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Power

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CHANGING REALITIES BY CHANGING HOW WE UNDERSTAND
AND USE POWER

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Dedicated to the memory of Sergeant Matanya Robinson, who was killed in Jenin on Monday, April 8, 2002, shortly before his 22nd birthday.

Matanya was a quiet, intelligent, serious young man who, in the words of a brochure sent out to those of us wishing to support the construction of a building to be dedicated to his memory, “had a unique gift of being able to make everyone feel comfortable in his presence. Unlike many young people of his age, he was devoid of cynicism and was genuinely motivated to help others.” Matanya was born and raised on a kibbutz and spent the year before his army service working in a social justice program that builds living bridges, promoting cooperative action and social integration between people from diverse sectors of the population in Israel while improving the lives of children from low-income families. Its central pillar is an urban kibbutz leadership program (desperately in need of permanent housing) in a poor neighborhood in Jerusalem, bringing together approximately 30 religious and secular young adult men and women for a yearlong pre-army volunteer program in which they do community service.

Matanya and his friends were not “out to kill.” They were in the army to defend their country.

Feminist research encourages me to begin dealing with the issues raised in this volume by trying to transcend the identity categories one might use (in this case: Jewish, Arab, Women, Men) in relating to issues of war and peace, so that we can ask more productive questions about human experiences. Learning to look at the world through feminist lenses leads one to question the certainties that abound in people’s minds, including our own. Many of us already see, as Cynthia Enloe has written, that traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity, far from being inevitable, have been “surprisingly hard to perpetuate,” requiring the daily exercise of domestic, national and international power.¹ Enloe was referring to power as control over others. My interest lies in exploring the possibility of developing cognitive resources that will allow people to change their concepts of power in accordance with the outcomes they want to see—outcomes that must be clearly defined before rushing to change. Otherwise we simply replace one kind of “power over others” with another version of the same.

I would like to argue from a social constructionist position that we need to redefine power before we can meaningfully talk about empowerment. Just as concepts of masculinity and femininity have been perpetuated by the use of controlling power, most political and economic arguments, domestic, national, and international—including those related to war—are maintained by that same concept of power, as it has been defined by both men and women in patriarchal societies throughout history. Many of us continue to participate in patriarchally patterned operations of power even when we believe that we are fighting for change. In such a scenario, all that can end up changing is who holds the controlling power.

Before proposing alternatives, let me define what I mean by “patriarchally patterned operations of power” and how they impact on liberal democracies such as ours in Israel, resulting in public policies that encourage continued inequalities. Power is something that all states have in common, regardless of their form of government. According to political philosopher Jonathan Wolfe,

The state possesses two essential features: it maintains a monopoly of legitimate coercion or violence, and it offers to protect everyone within its territory.²

Although no actual state lives up to the ideal of protecting everyone within its territory, there are those of us who believe that democracies are best at protecting their citizens, because they are “governments of the people, by the people.” The right to vote expresses respect for all the citizens of the state, regardless of what they do with the vote when they have it. However, voting is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a just society. Feminists, remembering the fifty-year struggle for women’s suffrage, understand the importance of voting as a means of political participation, but they also realize that the true measure of the process is the results observed in public policy. There are many explanations for the historical subordination of women and the near-universality of patriarchy,³ but one thing is clear: liberal democracies have not been successful in preventing the tyranny of dominant elite groups. In the democratic context, power is still understood as “power over others,” and it is this patterning of power in patriarchal society that creates the potential for those in control of political institutions to manipulate the process in order to achieve their goals.

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Many women are wary of power, because they have learned that “power corrupts”—but it doesn’t have to. I believe that critiquing power from a social constructionist perspective can help develop a conceptualization of power that allows it to be used in positive ways. The social constructionist position places knowledge within the framework of social interaction in a given culture at a particular historical time.⁴ Each of us has her or his own psychological construction of knowledge and reality, based on certain fundamental assumptions that are shared with others and taken for granted in a particular cultural community. That is to say, “what we assume to be a description of a freestanding reality—that is, what we take for knowledge—is in fact a construction.”⁵

Michel Foucault, who has probably contributed more than any other scholar in recent years to our understanding of the nature of power as wielded throughout history, repeatedly asked us to look at knowledge as power. For example, decontextualized positions, often stated as universal essentialisms, may well be social constructs that legitimize, justify, and perpetuate current arrangements of power.⁶ Similarly, ideological positions are prescriptive constructions; they can never simply be describing “reality.” Switching ideologies does not automatically change the underlying construction of power; it just changes who is in control. The political consequences of today’s debates about war and peace require that we stop using what Audre Lorde calls “the master’s tools”—in this context, our understanding of what power is and how it works—because these “will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁷

