Core Concept: Power

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Power trip, power hungry, power move, power politics, even power lunches and power ties! Chances are you use the term "power" in a variety of phrases every day. Few of those phrases have positive connotations--power is generally seen as an oppressive force associated with compulsion and authoritarianism. When used in English, power generally connotes an individual or a group exerting a will over another, less fortunate, person or group. In this way, Max Weber's definition of power resonates with many people: "By power is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests" (117). Most people in this country see power as a by-product of wealth, privilege, gender or race. In other words, power is seen as something that comes from innate characteristics, or things that you are born with. In many ways, this perception of power in the United States is correct. Economic class, race and gender do indeed play a role in how we are perceived by others and the strategies we can employ to work and be in the world. However, that doesn't mean ordinary people can't change their lives and their communities. In Public Achievement, where we see power as an ability to act, learning to identify, access and work with power is one of the most important skills for developing a public life.

Power: It's More than You Think

Try this experiment: ask your friends, family members or strangers on the street what they think about power. We bet you'll find that many folks have a negative view of power. Very few people you talk to will exclaim, "Yes, I love power, and I want more!"—even the ones who have the traditional markings of power such at wealth and prestige. Why do people tend to shrink from power? In Powers of the Weak, Elizabeth Janeway argues that we are put off by power because of fear. "Power is dangerous: or so we believe," Janeway argues, and we stay away from it because we think we don't have the capabilities to work with the responsibility that comes with power (93). Janeway alludes to Lord Acton's famous phrase, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" arguing that this phrase has so much currency in our language because it lets us off the hook. If you think of power as corrupt, pushing it away, or deciding not to take it becomes a moral choice or, as Janeway says, "It supplies a convenient explanation for inaction and passivity" (91). When we shrink from power we make a conscious choice to remain isolated and, we implicitly allow things to stay as they are. What we are shrinking from, then, is the responsibility that comes with power and we allow others to make decisions for us rather than engaging ourselves with the real problems of the world.

Here is another interesting phrase that has a good deal of currency in English: "Power to the people!" You've all heard it—the phase is generally accompanied by an upraised fist--and you have probably used the phrase and the gesture yourself on occasion. In the context of Public Achievement, though, this phrase makes little sense. You might, however, find a Public Achievement Coach thrusting her fist in the air and exclaiming, "Power from the people!" Prepositions matter, and, in Public Achievement, we realize that power is not a commodity that can be given to the people from the powerful. Power lies dormant in all of us until we

choose to take action, and the more people you can mobilize to join your cause, the more change you will affect in your communities.

Despite its negative associations, power is actually a neutral term; it is neither good nor bad until it is applied to specific human acts. Philosophers and theologians spend a good deal of time trying to understand power as a concept and explaining it as an element of human experience and behavior. For instance, the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche wrote about a "will to power" which he explained as an innate, creative force of human nature. Picking up on Nietzsche's ideas, the German theologian, Paul Tillich, argued that power is an effort to overcome non-being, or death, and in this way, power becomes associated with a life-affirming force. For Tillich, "[p]ower actualizes itself through force and compulsion. But power is neither the one nor the other. It is being actualizing itself over against the threat of non-being" (47). Another German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, discussed the concept of power in her famous work of political philosophy, The Human Condition. For Arendt, power is a possibility, and it only ". . . springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (179). In other words, power cannot happen when people are isolated—it is the direct result of human connection and human relationships. Michel Foucault, a postmodern French philosopher and historian has done a great deal to shape the postmodern definition of power, and while it is impossible to distill Foucault's voluminous writings on power into a few sentences, it is worth noting that for Foucault, power is a process and a force that allows humans to understand, define and, in many ways, control the phenomenal world. For Foucault, power is like a low, but very powerful radio frequency. It works through human beings and institutions and it determines how we see and evaluate the world around us, but it is very difficult to identify. Although he made many statements that power is not an oppressive force, it is difficult to read Foucault and come away with a sense of power as something ordinary people can access to change their lives and worlds.

