February, 2005

Rethinking Power

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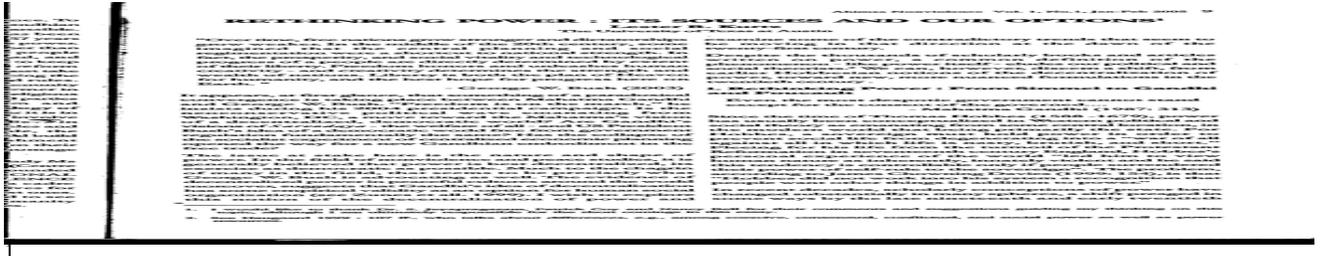
The most effective exercise of power is that which irks least. Power rightly exercised must sit light as a flower; no one should feel the weight of it.
-- Mahatma Gandhi (1987:133)

Over time, free nations grow stronger and dictatorships grow weaker. In the middle of the 20th century, some imagined that the central planning and social regimentation were a shortcut to national strength. In fact, the prosperity, and social vitality and technological progress of a people are directly determined by extent of their liberty. Freedom honors and unleashes human creativity -- and creativity determines the strength and wealth of nations. Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth
    -- George W. Bush (2003)

It appears, at first glance, that something of a paradoxical convergence is taking place between Mahatma Gandhi and George W. Bush. "Freedom is on the march," he insists during his 2004 presidential campaign. Is the neoconservative political wave emanating from Washington, DC, a move toward the Mahatma's vision of a decentralized, democratic world? Are Gandhi's visions of *Sarvodaya* – the welfare of all – and US President Bush's idea of a democratic world free from government regulation fundamentally the same? Are the World Bank's structural adjustment programs Gandhian projects disguised as Western imperialism? Has the collapse of the socialist experiment of centralized economic planning opened the way for a new Gandhian embodiment in the free trade?

The issue at stake here is the nature and shape of power. In the field of nonviolence and peace studies, it is generally believed that power

is best decentralized, its exercise as democratic as possible. Much to the chagrin of many in the field, that seems to be precisely what George W. Bush is advocating as well. The evidence of decentralized power in peaceful cultures around the world, moreover, suggests that Gandhi's idea of decentralization has some empirical validity as an option for human social organization. I wish to explore this notion of the decentralization of power and examine some of the contradictory trends that seem to be moving in that direction at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Despite the thousands of scholarly books and articles written on power, a common definition of the phenomenon – like power itself – eludes our political and social theorists.[2] We can, however, discern a shift, from earlier Hobbesian notions of the decentralization of power, toward new, more nuanced formulations in the twentieth century.

i. Rethinking Power: From Simmel to Gandhi and Foucault

Even the most despotic government cannot stand except for the consent of the governed....
        -- Mahatma Gandhi (1987: 313)

Since the time of Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679), power has usually been conceptualized in Western political and social theory as emanating from some central location, in the modern world that being primarily the state. For Hobbes, a sovereign must hold power in order to prevent social life from degenerating into a "war of all against all in which life is nasty, brutish, and short." Fleeing for his life from the turmoil of the Protestant Reformation in seventeenth century England, Hobbes's personal experience of the world "led him to view human nature as

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[2] See Haugaard 1999:107ff., who talks about differences, e.g., among coercive, consensual, conflictual, and social power, as well as power resources

inherently, innately violent and he said this tendency is controllable only if people surrendered their power of self-rule to the sovereign" The problem, according to Davis, is that "Hobbes did not work into his system a recognition that people want other things in addition to power" (Davis 1999: 154).