Webster’s Dictionary lists nine definitions of power, only one of which is “a possession of control, authority, or influence over others.” Another is simply “the ability to act or produce an effect,” and still another is “a means of energy.” Booles and Swan define power as “the ability to do or act” and assert that as such “it is neutral in value” (p. 51).⁸ Glasser adds that although power “has no morality,” all humans have a need for power. Like Foucault, Glasser sees a connection between knowledge and power, but he sees knowledge as creating a positive feeling of power that need not be used to disempower others.⁹

What about understanding power as a means of energy? Think of how power is defined in physics (mass times velocity) or electronics (resistance times voltage). Broom and Klein declare that “whether in the world of physics, electronics, or human dynamics, power is energy in use.”¹⁰ Asking how it is that power got such a bad reputation, they respond by contrasting what they

call “finite” and “infinite” perspectives on power. The finite position supposes that there is only a limited amount of power available. For one person to gain power, the other must lose it. The infinite perspective supposes that there is limitless power available, making it unnecessary to balance wins and losses. This understanding evokes cooperation and openness.

However, Broom and Klein clarify that being cooperative does not mean allowing others to take advantage of you. All relations involve conflict between the “stories” that each of us, as individuals and as part of a group, tell about our own reality. The question is how one goes about resolving those conflicts. As Broom and Klein put it,

Those who surrender their positions on behalf of maintaining peace or the appearance of conformity, often become angry, resentful, and unproductive. (p. 120)

There are times when the other side takes a finite, win/lose stance, creating a situation in which fighting back is the only alternative to surrender. After fighting back, however, we can return to the infinite position—to cooperation as the basic mode of operation. That, according to Broom and Klein, is the critical ingredient:

Within an infinite perspective, the possibility of a win/win resolution of a difficult situation can be sustained and implemented as long as at least one of the parties involved is willing to attend to that possibility. (p. 12)

Many of our social relations are win/lose relations of domination and subordination, of control or “power over,”¹¹ of disempowering others by getting them to do what one wants by force or by manipulation. We see examples of this in many marriages, in the rabbinic courts, in our political arena, and of course in fighting and winning wars. However, there are also relationships that are mutually supportive and enabling; they are empowering in the sense of “power with.” Fostering such relationships demands the acquisition of communication skills. An example of this approach can be seen in the encouragement of the use of mediation in the courts, in dealing with family problems, and in the classroom.

The derailed peace process required the kind of skills developed in the context of this approach, which, unfortunately, were not learned by either

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side in the conflict. But if this approach can work when at least one of the parties involved is willing to attend to the possibilities of a win/win situation, what does one do when advocating it in a relationship in which the other party—spouse, boss, student, teacher, political party, or nation—espouses the opposite, win/lose approach?

As Broom and Klein explained, one does not automatically surrender one's position on behalf of maintaining peace. The whole notion of empowerment is one in which strength of self is established in processes of developing self-awareness and self-definition. Unfortunately, there are times when one has to "hit back," as I believe we have had to do in response to the Intifada. Nevertheless, one stays involved and tries again until discussion generates better ideas that both sides can own. As Broom and Klein put it,

As we deepen our understanding of how infinitely related our personal, organizational, and world systems are, we better understand that our survival, productivity, and satisfaction are dependent upon the survival, productivity, and satisfaction of our partners in our planet-wide community. Accordingly, we will build infinite partnerships rather than continue strategies of discrimination, conflict, and war. (p. 132)

We can no longer afford to avoid these power issues. By refusing to deal with them, we automatically fall back on using the master's tools, and then whatever change we will see can only involve who is in control, not how the system works. How do we use "infinite" tools to alleviate violence, poverty, and discrimination? How do they help us correct the imbalances in personal relationships, in housing, and in educational opportunities? I do not have a simple answer, but it is clear to me that how we go about working for change is just as important or perhaps even more important than the change itself.¹² According to Wolfe,

A society that has a tendency to create ruthless, egotistical exploiters is worse than one with a tendency to produce charitable, altruistic co-operators, even if in formal terms, both societies can be described as just. (p. 220)

What seems to be required is commitment to goals within support groups that work together, empowering one another in the process, rather than

getting involved in win/lose patterns of conflict resolution. I am convinced that each of us has to find her and his own frameworks within which to demand and work on the remedying of disturbing inequalities.

