Ashenden and David Owen note, 'the history of this encounter is characterised by the marked absence of open dialogue' (1999: 1). For, as Michael Kelly comments:

> the amount of discussion by each philosopher about the other was unintentionally lopsided in Habermas' favour. He devoted two chapters of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1987) to Foucault, but the book was published after Foucault's death and thus received no reply . . . the effect of this lopsidedness is that the debate is too often construed in Habermasian terms. (1994: 4)

In contrast to the faces of power controversy, this largely virtual exchange reflects a very different and more characteristically contintental European intellectual tradition. The debate, such as it is, displays a perhaps remarkable disdain for methodological considerations, certainly when compared to its anglophone counterpart. It is almost entirely uninhibited by considerations as pragmatic or parochial (depending on one's loyalties) as whether one can 'measure' or catalogue the power relations one identifies. The tenor of the controversy is, consequently, much more philosophical, indeed, metaphysical. The debate concerns the extent to which power is ubiquitous and hence the very possibility of liberation or emancipation from power. As such it has clear implications for

critical political analysis – for if there can be no possibility of liberation from power, then arguably critical theory loses its emancipatory potential. Finally, in contrast to the anglophone 'faces of power' controversy, power is understood to be social and structural rather than inter-personal.

The marked contrast in both the content and conduct of the two debates reveals much about the character and distinctiveness of anglophone political science. While the Anglo-US 'faces of power controversy' is concerned essentially with finding a definition of power which might be operationalised methodologically, the European debate is animated by rather more ethereal considerations – the extent to which the critique of, and emancipation from, power is possible given the ubiquity of power relations. The 'faces of power controversy', then, rests fundamentally on the tension between a concept of power that is simple, precise and potentially quantifiable and one which is more complex and intuitively appealing, yet which is much more difficult to catalogue and measure. For the majority of the protagonists, this essentially theoretical (indeed, ontological) controversy can and should be resolved by appeal to methodological concerns. Such a suggestion would be unthinkable in the context of the continental European debate.

The 'faces of power' controversy

As is by now clear, if the field of political analysis is, by the very political nature of its subject matter, profoundly contested, then within that field the concept of power is more profoundly contested than most. Yet this was not always the case. For in the early post-war years, when the practice of (anglophone) political science was assumed simple, there was but one 'face of power'. Debate may have raged between sociologists and political scientists as to the precise *locus* of power but, by and large, political scientists remained united and intransigent in their defence of a pluralist conception of power. Power was transparent, expressed in an unambiguous and empirically demonstrable way in the decision-making process.

This, at least, is the textbook orthodoxy. Arguably it is something of a myth. It is certainly true that influential political scientists in the 1940s and 1950s did not trouble themselves too much with conceptual disputes about the concept of power. Nonetheless, any but the most cursory treatment of anglophone political science in the early post-war years cannot fail to acknowledge the extent of the theoretical gulf (however implicit) which already divided pluralists and elite theorists in their efforts to operationalise the concept of power (compare, for instance,

Dahl 1956; Dahl and Lindblom 1953; Truman 1951; with Lynd and Lynd 1937/64; Hunter 1953; Lasswell 1936/50; Mills 1956; for a discussion see also Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987).

Decision-making: the first face of power

While the extent of its ascendancy even in the early post-war period might be questioned, then, the one-dimensional view of power was extremely influential. As its designation as the 'one-dimensional' view of power might suggest, it is relatively simply stated. Thus, for Dahl, one-time doyen of classic pluralism, *A* has power over *B* to the extent that she can 'get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do' (1957: 201) *and*, crucially, where there is an overt conflict of *interests* (here assumed synonymous with *preferences*) between the actors involved. Thus, by virtue of *A*'s power, *B* not only modifies her behaviour, but does so in full knowledge that her modified behaviour is contrary to her own genuine interests.