It is also interesting to look at power from a linguistic perspective. As a concept, power is an idea that has different signifiers in different language and cultures. According to Ed Chambers, English speakers consistently misunderstand power because they typically use it as a noun or an adjective. Spanish speakers, however, have the verb, poder, which means "to be able" and "to have the capacity to make an influence" (28). For Spanish speakers, then, power is related to action. A quick study of the way power is defined in English reveals some deep linguistic tensions. In the Oxford English Dictionary, power is defined in three ways: First, the OED sees power as an "ability to do something," next it notes that power is related to governing and to force and finally, the OED deals with the mathematical and physical definitions of power. What we are left with, then, is a tension between power as the ability act and power as a force that acts upon us. The fact that English and Spanish speakers have a variety of ways of describing and using the word "power," suggests that individuals and the culture they create decide how they wish to use language and the concepts that are attached to certain words and ideas. Language, in other words, is fluid, always being transformed by new events, technology and agreed ways of explaining ourselves and the world around us. If you accept the idea that language is the pragmatic product of the human imagination, then it is worth considering ways we might begin to re-define "power" in the United States.

Power and Protest Politics: An Applied Example

Let's consider an example. Imagine you are a university student who is concerned about the use of sweatshop labor to manufacture athletic clothing for your university. If you only see

power as something that is in the hands of other people—people with more money, prestige and knowledge than yourself, it would be difficult for you to imagine a way to address the problem at hand. It is hard to imagine going up against a heavyweight when you yourself are just a welterweight and with those odds, it would benefit you to give up on your interest in holding the University accountable for supporting sweatshop labor and just go to the game on Saturday and have a good time. That is partly the problem with defining power as something that is held by other people—it is that much easier to give up on the challenges that we care about and that pejoratively affect the livelihood of others.

However, if you see power an ability to act, you free yourself to actually do something about companies that use sweatshop labor to manufacture athletic clothing for your university. That is why, in Public Achievement, we define power as the ability to act—it is a re-definition of a received cultural concept that gets us out in the world and cures our helplessness. In this way, every human being possesses the capacity to exert his or her power. You might even argue that as human beings we have a responsibility to exert our power and to change the parts of our everyday lives that trouble us or cause trouble for other people.

But there are still more things to consider. Let's say you manage to find like-minded individuals on your campus who also care about the problem of sweatshop labor. And let's say that you all meet one evening at the local coffee shop and decide that the best way for your group to exert its power and to work toward holding this company accountable for its manufacturing procedures in the developing world is to organize a sit in at the President's office of your university. A sit in would, of course, be a dramatic event—you could probably get a good deal of press coverage and, maybe if you are lucky, you could even get arrested by the university police force. Still, what would that kind of protest politics do to counteract the problem? How would your sit in affect the way the university decides to stock its shelves with sweatshirts, shorts and baseball caps? How would your sit in affect the lives of the people in the developing world who manufacture your University's athletic wear? You would need to consider this as well: is there a chance that the press coverage you receive could actually work against your cause and influence others to see your protest as a histrionic bit of political theatre?

Part of the reason we default toward protest politics when we are upset with a current political situation is because American history tends to favor the protester over the community organizer. We know a good deal more about Rosa Parks' and Cesar Chavez' acts of protest against racial segregation than we do about their abilities to organize people around salient social issues and to accomplish the hard work of inspiring people and mobilizing them to action. The same is true for our understanding of the student protests against the Vietnam War, the Million Man March and the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. The problem, though, is that these forms of massive protest often fail to address the problems at hand and mostly serve to inspire people and make them feel good about being a part of a big group. Massive protest movements, in other words, often leave out the hard work of everyday politics that is, arguably, more mundane, yet more effective in transforming lives and communities. In Going Public, IAF organizer, Michael Gecan, offers a searing critique of "activists" who take to the streets to protest governmental and multinational activities. Walking to his Manhattan office one afternoon, Gecan stumbles on a street protest: 5 people stand on a Manhattan street corner. Black paint is splashed on their faces and clothing. One man beats a drum, another speaks inaudibly through a megaphone, two protesters writhe on the sidewalk and another confronts passersby. NYC police surround the scene, more bored than anxious. The entire

