

What is power?

**BYUNG-CHUL
HAN**

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PREFACE

When it comes to the concept of power, theoretical chaos still reigns. While the existence of the phenomenon itself cannot be doubted, the concept remains altogether ambiguous. For some, it means repression; for others, it is a constructive element in communication. Legal, political and sociological notions of power remain unreconciled. Power is sometimes associated with freedom, sometimes with coercion. For some power is based on common action, for others on struggle. Some draw a sharp line between power and violence. For others, violence is just a more extreme form of power. At one moment power is associated with the law, at another with arbitrariness.

Given this theoretical confusion, we shall look for a flexible concept of power that is able to unite these divergent ideas. Thus, the task is to formulate a basic form of power from which we can, by modifying its inner structural elements, derive the different forms in which power may appear. This is the theoretical approach the book pursues, and the

book aims, in this way, to deprive power of that power it has on account of the fact that we do not fully understand what it actually is.¹

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The Logic of Power

Power is usually defined as a causal relation: the power of the *ego* is the cause which effects a particular behaviour in an *alter* against the latter's will. It enables the *ego* to impose *his* or *her* decisions without having to show any consideration for the *alter*. Thus, the *ego*'s power limits the *alter*'s freedom. The *alter* suffers the will of the *ego* as something alien. This common idea of power does not do justice to its complexity. Processes of power are not exhausted by attempts to break resistance or to compel obedience. Power does not have to take the form of coercion. The fact that there is a will forming that opposes the holder of power actually bears witness to the weakness of that power. The more powerful power is, the more *silent* is its efficacy. Where it needs to draw special attention to itself, it is already weakened.¹

Neither does power consist in 'neutralizing the will'.² The claim here is that the existing power imbalance impedes the formation of a will on the side of the subordinated party, for this party will in any case have to succumb to the will of

the holder of power. Hence, the holder of power directs the subordinated party regarding the latter's choices of action. But there are forms of power that exceed such a 'neutralization of the will'. It is the sign of a superior power that those subjected to it explicitly *want* what the holder of power wants, that those subjected to power follow the will of its holder *as if it were their own*, or even *anticipate* that will. The one who is subjected to power may glorify what he or she would have, *in any event*, wanted to do, by declaring it to be in accordance with the will of the superior power, and executing it with a 'Yes!', an emphatic affirmation of that power. Thus, one and the same action takes on a different form in the medium of power because the action of the holder of power is affirmed or internalized by the one subjected to power as his or her *own* action. Power is thus a *phenomenon pertaining to form*. *How* an action is motivated is crucial. Not 'I have to anyhow' but 'I want to' expresses the presence of a superior power. Not the inner 'No', but the emphatic 'Yes!' is the response to a superior power.³ Causality does not allow for an adequate description of it, because in this case power does not operate like a mechanical push that simply moves a body out of its original trajectory. Rather, its effect is like that of a field in which the body moves *out of its own accord*, so to speak.

The model of coercion does not do justice to the complexity of power. Power as coercion consists in enforcing one's own decisions *against* the will of the other. It therefore displays only a very low degree of mediation between *ego* and *alter*, which relate antagonistically to each other. The *ego* is not received in the *soul of the alter*. The form of power which does not exercise its effects *against* the intended actions of the other but *from within* these contains more mediation. For a superior power is one that forms the future of the other, not one that blocks it. Instead of proceeding against a particular action of the *alter*, it influences or works on the environ-

ment of the *alter*'s actions even before they take place, so that the *alter* *voluntarily* decides in favour of the *ego*'s will, even without the threat of any sanctions. Without the use of any violence [Gewaltausübung],⁴ the holder of power takes his place in the *soul* of the other.

The causal model is incapable of describing complex relations. Even organic life as such cannot be understood in terms of causal relations. As opposed to a lifeless and passive thing, an organism does not allow an external cause to have an effect on it without the organism contributing to it. Rather, it reacts *independently* to the cause. This capacity to give an independent response to an external trigger is characteristic of the organic. A lifeless thing, by contrast, does not *respond*. The specificity of life is that it cuts short the external cause, transforms it and lets it begin something new in itself. Life may be dependent on food, but food is not the cause of life. If we can talk of a cause at all in this context, then it is life itself which has the *power* to *turn* what is external to it *into* a cause of specific organic processes.⁵ These processes are therefore not simple repetitions of the external cause on the inside. Rather, they are independent achievements, independent decisions of life. It reacts independently to the outside. An external cause is but one of many possible triggers that life itself turns into a cause. Life never just passively suffers such causes. An external cause never achieves an effect without a contribution or decision of the inner. There is no immediate continuation of the outer into the inner, as in the case of the transmission of kinetic energy from one body to another. The category of causality is even less suitable for a description of *mental* life. The complexity of mental life determines the complexity of power processes which cannot be translated into linear relations between cause and effect. This complexity distinguishes power from physical violence, where a simple causality between force, or strength, and effect can be

given. This reduction in complexity probably constitutes the advantage of physical violence.

The complex processes of power cannot be adequately described with simple arithmetic. A slight countervailing power may inflict severe damage on a power of superior strength. This affords even a weak opponent great importance, and thus power. Specific political constellations may also give a lot of power to weak parties or nations. And complex interdependencies mean that there is reciprocity of power. If the *ego* needs the cooperation of the *alter*, a dependence of *ego* on *alter* is the result. The *ego* can no longer formulate and enforce his or her demands without taking the *alter* into consideration, because the *alter* has the option of reacting to the *ego*'s attempts at compelling him or her by ending his or her cooperation, which would also put the *ego* into a difficult situation. Thus, the *ego*'s dependence on the *alter* can be perceived and used by the latter as a source of power. Even the very weakest can turn their powerlessness into power by making skilful use of cultural norms.

Furthermore, there is the multifarious dialectic of power to consider. The hierarchical model of power, according to which power simply moves from top to bottom, is undialectical. The more power someone holds, the more he or she is dependent on the advice and cooperation of subordinates. The holder of power may be able to give orders across a vast range of matters. But due to the increasing complexity of such operations, the power in fact passes on to the advisors who tell the holder of power what orders to give. The numerous dependencies of the holder of power become a source of power for the subordinates. They lead to a structural *dispersal of power*.

There is an obstinate belief that power excludes freedom. But this is not the case. The power of the *ego* reaches its peak precisely at the point at which the *alter* voluntarily follows the