If Anna purchases Ben's car for £500 when they both know that it is in fact worth £800 – by threatening, say, to put a sledge-hammer to it if her less than generous offer is refused – then Anna might be said to exert power over Ben. Anna's power is mirrored in Ben's lack of power. Note, however, that were Ben unaware of the market value of his property and, consequently, were no threat required to facilitate the transaction, no power relation would have been exerted. This might seem rather strange and serves perhaps to highlight one of the key assumptions underpinning the (classic) pluralist conception of power. Actors are assumed to be blessed with perfect information and hence to know their real interests. Consequently, the preferences their behaviour exhibits can be assumed to reflect their genuine interests. What they want is what they really, really want. What's more, what they want is what's good for them. While it may certainly simplify matters to assume perfect information and the transparent quality of material interests, it may also seriously limit the utility of such a conception of power, as we shall see.

For now, suffice it to note that the pluralist conception of power is based on the idea of Anna getting Ben to do something that he would not otherwise do or, more generally, of *A* getting *B* to do something he or she would not otherwise do. This is operationalised by pluralists in a focus on decision-making. The powerful are those whose opinion holds sway in the decision-making arena, whether a parliament, cabinet or diplomatic negotiation.

There are four immediate things to note about such a definition of power:

1. Power is understood in terms of its *effects* – if Anna's actions have no effect on Ben, there is no power relation
2. Power is an attribute of *individuals*, exercised in their relations with other individuals – it is *behavioural*
3. Power is associated with *domination* or *power over* – it is not so much a capacity to affect outcomes, but to dominate others in so doing
4. Consequently, power is unproductive or zero-sum – some gain only to the extent that others lose out. If Anna has power, Ben does not; the extent of Anna's power is the extent of Ben's lack of power.

Such an approach had, and still has, an obvious appeal. Power is rendered transparent and can be catalogued, classified and tabulated in terms of the realisation of preferences in the heat of the decision-making process. An obvious and apparent object of analysis is identified (the arena of decision-making); a series of unproblematic methodological strictures naturally follow. For, as James L. Hyland explains, 'there is a radical distinction between having access to a political resource and successfully wielding that resource in the determination of a particular outcome'. Consequently:

> if we are attempting to establish who in reality wields actual power, the simple categorisation of people in terms of their access to potential political resources is wholly inadequate. We must try to decipher the actual lines of influence by identifying who was in favour of which alternative, which alternative was finally implemented and what the participants in the conflict actually did in the attempt to get their preferences realised. (1995: 197)

Thus, if we want to know *who* is powerful we tabulate exhibited patterns of influence in the decision-making process (Dahl 1961b; Polsby 1980).

Consider a tripartite political system. To ascertain the distribution of power we would monitor the outcome of the decision-making process over a given period of time, tallying the number of occasions in which particular parties' preferences were satisfied on controversial issues where a clear conflict of interest could be identified (see Table 5.2). In this scenario, Party *B* is revealed to hold the most power.

In sum, the classic pluralist conception of power is one-dimensional in its narrow focus on power as decision-making and analytically precise in unambiguously identifying what counts, and what does count, as power relations. It is also actor-centred in its focus on power as an interpersonal and zero-sum phenomenon. Finally, it implies an *instrumentalist* or *input* theory of the state which, as the term would perhaps

Table 5.2 *Operationalising power as decision-making*

	Vote 1	*Vote 2*	*Vote 3*	*Vote 4*	*Vote 5*	*Total*
Party A	WON	LOST	LOST	LOST	WON	2
Party B	WON	WON	WON	WON	LOST	4
Party C	LOST	LOST	LOST	LOST	WON	1

imply, conceives of the state as an instrument rather than a set of structures (on instrumentalism see Barrow 1993: 13–41; Finegold and Skocpol 1995: 176; Hay 1999c: 164–71; on input politics see Dunleavy and O'Leary 1987: 23–41). It focuses attention on those who inhabit positions of influence within the state apparatus rather than the nature, form and function of the state itself.

In so far as this classic pluralist conception of power was dominant in anglophone political science in the 1950s, the theoretical and empirical confidence it engendered among its proponents was not to last for long.