drama is conducted underneath a homemade sign that reads, "Save the U'Wa Tribe." For Gecan, this sort of scene represents the most cynical kind of political engagement. He calls this sort of protest a "reenactment" and the protesters, "political idolaters" who draw more attention to themselves than to the plight of the indigenous people for whom they purport to advocate. Gecan draws a bright line between the street activism he witnessed in Manhattan that day and the kind of community organizing that involves ordinary people working to make their lives and their communities better. From Gecan's community organizing perspective, acting in public is not about wearing a "Peace" shirt, protesting on street corners, joining the Sierra Club or writing a check to your favorite charity. Rather, public engagement is about training ourselves to mobilize people around salient social issues, dialoguing with legislators, business leaders and school board members, as well as understanding and practicing social change strategies (49-53). In other words, through your work in Public Achievement, you are learning and applying strategies to affect real change in your communities.

On the Ordinariness of Power

United States history reveals hosts of examples of ordinary people who identified problems in their communities and acted on their abilities to resolve those problems. Typical examples include William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and all the courageous people who organized the Abolitionist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Other examples include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the brave women (and men!) who spearheaded the Suffragist movement. You are probably thinking of other examples such as the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 60s and, if you know anything about community organizing, perhaps the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation comes to mind.[1]

The problem with focusing on sainted figures such as Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez is that it is daunting to imagine ourselves changing our worlds and affecting power with the same aplomb and effectiveness as those great leaders. So, again, we run into the danger of comparing ourselves to historical figures, thinking there is no way ordinary folks like ourselves could ever do what they did and, once again, giving it all up and enjoying the game the next Saturday. If you find yourself currently thinking these thoughts read the following story about a Public Achievement group in Lafayette, Colorado:

> A team consisting of a coach from Naropa University and four students from Centaurus High School in Lafayette, Colorado started with a dream. As undocumented Latino students, they felt that they had a right to attend college and further their education. However, without status as citizens, they were not eligible for in-state tuition, or even federal scholarship money to help them afford the high cost of tuition, making attending college impossible.
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> The team found a way to act on their dream when they learned about the DREAM Act, a piece of legislation on the table in Colorado that would allow undocumented students conditional in-state tuition so they can attend college, work on their GED, or register for military service. As their Public Achievement project, this team decided to raise awareness of the existence of the DREAM Act in hopes to help get it passed. Their team decided on the appropriate name of Encontrando Nuevas Oportunidades, or "finding new opportunities."

[1] For a history of social change movements in the United States, see Harry Boyte and Sara Evans, Free Spaces: the Sources of Democratic Change in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The team made signs and posters to put up around the school and the community to raise public awareness about the DREAM Act. They also surveyed students at the school to rally students support, but they knew that wasn't enough. They knew there were a large number of people in support of their issue, and had to find a way to show this to stakeholders. They used technology to help them act of their issue. The team couldn't physically leave the school, but they did have internet access and knew they could use it to reach a large audience. The team set up an online petition that people could sign in support of the DREAM act. Within a month, the petition had over 1000 signatures which the students displayed publicly in their school and sent hard copies to members of the Senate and House of Representatives. They also presented their project to a representative of Senator Ken Salazar of Colorado and followed up with her to make sure their work was noticed and received.