In recent decades, scholarly conceptions of power have changed substantially in many spheres, a shift presaged in some ways by the late nineteenth and early twentieth sociologist Georg Simmel. A marginal and independent Jewish scholar living in Germany, Simmel never held a major academic position but nevertheless influenced many of the giants of social modern thought (like Max Weber) and was the central theorist drawn upon by the Americans who institutionalized the discipline of sociology at the University of Chicago.

At the core of Simmel's concept of power is the idea that domination is a form of social interaction that is negotiated, in a sense, between a super-ordinate and a subordinate. Moreover, Simmel asserts (in 1908),

Even in the most oppressive and cruel cases of subordination, there is still a considerable measure of personal freedom. We merely do not become aware of it, because its manifestation would entail sacrifices which we usually never think of taking upon ourselves. Actually, the "absolute" coercion which even the most cruel tyrant imposes upon us is always distinctly relative. Its condition is our desire to escape from the threatened punishment or from other consequences of our disobedience. More precise analysis shows that the super-ordination relationship destroys the subordinate's freedom only in the case of direct physical violation. In every other case, this relationship only demands a price for the realization of freedom. ([1908] 1971:97-98).

Similarly, Max Weber (1968) raised questions about the centralization of power as a concept by pointing out the multiple sources of power found in economic class, social status, and political power. Although the three are often intertwined in empirical reality, they are analytically distinct and may reside with different individuals and groups in a society. Weber also distinguished between power and authority, with the former being "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis" (1968: 53). Authority, however, is somehow rooted in legitimacy, whether it be on traditional, affectual, value rational, or legal grounds (ibid.: 36, 215).

Political power, for Weber, is intimately connected with violence, a position echoed as we shall see in Gandhi's writings as well. Unlike Gandhi, he agrees with Leon Trotsky that "Every state is founded on force" (Weber 1946: 78).

Gandhiji's conception of power is both simple and complex at the same time. He lived in a time when a major problem facing many people in the world was the ubiquitous and oppressive power of colonial regimes. He was, on the one hand, very suspect of the centralization of power, especially in the hands of the state. Indeed, he contends, "The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but as the State is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence. Hence I prefer the doctrine of trusteeship" (Gandhi 1987: 135) On the other hand, the persistence of any despotic government is due to the consent of the governed. Any system, he insists, could be overthrown by popular noncooperation with the regime. This radical rethinking of the nature of power by Gandhi, which we will examine in more detail later, helps to lay the foundation for a cascade of nonviolent insurgencies in the late twentieth century.

An extended intellectual debate in Western social theory beginning in the 1950s seems to have missed Gandhi's new paradigms, although political activists from Martin Luther King, Jr. to Desmond Tutu, from the People Power

Movement in the Philippines to the anti-apartheid forces in South Africa and prodemocracy movements in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia outran the theorists and befuddled the social scientists. C. Wright Mills's (1951) critiques of American political process, on the one hand, emphasiz the extent to which power was unequally distributed in the United States, rendering democracy impotent. Robert Dahl (1957), on the other hand, distinguishes between power and power resources, so that the latter should not be automatically equated with actual power.

French philosopher Michel Foucault broadens the intellectual debate considerably by conceptualizing power as a diffuse phenomenon connected to systems of knowledge and relationships among people. He posits the idea of power as related to truth production and the construction of rules ordering the world that favor some relations of domination over others. The model of power Foucault offers is not a static, centralized notion of power located in a sovereign, but a dynamic process in which power is diffused throughout social life in the actual reality of human actors. Other theorists point out the ways in which social actors create social structures (e.g., Giddens 1984) or engage in subtle forms of resistance against existing structures such as those identified by James C. Scott in his work on *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990).

Other scholars have noted the multidimensionality – or multiple "faces" of power, such as Bacharach and Baratz's (1962) "Two Faces of Power" theory and economist Kenneth Boulding's (1989) "three faces of power:" the destructive, economic, and integrative. He contends that "the increase in the productive and integrative powers of the human race have been much more significant than the increase in its destructive powers, at least up to the present century" (ibid.: 226). The use of threats to consolidate power played very little role in humanity's early development, Boulding argues, becoming more significant only after the

development of agriculture and the emergence of organized warfare. In addition, he observes that "at least 90 percent of human activity even in the age of civilization was peaceful--plowing, sowing, and reaping, cooking, weaving, and building, making pottery and tools, eating, feasting, singing, worshiping, dancing, having and raising children, and so on" (p. 223).