Agenda-setting: the second face of power

Enter Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz. In two short but brilliant and highly significant methodological critiques (and later in more empirical detail), they proceeded to demolish the grand if fragile edifice of classical pluralism (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 1963, 1970). Motivated, essentially, by a desire to defend elite theorists (such as Floyd Hunter) from the methodological critique of pluralists like Dahl (1958) and Nelson Polsby (1961), they took the offensive to the pluralists. Power, they argued, is Janus-faced, its complex nature merely obscured by a narrow concentration on the decision-making process. While decision-making is essentially and obviously a power relation in so far as the actions of the *A* affect *B*, this is not the end of the story. For power is also exercised in what they, rather cryptically termed, 'non-decision making'. Here, as they explained, 'A devotes his [*sic*] energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public considerations of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A' (1962: 948; see also 1963: 632). A non-decision is, then, 'a decision that results in the suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker' (1970: 44).

Put in its most simple terms, power is exerted in *setting the agenda* for the decision-making process. The selection of what is and what is

not subject to the formal process of political deliberation, they argued, is itself a highly political process – and one overlooked by pluralists. As James L. Hyland suggests, 'the common knowledge that certain decisions would be unacceptable to the local "godfather" is sufficient to remove whole ranges of potential options from the agenda of the town-meeting entirely' (1995: 194; see also Gambetta 1993, 1994).

What this suggests is that, even at this relatively early stage in proceedings, the faces of power controversy, though couched in the language of power, was essentially a dispute about the boundaries of the political. While pluralists restricted the concept of power, and in so doing their analysis of the political, to the content of the formal decision-making process, neo-elitists such as Bachrach and Baratz sought to broaden the concept of power, and with it the political, to encompass agenda-setting. Through the process of agenda-setting, they argued, powerful actors got to decide which issues became subject to (formal) deliberation (or decision-making) and which did not. Here they drew upon E. E. Schattschneider's concept of the 'mobilisation of bias' and the insight that power may be exercised by 'creating or reinforcing barriers to the airing of policy conflicts' (Bachrach and Baratz 1962: 949; Schattschneider 1960). The ability to shape agendas was, then, in one sense a more fundamental exercise of power than merely influencing decisions once the agenda had already been set. For the art of politics was to steer the agenda is such a way as to avoid the need for formal decision-making on issues where the desired outcome could not be guaranteed.

This suggests a more fundamental critique of pluralism. It is all very well to consider the exercise of power within the decision-making chamber, but if this is merely a talking shop from which consideration of all contentious issues has already been excluded, then the wood is being missed for the foliage on the trees. Indeed, such a narrow concern with decision-making is tantamount to an endorsement of systematic and deep-seated power relations. It is, in short, a normative legitimation of the political elite masquerading as a neutral and dispassionate science *of* the political. For, as Barry Hindess notes, 'it is the *covert* uses of power which make possible the benign public representation of power as serving the general interest . . . it is precisely because their power enables them to manipulate the agenda of political debate that the rule of unrepresentative elites meets so little opposition in such "democratic" communities as the US' (1996: 5, emphasis in the original).

It was the focus on agenda-setting as the second 'face' or dimension of power which served to differentiate Bachrach and Baratz's neo-elitism from Dahl's pluralism. Yet, it is important to emphasise that the neo-elitists sought not to supplant the pluralists' emphasis on decision-

making with a similar concern for agenda-setting. Rather, they called for a more rounded and inclusive conception of power (and the political) capable of analysing *both* the decision-making and the agenda-setting (or non-decision-making) process. This revised definition of power extended the sphere of political analysis from the parliament or formal decision-making arena to include the corridors of power, the boardroom, the masonic lodge, the golf course and the clubs and pubs in which agenda-setting occurs behind the scenes.

Though certainly less naïve about the conduct and practice of political power, this extension of political analysis to the subterranean corridors of power did not come without a price. In short, it put paid to the methodological assuredness of the classic pluralists. It had been relatively simple to observe, catalogue and analyse the formal decision-making arena. But now that the locus of power was expanded to include the masonic lodge and now that power was seen to operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week rather than Monday to Friday, nine to five, the analysis of power was set to become an altogether more complex, exacting and, arguably, subjective task. This led a number of pluralist critiques to conclude that non-decision-making was simply unresearchable (Merelman 1968; Wolfinger 1971; though see Bachrach and Baratz 1970).

