



Two perspectives on power

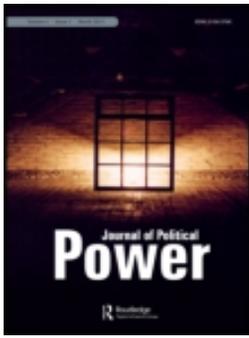
A Frankfurt take on a contentious concept

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BOOK REVIEW

Two perspectives on power: a Frankfurt take on a contentious concept

Logik der Macht: Zum Ort der Kritik zwischen Theorie und Praxis, by David Strecker, Weilerswist, Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2012, 320 pp., €32.90 (hardback), ISBN 9783938808641

As the title of David Strecker's book – which translates as *The logic of power: on the site of critique between theory and practice* – suggests, Strecker has set himself a highly ambitious task. This task is nothing less than to chart the conceptual structure of power through a reconstruction of the 'logic' of its recent theoretical history. His central claim is that this conceptual structure – the logic of power – should be understood in terms of the unavoidability of two methodological perspectives that are both necessary and only together sufficient for a satisfactory account of power. This is how Strecker describes his main line of argument in the introduction:

My entire argumentation is directed towards demonstrating that concerning the question of which social relationships are to be understood as power relations in need of justification, no principled criterion can be justified that would allow us to sidestep the incessant to-and-fro between the objectivating perspective of the social-scientific observer and the simultaneously higher-ranking perspective of the participant in societal practice (p. 11).

According to Strecker, any social-scientific attempt to account for power relations without recourse to normative judgement is doomed to fail, since the 'social-scientific observer may be able to identify relations of cause and effect, but these can only be characterised as infused with power by relying on the normative views of the affected' (p. 10). Since the objectivating perspective cannot do without the participant perspective, which is inherently oriented towards questioning the legitimacy and justification of power, any comprehensive analysis of power is therefore always an exercise in social criticism. Strecker calls this 'the paradox of power' and he claims that it requires both a strict methodological separation of the observer and participant levels of analysis as well as a convincing mediation between them.

First, a note on the method and overall argument of the book. Strecker's argumentative strategy is to develop a 'history of theory with systematic intent' (p. 11) – a Hegelian methodological staple familiar also from the work of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth – and Strecker's view shares more than a methodological kinship with the two Frankfurt philosophers (see Habermas 1987a, Honneth 1991). Indeed, the distinction between the objectivating and the participatory perspective primarily derives from Habermas's *The theory of communicative action* (1994, p. 111) and Strecker's book can be read as a retrospective reconstruction of how every theory of power before Habermas's has faltered on an inability to appropriately distinguish and mediate between these two methodological points of view.

This may seem like an oddly circular exercise, but the point of such Hegelian ‘histories of theory’ is precisely to allow the reader to follow the historical development of a domain of research and recognise this development as a kind of learning process, where the standards used for classifying and evaluating the material are worked out in the course of the investigation. Strecker should thus be read as charting a dynamic learning process in the conceptual history of power that culminates in Habermas’s critical social theory, where the latter’s solutions are indirectly foreshadowed by the problems encountered by earlier attempts to grapple with this contentious concept. To be sure, this is an incredibly strong and broad-sweeping interpretive claim. The obvious danger is that Strecker might also, from a less sympathetic point of view, be read as engaged in the more openly question-begging project of measuring the theoretical history of power against standards provided by Habermas and concluding that – surprise! – only Habermas’s theory succeeds where others have failed. Strecker’s considerable interpretive burden of justification is to convince us that the former reading is the correct one.

I am not altogether convinced that he succeeds in meeting this burden. In the interest of honesty, I should note that my doubts are mitigated by my own Habermasian sympathies and the intuitive appeal that I – perhaps for this reason – find in Strecker’s conclusions. But I can easily imagine that those who see a superior form of critique in Foucault’s genealogies of power would sharply disagree. In his rather brief discussion of Foucault’s work, Strecker resurrects Habermas’s claim that Foucault’s genealogies suffer from ‘crypto-normativism’, since the French philosopher is so unabashedly unconcerned with clarifying their normative presuppositions¹ (pp. 82–83, 106). However, the claim that such a clarification is necessary remains an assumption brought to Foucault’s work from without; and although this is precisely what Strecker should be *proving* in order to justify his claim that Habermas’s distinction between the perspectives of observer and participant represents a conceptual advance vis-à-vis Foucault’s genealogies, he does not really bring any new considerations to bear on this difficult and highly controversial issue (for a discussion of genealogy as critique, see Saar 2010). Moreover, a more general concern is that Strecker’s ‘history of theory’ is, in fact, fairly cursory; it merely takes up Part I of the book – which covers a lot of ground in a mere 100 pages – while Part II and III are concerned with reconstructing, respectively, the Frankfurt School model of *Ideologiekritik* and Habermas’s critical social theory, as attempts to capture the logic of power through the distinction between observer and participant. But the latter two parts actually *presuppose* rather than contribute to ‘demonstrating’ the truth of Strecker’s central claim. However, even if these considerations cast some doubt on whether Strecker succeeds in meeting the aforementioned interpretive burden of justification, they do not speak against the weaker judgement that Strecker’s book provides a daring and provocative reading of the theoretical history of power that makes a strong and original case for the need to distinguish between the observer and participant perspectives in theorising power. Indeed, in my view, Strecker’s great contribution should rather be understood as providing an analysis of power from the *point of view* of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory and anyone interested in that tradition – and in Habermas in particular – should consider Strecker’s book a must-read.