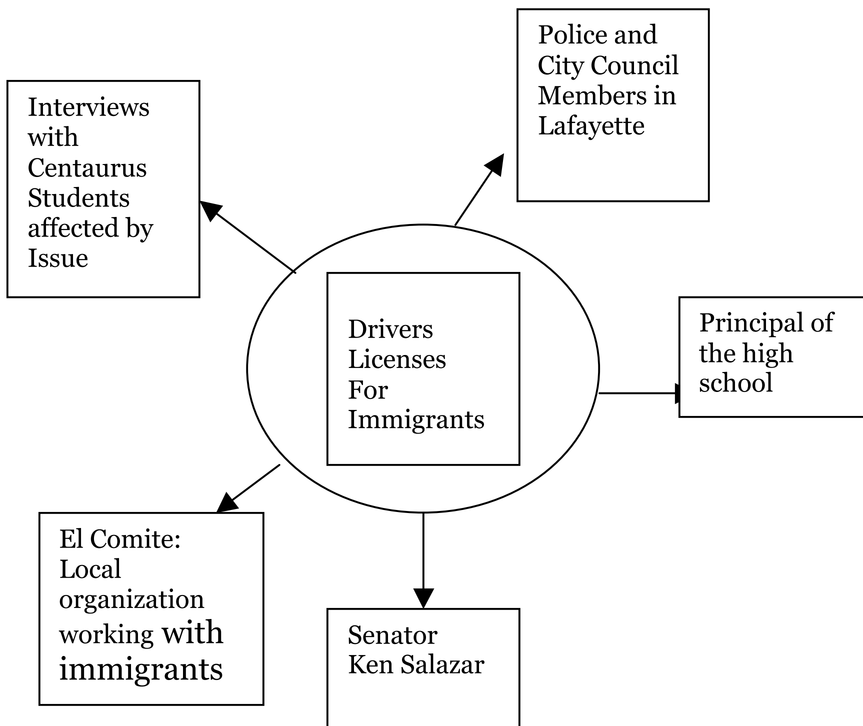
Encontrando Nuevas Oportunidades was not willing to accept a short-sighted, cynical definition of power, and made a commitment to act on their ideas to create real change. At first glance it would appear this team had very little power. They were ninth and tenth grade high school students who were undocumented immigrants, so they could neither drive nor vote and their future in this country is bleak. They wanted to make their issue public beyond the school walls, but school regulations did not allow them to leave the school during their Public Achievement time, how could they possibly influence anyone? Rather than feeling paralyzed by their deficits, they took on a new definition of power. They began imagining power as the ability to act and they knew that with some creative thinking they could exert their influence on their school and community.

Power as Relational

While you are working on your Public Achievement project, you should begin to realize that power is relational and that those folks (despite their race, wealth and privilege) who can create trusting, public relationships with the right people are the ones who have the abilities to act and to change their worlds. What does it mean, though, to say that power is relational? One way to look at this question is to begin with the oft-quoted phrase, "You can't do it alone." Even ultra-powerful people like Bill Gates and George Soros don't sit in their offices, high above the rest of us and give orders to underlings who mindlessly re-arrange the world according to the whims of Gates and Soros. Indeed, powerful people like Gates and Soros have become, and remain, powerful primarily because of their abilities to seek out like-minded people with similar interests and strengths that complement their individuals weaknesses.

That is why power mapping is such a critical element of any Public Achievement project. When you power map, you simply create a visual map of the individuals and organizations who also care about the issue or problem you are working on in your Public Achievement Issue Group. Here is an example of a power map constructed by a group working on the problem of Immigrants receiving drivers licenses[2]:

[2] For more information on Power Maps, see www.publicacheivement.org



After you draw the power map, the next step is to create relationships with the people you have identified on your map. How do you create these relationships so that you can begin acting on a public stage and affecting change in your community? Well, in some instances you do it the old fashioned way: you simply pick up the phone, dial the number of the person you want to contact on your power map and ask for a meeting. If you are under 30 years old, you might be more comfortable sending an email, but stay away from instant text messaging strangers! Sending letters, faxes or just knocking on office doors are also good ways of beginning the kind off public relationships with people on your power map.