Important though the focus on agenda-setting clearly was, it did not exhaust Bachrach and Baratz's critique of classical pluralism. Even were one to accept its exclusive focus on decision-making, they argued, the classic pluralist approach was methodologically flawed. For, they suggested, Dahl, Polsby, and authors like them, provide no basis (objective or otherwise) for ascribing importance to specific issues and decisions.[1] Clearly some decisions are more significant than others and an approach which merely concentrates on the frequency with which different groups and actors get their way is likely to distort systematically the power relations involved. It may well be, for instance, that a strategic and hegemonic group will allow minority interests to prevail on certain issues which do not directly threaten its domination, reserving its influence for matters of greater significance. Indeed, such strategies may be crucial to the ability of an elite to maintain its hegemonic position. For pluralists, then, the buying off of particular constituencies (through, for instance, the targeted use of tax rebates), might be seen as an index of the power of those targeted; for neo-elitists is it further evidence of the power of those able to make such selective concessions. A simple tally of ostensible successes and defeats in the decision-making forum may, in such circumstances, hide more than it reveals.

Bachrach and Baratz's modified pluralism (or, as they would perhaps prefer, neo-elitism) implies two methodological innovations:

Table 5.3 *The power to make concessions*

Weighting	*Vote 1* 1	*Vote 2* 1	*Vote 3* 2	*Vote 4* 1	*Vote 5* 5	*Total*
Party A	WON	LOST	LOST	LOST	LOST	1
Party B	LOST	WON	WON	WON	LOST	4
Party C	LOST	LOST	LOST	LOST	WON	5

1. The need to consider the largely informal process of agenda-setting within the corridors of power before examining the formal decision-making process itself
2. The need to weight issues in the decision-making process in terms of their 'importance' in assessing the real distribution of power (this is illustrated in Table 5.3).

In its sensitivity to the selectivity of the decision-making agenda and the mechanisms by which significant issues may be filtered out and thereby excluded from the decision-making process, Bachrach and Baratz's 'two-dimensional' view of power represents a considerable advance on that of the classic pluralists. It is not, however, unproblematic. Like their pluralist forebears, Bachrach and Baratz assume that power relations exist only in so far as there is observable conflict between those exercising power and those over whom power is exercised (1970: 49). This excludes the possibility of power being exercised in situations in which the subordinated do not identify themselves as the subject of subordination – in which those subject to the negotiations and deliberations of agenda-setters and decision-makers do not perceive themselves as possessing an interest they are prevented from realising.

To return to our earlier example, for pluralists and neo-elitists alike, while Ben remains ignorant of the true market value of the car he has just sold to Anna for what she knows to be a paltry sum, he remains immune to Anna's power. This raises a problem of temporal inconsistency. For, if Ben subsequently meets Caroline who informs him that she would have paid over £800 for his car and that Anna exploited his naïvety in such matters, does this alter the situation? Does Anna's duplicitous offer now become a power relation retrospectively even if it were not a power relation when the offer was accepted?

The problem rests in the assumption, which Bachrach and Baratz share with Dahl, that actors' preferences are a direct representation of their material interests. As the above example perhaps suggests, perceived interests (or preferences) may vary independently of material cir-

cumstances as, for instance, actors' information of the context in which they find themselves changes. On the basis of the (limited) information available to him, Ben may regard his material interests to be served by selling his car to Anna only to come to re-evaluate that judgement, after the fact, once more complete information is available to him.

The result of this inability to differentiate between interests and exhibited preferences is that, for Bachrach and Baratz, as for Dahl, where there is no explicit conflict of (perceived) interest – where, in short, there is seeming consensus – no power can be said to be exercised. Despite their critique of classic pluralism, then, they retain a residual behaviouralism which they inherit from the pluralist tradition. In the concentration on the observable (and behavioural) phenomenon of agenda-setting, no consideration is given to the less visible processes by which *preferences* are shaped. This brings us to the intervention of Steven Lukes, and to the 'third dimension' of power.

The third dimension: preference-shaping

In outlining the limitations of Bachrach and Baratz's bold attempt to overcome the parochial pluralism of Dahl's early work, Lukes lays the basis for his own distinctive and important intervention in the debate. In what might at first seem like an exercise in one-upmanship, he calls for a radical *three*-dimensional conception of power – who, after all, could possibly prefer a one- or two-dimensional perspective when presented with a three-dimensional alternative? Where once there was only one face of power, there would now be three. Yet the significance of Lukes' intervention should not be understated. For in advancing the three-dimensional conception of power, Lukes offers us a route out of the behaviouralist impasse.