Now to a brief outline of some of the more specific arguments of the book. Early on, Strecker makes a helpful tripartite distinction between three dimensions of power in ordinary language: power as an ‘existence concept’ (*Seinsbegriff der*

Macht); power as an ‘action concept’ (*Handlungsmacht*); and ‘social power’ (*Gesellschaftliche Macht*) (pp. 18–19). The existence concept of power refers to its most abstract sense, understood as a potential property of all things, such as a powerful current or idea. The action concept of power is understood as the specifically human capacity to effect a change in the world, whereas social power limits its application to social or political contexts. These distinctions enable Strecker to specify his project as the reconstruction of the discourse on social power, thus side-stepping a host of semantic hurdles. Social power is best understood in terms of the German term *Herrschaft*, which is rather difficult to translate. The most obvious candidate is ‘rule’, though in its broadest sense (which is not limited to formal political rule); it encapsulates the insight that any social order is characterised by more or less stabilised and formalised relations of power. This broad sense is captured in Weber’s famous definition of *Herrschaft*, often – and to my mind, falsely – translated as ‘domination’, as ‘the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons’ (Weber 1978, p. 53). It is, thus, within the dimension of social power that we find the two predominant traditions in the theoretical history of power, what Strecker calls the traditions of ‘repressive power’ and ‘constitutive power’.

As suggested by its defining adjective, the tradition of repressive power sees an internal connection between power and its illegitimacy. Strecker reconstructs this tradition – in which the Anglo-American debate on the ‘faces of power’ and the Marxist tradition take pride of place – as proceeding through an initial focus on the ‘site’ of power, moving to a focus on its *modi operandi* and finally its social functions, in which we find a categorial shift to structural power and an increasing appreciation of the fact that power not only fulfils a repressive function but also *constitutes* social order. This leads us to the tradition of constitutive power, which starts from the insight that the assumed illegitimacy of power as inherently repressive obscures the potentially *productive* function of power. In the work of Talcott Parsons and Hannah Arendt, power is thus seen either as the generalised medium of social order or as the ability of groups to act in concert. However, since this tradition falls in the opposite trap of presenting an overly benign picture of power, a third and more recent tradition has emerged – primarily in sociology and continental philosophy – that is guided by the intention to *mediate* between the repressive and constitutive traditions of power.

Through a somewhat condensed discussion of the extremely complex work of Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens and Foucault, Strecker ultimately locates the seeds of a solution to the problem of mediation in the praxeology of Pierre Bourdieu. With his central concept of *habitus*, Bourdieu captures both Giddens’ insight that power should be reduced to neither structure nor agency, as well as Foucault’s insight that power constitutes social order primarily through the socialisation of subjects. However, although Bourdieu takes steps towards disentangling the observer and participant perspective, he too ultimately fails to see that the key to mediating between repressive and constitutive power lies precisely in the careful separation of these two levels of analysis. Along with the remaining contenders, he thus ends up losing his way in the *cul de sac* of crypto-normativism where the question concerning the normative justifiability of an at once repressive and constitutive power recedes into the background.

After this tour de force through the recent theoretical history of power, Strecker shifts to a higher level of abstraction and considers the Frankfurt

School model of *Ideologiekritik* as a candidate for achieving this methodological separation and mediation. The idea of a critical theory – paradigmatically formulated in Max Horkheimer’s famous essay *Traditional and critical theory* (1999, pp. 188–243) – proceeds through a two-step procedure: in a first step, the social-scientific observer clarifies unrecognised relations of power relying on an account of the true interests and false consciousness of the oppressed, who, in a second step, are supposed to rely on this account for their practical emancipation. That is, critical theory first takes up the perspective of the observer of social practice and the participants in society are then subsequently tasked with enacting the emancipatory hypotheses in their own practice. Accordingly, the truth of these hypotheses, as well as the critical theory of society from which they derive, ultimately depends on their ability to *enable* emancipation in practice – an account of social-theoretical truth that I refer to in my own work as a *practical criterion of validity*.