Another important theory of how power works is the insight in Hannah Arendt's (1970) *On Violence:* violence and power – often mistaken to be the same thing – are in fact opposites. It is only when people do not have power – or are losing that which they do have – that they use violence in an effort to grab power.

ii. Peace and the Decentralization of Power

Recent reformulations of the concept of power parallel those earlier developments from Simmel, Gandhi and Foucault, with an emphasis on the multiple forms and sources of power and the ability of individuals and groups to resist the imposition of unjust power. They go even further, shifting from a narrow emphasis on the idea that some people have power and others do not, to seeing "a distinction between 'power over,' characterized by domination, and 'power to,' with its emphasis on empowerment (Bell 1999: 100). "In this way," Nancy Bell suggests, "power in general is clearly distinguished from force, coercion, and control and is associated with characteristics such as ability, capacity, competence, and potentiality" (ibid).

These new theories do not see power as a "zero-sum" quantity possessed by a few and denied others" in a scarcity model in which a limited amount of power is available and some will win while others necessarily lose. Empowerment theories, Bell(*ibid.*) observes, "emphasize power relationships based on the assumption that the availability of power (as ability, competence, energy) is unlimited and that the dynamics of power relationships can be of the 'both/and' or 'win/win' variety." From this perspective, "power is potentially exercised by all people involved in an interaction, and an

increase of power on one side does not necessarily lead to a lessening of power on the other" (*ibid.).*

That is not to say, of course, that "power over" does not exist, but rather than it is not the only form of power available to humans. Empowerment conceptions tend to power as communal and relational, a product of cooperation rather than of control. Like Simmel and Gandhi, empowerment theorists "recognize that domination is not a unidirectional phenomenon (ibid.: 101); instead, it is something that results from an interaction between people. Consequently, those traditionally considered "weak" have their own sources and forms of power on which they can draw – what Vaclav Havel (1990) calls "the power of the powerless." Moreover, as Arendt points out, power is the just simply domination but is the "glue" that holds community together, whereas violence is destructive of community. It may defeat power but cannot create it.

Gandhi was well aware of the difference between violence and power, a lesson he learned in the struggle for Indian rights in South Africa in the late nineteenth century. In 1908, at the same time as Simmel is writing about domination as a form of interaction, Gandhi pens his famous treatise on Indian *Home Rule or Hind Swaraj,* he was aware of the power that lies outside of military superiority. "You have great military resources," he says to his British "reader,"

> Your naval power is matchless. If we wanted to fight with you on your own ground, we should be unable to do so, but if the above submissions be not acceptable to you, we cease to play the part of the ruled. You may, if you like, cut us to pieces. You may shatter us at the cannon's mouth. If you act contrary to our will, we shall not help you; and without our help, we know that you cannot move one step forward. (Gandhi 1908: Chapter XX)

This strategic aspect of nonviolent resistance to power, so ingeniously systematized by Gene Sharp, relies on a thorough analysis of the multiple forms and sources of power. Nonviolent action, Sharp (1973:8) claims is based on the view that

> "governments depend on people, that power is pluralistic, and that political power is fragile because it depends on many groups for reinforcement of its power sources." Rather than a monolithic view of power, nonviolent theory posits that power "can most efficiently be controlled *at its sources*" (ibid.: 10) such as the authority of a leader, access to human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors (e.g., habits and attitudes toward obedience and submission), material resources and the type and extent of sanctions at the ruler's disposal.

All of these sources of power depend upon the obedience and cooperation of the subjects. Submission to power is a result of a combination of factors, Sharp contends, such as habit, fear of sanctions, feelings of moral obligation, self interest, psychological identification with the rule, zones of indifference, and an absence of self-confidence among the subjects (*ibid*.: 19-24). The power of an unjust regime is always far from absolute, no matter how fierce its enforcers; it cannot withstand a determined resistance by the people willing to think creatively and to accept the consequences of disobedience.

Elise Boulding (1999: 654) identifies similar reformulations of concepts of power which are not actually new, but have existed all along in peaceful societies and could be reinstituted in contemporary peace cultures, in which

> Power is redefined not in terms of violence or force, but of active nonviolence. This component builds upon the experience of active nonviolence as a means of social change and its proven success during the 20th century. Using nonviolence as a means and strategy, social movements contribute to the establishment of new institutions consistent with the other components of a culture of peace.