Creating relationships with stakeholders who have an interest in your Public Achievement project is one of the most effective ways to act, or to exert power in the public sphere. You might hear Public Achievement practitioners saying something like this: "Two is better than one, three is better than two and four is better than three." That is just another way of saying that the power we possess in our lives and our ability to act is directly related to the number of public relationships that we have developed. Creating relationships and setting up relational meetings is nothing to trifle with, though. As Ed Chambers says, creating relationships is an art form—it is hard work that involves a good deal of savvy. To find out about one on one relational meetings, see chapter two of Chambers' Roots for Radicals.

Conclusion: The Melian Dialogue

Human beings have struggled with the reality of power for a very long time. As the following story from the Peloponnesian War illustrates, power is not always about the strong exerting force over the weak. Sometimes it is about our ability (or inability) to negotiate, cut deals and work with people who are different than ourselves.

Athens and Sparta were two of the strongest states in the Ancient Greek world. And in the early 4th century BC the two states were engaged in what came to be known as the Peloponnesian War.   In 410, Athens set out to conquer Melos, a little island in the Sea of Crete. Melos had originally been colonized by Sparta so it had cultural and economic ties with the Spartans. But, when the war began the Melians claimed neutrality, choosing sides with neither Sparta nor Athens. For awhile, their island status kept them removed from the war, but one day in 410, the Athenians showed up on the island and gave the Melians a choice: Melos could surrender to Athens and the Athenians would in turn spare Melos. All it asked for was for Melos to become a tribunal state of Athens—the Melians would retain their property and their rights. Or, Melos could resist and go to war with Athens—a war they would surely lose.

In the dialogue that ensues between the two diplomatic corps, the Melians make the following arguments:

- We are neutral in the war: don't bother us, and we won't bother you.
- If you attack us, other neutral countries will be threatened and then become the enemies of Athens
- If you attack us, Sparta will come to our aid.
- We will fight against you because it is the honorable thing to do—we have hope and faith that we will win.
- It is about standing up for what we think is right.

The Athenians, in turn, make the following counterarguments:

- Surrendering to us is about self preservation. Because we are stronger, we have a right to rule you. If you resist we will destroy Melos.
- It is in both of our self interests for you to surrender—we don't want to kill anyone.
- Melos' neutrality is a sign of Athenian weakness—we must conquer you to show strength and because we need your cities.
- Historically, Sparta hasn't come to the aid of it's colonies—do you want to take that chance?
- The honorable thing is to surrender and become a part of Athens—no one will die, we won't alter your culture, plunder your resources or hurt you in any way.

Don't be confused by this story: the purpose of discussing the Melian debate in the context of Public Achievement is not to suggest that the weak should automatically cave in to the wishes of the powerful, and it is not to encourage you to be meek and submissive in the face of challenges you will undoubtedly face during your Public Achievement project. The Melian Debate is an extreme example of power relations at work. Few of you will ever find yourselves in the positions of the Athenians or, happily, the Melians. Nevertheless, this story tells us a good deal about power and how it can be exercised in the world. Because the truth is that most of us are Melians. Individually, we don't have a lot of resources and until we connect with other people our power to affect change in the world is diminished. The Melians had no time to create a power map and develop relationships that would allow them to realistically resist the Athenians. In many ways, the Melian story is the Old Testament story of David and Goliath with a very unhappy ending (at least for David). In both scenarios a physically dominant force threatens the weak. But David is an historical anomaly—the weak are generally crushed by the strong and the Melian story is a just a tragedy—with a proper

understanding of power, they could have saved a lot of bloodshed and heartache. Unlike the Melians, though, you have the ability to develop relationships and take action against the Athenians of your community and your world. As Public Achievement participants, you have the ability to marshal power, to negotiate with others and to mobilize people around important community and social issues. The Melians found out the hard way that isolation and neutrality are unrealistic and that hope without strength is a delusion. In the globalized world of the twenty-first century, where, as Thomas Friedman has recently argued, technology has flattened global communications and relationships, we can't afford to be like the Melians. Through Public Achievement, you have the opportunity to transform neutrality to commitment and isolation to engagement.

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