However, Horkheimer’s original materialist programme of critical theory soon broke down on account of the increasingly obvious implausibility of the assumption that the proletariat provided a historical subject capable of validating critical theory in practice. This gave way, on the one hand, to the near-hopeless critique of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *The dialectic of enlightenment*, in which the participant perspective was projected into an uncertain future and, on the other hand, to the political sociology of Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer, who lost sight of the participant perspective altogether. However, as the first generation of the Frankfurt School lost their way in search of the appropriate mediation between observer and participant perspectives and theory and practice, the original aspirations of critical theory were taken up by a new generation represented in Strecker’s narrative by Claus Offe and Habermas.

Before proceeding any further, however, I would like to register my regret that Strecker does not dig a bit deeper into Theodor W. Adorno’s attempt to mediate between the repressive and the constitutive traditions of power. As Foucault (2007) recognised, Adorno anticipated many of his own reflections on power, not only in terms of the shared appreciation of Nietzsche’s genealogical method, but also in terms of the assumption that subjects are constituted by the structural ordering and socialisation of their perceived needs and ‘space of reasons’. I would have preferred more in-depth discussion of these overlaps in the thought of Foucault and Adorno, which might very well stem from their respective conceptions of power, instead of Strecker’s fairly stylised account of Adorno’s work and rather uncharitable claim that it remains captive to the tradition of repressive power (p. 173). To my mind, Strecker misses such opportunities for more finely tuned discussion precisely because his perspective is so encompassing, preferring the broader picture over careful attention to difference and detail.

The welcome exception to this rule is Strecker’s discussion of Habermas’s critical social theory, which is at once comprehensive and knowledgeable and includes original interpretations of Habermas’s communicative account of the concept of ideology and his famous but oft-misunderstood ‘colonization thesis’. As should be evident by now, Strecker sees Habermas’s key achievement in the discourse on power as the careful distinction between the observer and participant perspectives. Compared with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas’s major innovation is that he no longer construes the distinction between observer and participant as perfectly overlapping with the distinction between

theory and practice, but rather sees both the observer *and* the participant perspective as domains of theoretical reconstruction. The specifics of Habermas's account – rational reconstruction of pragmatic presuppositions of rational discourse (participant perspective); an account of the market and the state as functional subsystems (observer perspective); and their practical mediation through democratically legitimated law – shall not concern us here. Instead, I want to conclude with a closer look at Strecker's original answer to the age-old question concerning the proper mediation between theory and practice.

Strecker's reflections take their starting point in a late reappearance of Foucault and Bourdieu in his reconstructive narrative, both of whom insist that there is no site in social practice that is not shot through with power – including, alas, rational discourse. Given this claim, it may seem indefensible to assume that any actual discourse could have the presumption of rationality (of generating 'good reasons'), which seems necessary for Habermas's account to preserve its moment of immanent *transcendence*. In the face of this problem, Strecker spots a way out by appealing to the Kantian idea of autonomy – which, of course, not only represents the normative core of Habermas's critical social theory, but a central concept in the whole discourse on power. Strecker's proposal is to take account of the intertwining of power and reason by translating the idea of autonomy into a distinction between participant and observer in both theory *and* practice. The latter leaves us with an account of what Strecker calls 'participatory objectivation' (p. 301) complementary to Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy. The basic idea is that in addition to the first-order participatory perspective in practice, in which we participate in the first-order justification and critique of society's norms, practices and institutions, we add to the public sphere a second-order domain of participation in the ongoing questioning and critique of the power structures that have contributed to the constitution of our identities and space of reasons. The social sciences are afforded the role of enlightening democratic citizens about the social forces that have made them who they are, and the results of this collective self-questioning are supposed to translate into emancipatory institutional reform. Unfortunately, Strecker gives few hints as to the institutional content of his account of autonomy as participatory objectivation, so one is left guessing at this crucial juncture.

However, a potentially more serious problem – at least from Habermas's point of view – is that Strecker's proposal essentially amounts to giving up on the aspiration to reconstruct reason *from* communicative practice. The point of Habermas's reconstruction of discursive presuppositions is precisely to *ground* his critical social theory in the rational infrastructure of linguistic communication. To be sure, Strecker describes his proposal as a way of ensuring that practical discourse gains the presumption of rationality that actual discourse – according to Foucault and Bourdieu – lacks, but this normative recommendation cannot *itself* be grounded in the reconstruction that it is supposed to bolster. If Habermas were to allow a normative recommendation to serve as a solution to the problem that even rational discourse might not provide an anchor in social practice free from the contingencies of power, then his account would only preserve its moment of transcendence by relinquishing its moment of *immanence*.

The final point gives reason to doubt whether Strecker has ultimately solved the age-old problem of how to properly mediate between theory and practice – at least within a Habermasian framework. But his argument that an account of this problem, as well as the methodological distinction between observer and participant

from which it derives, is part and parcel of any satisfactory account of power is both original and – to me, at least – highly compelling. Aside from its many insightful discussions, that insight alone would provide reason to read Strecker's engaging, provocative and highly ambitious book; one can only encourage the English translation that it deserves.

Note

1. See Habermas (1987b). The claim was first made by Fraser (1981).

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