To restrict the use of the term 'power' to situations in which actual and observable conflict is present, he argues, is arbitrary, unrealistic and myopic. Anna certainly exercises power over Ben by getting him to do what he would not otherwise do. But power – and an altogether more effective and invidious form of power at that – is also exercised when she influences or shapes his very *preferences* – by convincing him, for instance, that £500 represents a good deal. As Lukes asks himself:

> is it not the 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 or unchangeable,

> or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?. (1974: 24; see also 1978: 669)

As this passage perhaps suggests, Lukes is interested in rather more weighty issues than the price of second-hand cars. His analysis suggests that the societal consensus which pluralists and elitists would take as evidence of the absence of systematic inequalities of power is, in fact, the consequence of highly effective and insidious mechanisms of institutionalised persuasion. Here he draws implicitly on the work of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1971).

What is now required, Lukes suggests, is a framework capable of recognising: (i) the strategies, struggles and practices that characterise the decision-making process; (ii) the actions and *inactions* involved in shaping the agenda for the decision-making process; and (iii) the actions and *inactions* similarly implicated in the shaping of perceived interests and political preferences. This Lukes advances in his 'radical' three-dimensional conception of power. Its distinctiveness is summarised in Table 5.4.

Lukes' achievement is considerable, but his formulation is ultimately no less problematic for that. In expanding the notion of power to include preference-shaping, he is forced to draw the distinction between subjective or perceived interests on the one hand, and actual or 'real' interests on the other, suggesting that where power is exercised it involves the subversion of the latter. This is an important point and it is perhaps worth dwelling upon. To identify a power relationship within Lukes' schema is not merely to identify a situation in which Anna gets Ben to act in a manner he would not otherwise have done. It is also, crucially, to demonstrate that, regardless of Ben's preferences, his exhibited behaviour was indeed contrary to his genuine interests.

Yet who is to know what Ben's true interests are if he is capable of misperceiving them? This opens the Pandora's box that is the concept of *false consciousness* (Rosen 1996). The problem with such a formulation is the deeply condescending conception of the social subject as an ideological dupe that it conjures. Not only is this wretched individual incapable of perceiving her/his true interests, pacified as s/he is by the hallucinogenic effects of bourgeois (or other) indoctrination. But, to confound matters, rising above the ideological mists which tame the masses is the enlightened academic who from a high perch in the ivory tower may look down to discern the genuine interests of those not similarly privileged.

To most commentators such a formulation is now seen as both logically unsustainable and politically offensive, implying a privileged vantage-point for the enlightened academic which is difficult to sub-

Table 5.4 *The 'faces of power' controversy: political power in three dimensions*

	One-dimensional view	*Two-dimensional view*	*Three-dimensional view*
Proponents	Dahl, Polsby, classic pluralists	Bachrach and Baratz, neo-elitists	Lukes, Marxists, neo-Marxists and radical elitists/ pluralists
Conception of power	Power as decision-making	Power as decision-making and agenda-setting	Power as decision-making, agenda-setting and preference-shaping
Focus of analysis	The formal political arena	The formal political arena and the informal processes surrounding it (the corridors of power)	Civil society more generally, especially the public sphere (in which preferences are shaped)
Methodological approach	'Counting' of votes and decisions in decision-making forums	Ethnography of the corridors of power to elucidate the informal processes through which the agenda is set	Ideology critique – to demonstrate how actors come to misperceive their own material interests
Nature of power	Visible, transparent and easily measured	Both visible and invisible (visible only to agenda-setters), but can be rendered visible through gaining inside information	Largely invisible – power distorts perceptions and shapes preference; it must be demystified

stantiate and for which no justification is offered, and a somewhat overbearing paternalism towards the 'victims' of a distorted consciousness (Benton 1981; Clegg 1989: 95). To his considerable credit Lukes does, at times, acknowledge the difficulties of the distinction between false consciousness and real interests. Thus, whether *A* acts in a manner contrary to *B*'s interests in any given situation is, he concedes, essentially 'an evaluative matter' (1974: 34; 1979). Later he remarks, 'any view of power rests on some normatively specific conception of interests' (1974: 35). Here Lukes is perilously close to accepting the logic of Hyland's perceptive critique, namely that 'a theory of human nature robust enough to ground a substantive conception of interests will necessarily be implicitly normative and hence will not be open to straightforward proof or disproof' (1995: 203). Yet if this is indeed the case then the convenient differentiation between real and perceived interests simply cannot be sustained.