It is possible, according to Boulding, to replace "hierarchical, vertical authority that characterizes the culture of violence and war" with a "culture of peace, characterized by a democratic process, in which people participate on a continuing basis in making decisions that affect their lives" (ibid.). Such a shift toward power sharing empowers women and elevates the "caring and nurturing capabilities traditionally associated with and developed by women."

The idea of power sharing – now called democracy in our political lexicon – is, of course, nothing new. It was practiced in ancient South Asian village *panchayats* and elaborated by Socrates and the ancient Greeks. Indeed, traditional societies tended to be less violent, more peaceful and egalitarian than their post-Agricultural Revolution counterparts, although they were not without their atrocities as well. Riane Eisler (1988), in reviewing numerous archeological discoveries in recent decades, finds a shift in the ancient world from "partnership" societies to more warlike "dominator" models that emerge in the distant human past.

The development of agricultural techniques results in incentives (such as accumulated wealth and surpluses) for people to raid other villages in acts of war and the emergence of more hierarchical forms of social order as some people obtain more resources than others. Many questions remain as to whether new forms of social organization will emerge in the twenty-first century that respect the dignity and power of all people, not to mention how we might move in that direction.

i. Gandhi, Bush, and New Visions of Power

Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power.
We have guided missiles and misguided men.
   -- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

We now return, in conclusion, to the questions raised at the beginning of this essay regarding possible parallels between Mahatma Gandhi and President George Bush. Although I do not question President Bush's sincerity regarding his yearning for human freedom and liberty, his path toward that end and the Mahatma's are quite different and will not, I believe, yield the desired democratic societies he claims to desire.

One cannot impose democracy and freedom on a people through the use of military power, which President Bush seems to think, but which the unfolding of events in Iraq seem to contradict. Rather than facilitating democracy, the US invasion of Iraq seems to have unleashed forces of revenge and violence insurgency. Moreover, the other primary mechanism the Bush administration – the growth of free trade and the elimination of governmental regulations on industry – is also problematic. The main problem with the so-called liberalization process and the dismantling of governmental structures (also often a Gandhian agenda) is that the structural adjustments implemented (often through coercion and at a very high cost to the population of a country and with high benefit to its ruling elites) is that rather than freeing the people it frees multinational corporations to plunder natural and social resources. Like the state, the modern corporation is a soulless entity; its very existence seems to be to generate wealth for a privileged few at the top of its hierarchy rather than to serve the public.

Government regulations and centralized economies may thwart individual initiative and stifle entrepreneurship, but they also often provide protection from a focus on profit rather than the welfare of the people. Rather than having an economy planned by a centralized government, many countries now have an economy planned by multinational monopolies and a system that some have called a new form of sharecropping, in which entire nations become caught in a debt trap in which their resources are

spent not on servicing people but debts which grow more rapidly than income.

Although the forces of the market and competition among companies might provide some checks and balances, any such controls are well beyond the influence of the vast majority of people on the planet, many of whom are mired in hopeless poverty. According to UNICEF estimates, the number of child victims under the age of five who now die annually from malnutrition equals the total number of victims during the entire Nazi holocaust. Decisions effecting the lives of billions are made behind closed doors without any public accountability mechanisms such as those at least theoretically available to citizens of a democracy who could present their grievances to their government.

What appears to be deregulation and decentralization of power is, in fact, a shifting of centralized power from the public to the private sphere, from obvious government corruption and mismanagement to hidden social processes driven by the pursuit of profit. The overwhelming trend in the private sphere is toward the concentration of both wealth and power in that sphere in the hands of an increasingly small number of corporations and their owners and managers. One estimate suggests that the top three individuals at Microsoft own as much wealth as the entire continent of Africa. The Pentagon's capital assets are equal to eighty percent of the total capital assets of all American corporations (Dumas).

Gandhi's vision of the decentralization of power admittedly requires a radical transformation of the political and moral culture of humanity, but perhaps no less radical or widespread than the change being wrought by the avalanche of globalization. The seduction of material wealth promised – but for most undelivered – by "modernization" – is causing a transformation of life spheres in every corner of the planet. What appears to be widespread empowerment – i.e., the ability of people to acquire the products of industrial production – is generating new forms of obligation and indebtedness as well as increasingly concentrating the world's wealth in the hands of a few.

