

Gianfranco Poggi

Social Power in its Diversity



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For a long time, most of my teaching and writing has oscillated between two broad themes: the interpretation of the writings of the Sociology Greats — I have written on Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, Max Weber, and Simmel — and the analysis of the nature and development of modern political institutions — I have written two books on the state. The last book I published, shortly before coming to Berlin, dealt with *Georg Simmel's Philosophy of Money*; accordingly, my research and writing at the Wissenschaftskolleg has oscillated toward the other thematic pole, and once more has the state as its protagonist. But the scope of the book I have been drafting while spending ten most enjoyable months at the Wallotstraße 21 (I was one of the fellows who did not just have a study in the *Neubau*, but resided there) is rather wider, for it considers the state itself chiefly as the major institutional embodiment of *one* form of social power, onto which it juxtaposes *other* forms.

The concept of "power", with or without the adjective "social", has long been the object of much debate on the part of social scientists, philosophers, and other scholars; and this debate has been particularly lively and productive over the last three decades or so. But much of it has been focused on epistemological issues in which I personally have little interest, or on relatively generic conceptual aspects of the power phenomenon. Many years ago, my mentor Juan Linz (a Fellow at the Kolleg in 1990/91) suggested to me instead, as a particularly worthwhile theme for sociological and politological investigation, the variety of institutional forms that social power assumes, and in particular the interplay, rivalry, and mutual accommodation between political, economic, ideological,

and military power. Beginning in the late sixties, I occasionally explored this very broad theme in my courses on political sociology or political theory; and the stay at the Kolleg offered me a unique opportunity to analyze it more closely and to draft what I hope will become my next book.

I had deluded myself that I could complete an advanced draft of a book on the topic by the simple device of writing out *in extenso* the copious notes I had accumulated for the purpose of teaching. Things did not quite turn out that way, among other reasons because the actual process of writing confirmed time and again somebody's dictum to the effect that there are no things, no matter how complicated, that a bit of reflection will not reveal to be even more complicated. Another naive assumption I had made was that the writing of each chapter draft should be preceded by a fair amount of new reading on its theme. After about a month of intensive and inspiring, but exceedingly inconclusive reading, I was reminded of a witticism, according to which the *carabinieri* (the members of the Italian military police) always operate in pairs because one of them can read, and the other can write. I realized, that is, that if over the remaining nine months of my fellowship I was to draft most of a book, *writing* was what I chiefly had to attend to, and reading had to be considered a dangerous distraction from that main task. This is why, impressed as I was by the excellent service run in the Weiße Villa by Frau Bottomley and her collaborators, I found myself (I believe) among the "low users" of the Kolleg's Library. Practically all of my work time at the Wallotstraße 21 went into the labor of drafting chapters of my book.

Before outlining the results of that labor as they now stand, let me make it clear that (as will be immediately apparent to the informed reader) the book I worked on does not aim at breaking new ground, but rather at systematizing a body of well-known (though sometimes controversial) sociological material. As far as the present draft goes, the book opens, predictably enough, with a general presentation of the phenomenon of social power. The second chapter introduces the book's central theme, and suggests that social power typically assumes a variety of major forms, each based on a given group's privileged control over a distinctive social resource. The three chief forms have long been identified as political, economic, and ideological power; they result from the possession, respectively (in the wording of a contemporary Italian political theorist) of means of destruction, means of production, and means of persuasion - sword, plough, and book, as Ernest Gellner might phrase it. I subscribe to this conceptual tripartition, which closely relates political power to organized coercion; but, as we shall see below, I consider it empirically justified to give semi-independent status to coercive power itself.

In the third chapter, I discuss political power, drawing widely on Ger-

man writings on the subject, and particularly on a recent book by the Freiburg sociologist Heinrich Popitz. From this point on, the other power forms are considered chiefly as partners or opponents of political power itself, which, as I said, I regard mainly as embodied in the state. The scheme of analysis I employ throughout consists in identifying, for each non-political power form, the claims it typically lays upon the state, as well as (vice-versa) the state's claims upon it.

Among the non-political forms of social power, I consider first what might be called ideological or normative power; its generic aspects are discussed in the fourth chapter, while the following two chapters discuss relations between, on the one hand, institutionalized religion and modern "creative" intellectuals, and on the other hand, the state. (Because of my interest in relations between state and intellectuals, I profited particularly from an informal seminar run at the Kolleg by Robert Darnton, as well as from the opportunity to interact with Tony Grafton, Andras Bozöki, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and François Hartog).

In chapters seven and eight, my analysis of economic power simplifies matters somewhat by considering exclusively industrial property and the associated forms of business, and examining first the claims business forces typically lay upon the state, then the chief ways in which the latter draws resources from the economic system. I emphasize the explosive novelty of the contemporary variant of this relationship: while economic power is increasingly "global", political power remains territorially bounded. Hence the phenomenon (as a recent Italian book title phrases it) of "wealth without nations and nations without wealth".

As indicated above, although conceptually all forms of institutionalized coercive power belong within the political sphere, in certain circumstances and to a certain extent a state's military elites may conduct themselves toward a country's political leadership as if they constituted a semi-independent power center. While my ninth chapter discusses this well-known phenomenon, the final one will juxtapose with it a much less well-known one: the police, which also constitutes an aggregation of coercive power, may sometimes deploy it (or fail to deploy it) in ways that challenge the constitutional supremacy of political leaders.

In Berlin, I drafted all the chapters described except the last one. But those drafts, besides being just that, i. e. *relatively* early versions of chapters (I emphasize "relatively" because each of the drafts I now have is the product of quite a deal of drafting and redrafting), are also incomplete. As my summary above suggests, their content is chiefly conceptual and typological: they locate recurrent issues in inter-power relations and schematically indicate the range of the related arrangements. I would like most chapters in the book to add to this kind of sociological argument a few

short accounts of major episodes illustrating the historical significance of the various inter-power relations; and I would like most of those accounts to draw on the "story" of the Weimar republic, and thus to impart some historical concreteness to that argument. It had been my intention, during my stay at the Kolleg, to gather material for my discussion of such German episodes. But it occurred to me, once I had reached the Kolleg, that the best use to which I could put its unique atmosphere and facilities was to grapple with the sociological substance of the book by the sustained work of drafting on largely conceptual matters whose provisional results I have related. I assumed that the business of writing the narrative illustrations (beginning with those on the Weimar Germany) could be undertaken without much difficulty in the context of normal University teaching. So far (I write in mid-October 1994) I have been proven wrong; the draft of my chapter on the police has not been started yet, nor have I been able to undertake any of the several "narratives" I plan to introduce into my book. I wonder if this qualifies me for another year at the Kolleg?