Here Lukes relies on William E. Connolly's conception of 'objective interests': 'Policy x is more in A's interests than policy y if A, were he [*sic*] to experience the results of both x and y, would choose x as the result he would rather have for himself' (1972: 472; see also Habermas 1968; Isaac 1987: 35). Yet, while this certainly clarifies things, it merely compounds the problem. For such a definition is deliciously paradoxical, effectively conceding the essentially and irredeemably *perceptual* quality of supposedly 'objective' interests. There is nothing objective about the process by which one ascertains one's genuine interests, since one's objective interests are one's perceived interests under conditions of complete information. (Though, for an alternative view, see Dowding 1991: Chs 3 and 7). Moreover, since complete information is a purely hypothetical condition, objective interests are effectively recast by Connolly as the theorist's perception of how an actor *would* perceive her/his interests if blessed with perfect knowledge of past, present and *future*.[2] The concept is hardly robust.

It is not surprising, then, that Lukes is somewhat apologetic about the distinction he draws between real and perceived interests. Such obvious doubts, however, do not prevent Lukes from falling back on precisely such a distinction. Thus, when he asks himself 'can power be exercised by A over B in B's real interests?' he identifies two potential answers:

> (1) that A might exercise 'short-term power' over B . . . but that if and when B recognises his [*sic*] real interests, the power relation ends: it is self-annihilating; (2) that . . . successful control by A over B . . . constitutes a violation of B's autonomy; that B has a real interest in his own autonomy; so that such an exercise of power cannot be in B's real interests. (1974: 33)

Lukes ultimately plumps for the former, albeit somewhat reluctantly and with the proviso than an empirical basis for identifying real interests must be insisted upon to 'obviate the potential dangers'. This may sound attractive. But since Lukes provides us with no suggestion as to how such an empirical basis can be established and, as already noted, concedes that identifying interests is essentially a *normative* task, it is not at all clear that a 'paternalist license for tyranny' has indeed been precluded (see also Clegg 1989: 103). While any doubt remains, the 'anarchist defence' against tyranny embodied in the second answer is perhaps to be preferred.

Power: analytical and critical perspectives

The above discussion raises two crucial questions. First, why, despite his obvious unease at the theoretical contradictions and normative dilemmas that it generates, does Lukes insist on premising his analysis of power on the distinction between real and perceived interests? And, relatedly, can a genuinely three-dimensional conception of power (that is, one sensitive to power as decision-making, agenda-setting *and* preference-shaping) be formulated that is not compromised by its reliance upon such a distinction?

Attributing power: analysis or critique?

Given Lukes' seeming inability to offer an objective, empirical, or even normative basis from which to assess the genuine interests of social subjects in a potential power relationship, and his evident reluctance (in the absence of such criteria) to position himself as the supreme arbiter of such interests, it seems obvious to ask why he makes the attribution of power dependent upon such an assessment. For might it not be, as Hyland has it, that 'the problem lies not with the thesis that there can be a form of power that operates through the moulding of consciousness, but with certain specific features of Lukes' account of such power' (1995: 203) – in particular, his reliance upon the notion of power as a subversion of real interests. The answer is revealing and suggests a potential route out of Lukes' theoretical dilemma.

Lukes, it should be recalled, is a self-professed *critical* theorist advancing a *radical* conception of power (see, especially, Hindess 1996: 86–93). What makes his conception both critical, and more specifically, radical is that to identify a power relationship is, for Lukes, to engage in critique. To identify *A* as exercising power over *B* is to identify a situation in which *B*'s (real) interests are being subverted, and to identify *A* as not