Conclusion

I began this essay by trying to transcend my own identity issues with regard to the subject matter of this volume, but perhaps I can clarify what I have been trying to get across by way of my own narrative. As an Orthodox Jewish woman living in Israel, I have sought to affirm my own identity while respecting and addressing issues of diversity, of “the other” or others, from my own mate to secular Jews, Arabs, Mizrahim, Ethiopians, Russians, Christians, lesbians, homosexuals, and haredi men and women. The list could go on and on, because I believe that each of us has multiple identities, and therefore none of the above descriptives will fit any particular individual, any more than describing myself as an Orthodox Jewish woman living in Israel is complete. I am a feminist. I am a mother and a grandmother. I am much more than any of these, and I join together with like-minded people to work for the things that matter to me.

In order to provide others with the opportunity to empower themselves, I must have compassion for their situation, as I must have compassion for my own situation in order to empower myself. There is an enormous difference between compassion, which allows for recognition, and agreement. I can have compassion for the Palestinian people without agreeing to their desire for the right of return. It is not easy to take such a stance and work from it, but it can be done, at home, at work, in the political arena, and in international relations. Real empowerment requires us to be patient with ourselves. Anyone who wishes to develop an infinite perspective needs to do a lot of practicing.

I am not suggesting (as many of my colleagues continue to suggest) that women talk while men shoot it out. I am saying that most people in the world (both men and women) continue, consciously or subconsciously, to take the finite perspective. In the long run, the infinite approach will be the only way to achieve peace at home, in the workplace, in the political arena, and in international relations—always bearing in mind that this does not mean allowing others to take advantage of you. When you are treated in a “power

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over” way despite your attempts to relate at eye level, you must react in a “power over” way, even while seeking a return to cooperation as the basic mode of operation.

At times one has to leave a relationship, be it a marriage or an international agreement, because the other side is not only unwilling to give up his or her finite position but has become totally destructive. There may well be those who are simply unable or unwilling to learn the idea of cooperative interactions. Clearly, abused wives should not stay in their marriages while attempting to raise the level of discussion, nor can we sit and discuss peace plans with suicide bombers. Nevertheless, after hitting back, we continue our efforts to let the other side know that our object is not to be the only winners with them as losers, but, rather, to find a way in which we both can feel the kind of power Glasser says we all need for our psychological survival.

People often ask: would women make a difference? Phyllis Chesler has already shown us that women’s behaviors are often no “better” than those of males.¹⁴ My answer is that we can make a difference only after we have restructured our own constructs of power.

Notes

1. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
2. Jonathan Wolfe, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 40.
3. For an in-depth discussion of the anthropological and sociobiological arguments see Cynthia F. Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender and the Social Order* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988).
4. Kenneth J. Gergen, “The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology,” *American Psychologist*, 40 (1985), pp. 266–275; and idem, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1999).
5. Janis S. Bohan, “Sex Differences and/in the Self: Classic Themes, Feminist Variations, Postmodern Challenges,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26 (2002), pp. 74–88.
6. For interesting analyses of this position with regard to the role of psychology in society see Philip Cushman, “Ideology Obscured,” *American Psychologist*, 46 (1991), pp. 206–219, and *Constructing the Self: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1995).

7. For an outstanding description of the oppressor planted deep within each of us see Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (California: Crossing Press, 1984), esp. pp. 110–113.
8. Barbara Booles and Lydia Swan, *Power Failure: Why Some Women Short Circuit Their Careers and How to Avoid It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
9. The psychologist William Glasser has written several books on what he calls Reality Therapy and Control Theory. The ideas brought here are from a book on education, but they are central to all of his thinking. William Glasser, *Control Theory in the Classroom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
10. Michael F. Broom and Donald C. Klein, *Power: The Infinite Game* (Amherst, Mass.: HRD Press, 1995).
11. See S. Kreisberg, *Transforming Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
12. For a detailed discussion see my article, "Power and Politics as They Relate to Psychology and Education: A Critical Analysis for Dealing with Issues of Empowerment in Teacher Education from a Feminist Framework," in *Teacher Education in the 21st Century* (Brussels: ATEE, 2000), pp. 184–202.
13. Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001).

TIMELINE AND TRANSFORMATION OF MY RELATIONSHIP TO ISRAEL: MY JOURNEY TO BECOMING A PEACE ACTIVIST

Judith Stern Peck

1950

As I approach the door, I feel my throat tighten. I clutch the JNF "blue box" tighter and bravely ring the doorbell. More than likely, the fear that my eight-year-old self feels at my first-ever attempt to raise money—to plant trees in the new State of Israel—is reflected in my face. As a yeshiva student, however, I have been taught about Israel, and the pride I've learned enhances my Jewish identity and stiffens my spine. I see a woman peeking out from behind the curtain and glance at my blue and white box. I believe that she is coming to open the door. I wait for the door to open, but she never comes. I am confused as I turn to walk to the next house. I do not understand what I have just experienced. Surely everyone must feel as I do about Eretz Israel!