Gandhi's alternative vision of power requires an empowerment of all in which everyone is conscious not only of their rights, but also of their responsibilities, of the welfare of all (*Sarvodaya*), but also the welfare of the last first (*Antyodaya*). *Swaraj*, or home rule, would be practiced at every level from the individual person to the planet. Power could be decentralized because all people would exercise self control, and work to achieve Truth and nonviolence in every sphere of their lives, with an emphasis on simple and ethical living in daily life and in international relations. People would seek not their own interests, but the Truth, not the ability to "spin" the facts to benefit oneself, but transparency and accountability. Individuals would engage in voluntarism and altruism in order to control and sublimate power, to place checks on self-aggrandizement.

The role of the state and political power would be "not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life" (Gandhi 1967: 134). The emphasis would be not so much on punishing the wealthy for their greed but on uplifting the poor; "Exploitation of the poor," Gandhi insists, "can be extinguished not by effecting the destruction of a few millionaires, but by removing the ignorance of the poor and teaching them to non-co-operate with their exploiters" (*ibid.:* 205). This two-fold process of facilitating self-reliance, on the one hand, and of training people in the art of nonviolent resistance, on the other, would help to lift up the people. Exploitation would be resisted in every corner by collective direct action designed to empower the victims of injustice. The power of government – and of the corporation – would "sit light as a flower; no one should feel the weight of it."

Now, is this not all a bit too idealistic in an age of weapons of mass destruction, powerful multinational corporations, and rampant greed

and materialism? C. Wright Mills was correct, I think, when he wrote in 1958 that "the idealists are now the realists." Is it more idealistic to think that we could transform the world in ways that we cannot see now because of our myopia and structures and rituals of violence? Moreover, we have seen that people are capable of such behavior in the heroism of sacrifices made in historic struggles and in daily lives by mothers and fathers who sacrifice their own wellbeing in order to provide for their children. As (Kenneth) Boulding's Law suggests, "That which exists is possible." Because we have models – empirical evidence – of heroic, peaceful, altruistic lives, we know that it is possible for humans to live that way.

We "cannot say in advance what a nonviolent government will be like," even Gandhi admits – "just as those who discovered gravity didn't know all of the implications" (*ibid.: 130).* Perhaps if we began to move toward a nonviolent society, and promote nonviolent government, we would see more clearly around the corner what to do next.

All of this might seem like the idealistic ravings of a prophet or a saint if it were not for the fact that Gandhi and the Indian Freedom Movement already did shake the foundations of a world system and set it to toppling. It might seem overly idealistic if we had not seen the toppling of the Berlin Wall, the overthrow of South African apartheid, the thousands gathered in the streets in Manila, Belgrade, and Kiev successfully demanding free and fair elections in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and military might. Jonathan Schell, in his eloquent analysis of and ode to nonviolence, *The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence, and the Will of the People* (2003:188) claims that

> The nonviolent popular resistance that brought down the Berlin Wall was as historically consequential – as final an arbiter – as either othe two world wars. It ended Soviet communism and its shadow, the specter of 'international communism." … it initiated the creation

of more than a dozen new countries. It was the equivalent of a third world war in one particular – it was not a war.

The people who fought that battle did not get the world of their dreams, any more than did the victors of the French, American, Russian, Chinese, or Indian revolutions. They did take the next step, however, in our redefining of power. Gandhi advised the Congress Party leaders not to take the reins of state, but to turn their organization into a great grassroots movement in an independent India, but the temptations of state power were too great. Perhaps the next revolutions will show us not only how to topple regimes, but how to create nonviolent lives in a new post-oppressive society. Perhaps we will learn how to harness the energy of Truth not only for large-scale political struggle, but also for the creation of new forms of daily life and social organization built on love rather than violence.

What are our alternatives? Do we think that instead of mounting a nonviolent transformation of the planet we can continue down the path of violence indefinitely? Martin Luther King, Jr. had it right, I think, when he said that our choice is no longer between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and nonexistence. The first step toward a nonviolent society is a nonviolent conception of power.

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