

CHAPTER 1

Power changes

The exercise of power is an intricate part of human nature and as such may be considered a global structure. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, we can observe two trends related to power: one relates to the international practice of power, the other to the way we think about power.

International practices of power

Since the Second World War, the world has witnessed a decrease in the number of wars between states and an increase of cooperation among states resulting in a proliferation of international organizations. It seemed that a large part of the world had moved from power and prestige to peace and cooperation. To some, this development heralded the emergence of a new global structure (or, as some preferred to call it: a “new world order”). To others, these processes merely represented a temporary phase in the history of humankind pointing out a continuation of power politics by states like America, Russia and China, and the re-emergence of unilateral actions by these states since the 2010s. The latter raises the question whether international cooperation is a global trend that will consolidate into a global structure or is merely a global trend that is fading away. Since we are in the middle of these developments, we cannot conclude on the outcome yet: have we indeed moved from power and prestige to peace and cooperation, or has this development been reversed since the 2010s?

Whatever the case, it is a development that we can call a global trend, regardless of whether it will develop in a global structure or is about to end. To analyze this trend, we will use two frames of reference: power and leadership. Both frames are fueled by the 3-Is (Interests, Ideas, and Identities). When the 3-Is energize people, power is a means to use this energy, and leadership is a means to channel that power. It is then the leader’s choice to wield that power alone (unilateralism) or to cooperate with others (multilateralism). These three elements – power, leadership, and uni- or multilateralism – are key to understanding the developments that are taking place in the global trend of international cooperation and will be discussed below.

Power

One way of looking at power is the ability to influence the behavior or thinking of others to arrive at a desired outcome. In short: the ability to make others do what you want them to do. Defined this way, power is present in almost every human

interaction, from raising children to landing jobs to running companies and waging wars.

The next question is how that power is wielded. In the interaction among states, we often distinguish between **'hard' and 'soft' power**, that is between the power to coerce and the power to convince, respectively. These notions also apply to interhuman relations. While for centuries was considered a measure of power that earned respect – think of kings leading their men into battle – seemed to have become the new trend in second half of the twentieth century. The battle-hardened warrior was replaced by the well-spoken orator. Both have the same aim – creating order – but seek to reach it with different means. To many, soft power appeared to be a new global trend.

Language is power...

'Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true'

(Michel Foucault, in Paul Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought*, 1991)

However, critics have pointed out that the exercise of soft power is subject to other, internal power dynamics. They believe power is not only what people do or say, it is also embedded in who they are. In interactions among people, for instance, structures of patriarchy, religion or racism often still play a role. A woman may be the minister and therefore holding a position of power, but that power can be undercut by people who consider the fact that she is a woman a disadvantage to that position of power. Similar power plays are waged in cases involving people from different color, social background and religion, amongst others. The power imbalances at the foundation of these occurrences also manifest themselves at the level of states: former colonized countries are still very sensitive to a condescending tone or treatment from their former colonizer, just as the colonizer may still have difficulty to kick that habit, possibly out of an enduring belief in its superiority.

Since the 2010s, a new dimension of power has emerged in these power dynamics which can be considered 'manipulation'. This is referred to as **'sharp power'** which taps into the omnipresent information technology that can be manipulated into, and is conducive to the production of fake news and disinformation to influence people. But sharp power is not just another form of soft power; it can also take the shape of hard power when the manipulation of information takes on aggressive forms

by means of hacks, deep fakes, possibly state-driven. Examples may include state-run ‘troll farms’ that target certain information sources with disruptive forms of disinformation, or states investing in foreign information and knowledge sectors like universities or social media, to manipulate information flows in foreign countries. Sharp power has grown exponentially with the development of digital technology.

Power is the ability to influence the behaviour or thinking of others by means of coercion (**hard power**), convincing (**soft power**) or manipulation (**sharp power**).

Leadership

Leadership is traditionally connected to hard power, as demonstrated by the notion of the warrior-king that still resonates in the image that some of today’s leaders like to portray. But what did leadership look like during the global trend that replaced power and prestige with peace and cooperation?

Leadership has been a topic of research in Humanities for a long time, and a helpful analysis has been provided by one of the founding fathers of sociology, Max Weber (d. 1920). According to him, a key notion to understand leadership is **authority**. He argues that authority is based on the belief that people have about the legitimacy of a person’s authority. He then distinguishes three types of authority: **traditional authority** is based on the belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions (examples are hereditary royalty, whether as clan chiefs, kings or emperors); **legal authority** is based on the belief of the legality of rules according to which a person is appointed in an authoritative role (like the elected president, the appointed professor or judge); **charismatic authority** is based on the devotion to exceptional qualities of the individual person (e.g., Hitler, Napoleon, Ghandi, Mandela). Ideally, these three types will overlap, as has been the case with some popes: their authority is enshrined in traditions that go back for almost nineteen centuries, while each pope is elected according to a strict procedure, and some popes enjoy charismatic qualities due to their character or policies.

Traditional and legal authority in Asia

In the second half of the twentieth century, Asian countries have seen quite some instances where female prime ministers and presidents were elected who were the daughters or spouses of male leaders of their countries, thereby combining hereditary and legal authority: Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Indira Ghandi of India, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed of Bangladesh, Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, Park Geun-hye of South Korea, Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar.

Figure III.1

Martial leadership



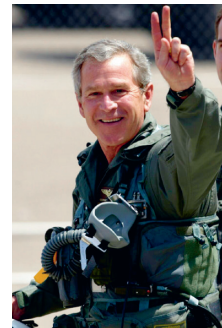
Vladimir Putin (Russia)



Kim Jong-Un (North Korea)



Margaret Thatcher (United Kingdom)



*George W. Bush
(United States)*

Another element of authority that Weber points out, is the context, or the moment in history in which the authority is displayed. For instance, Churchill was very unpopular in pre-war times because of his hard-power rhetoric, but he rose to the occasion during the Second World War, only to be voted out of office immediately after the war. Simply put: ‘hard’ times seem to require hard-power leaders while times of peace and rebuilding require soft-power leaders. This may explain the dominance of soft power during the second half of the twentieth century: most Western states were recovering from a devastating world war while the former colonies were gaining independence and were building their own states. Hard power was not absent, however: the Cold War led to numerous proxy wars where ‘communist’ forces backed by the Soviet-Union were pitted against ‘liberal’ and autocratic forces backed by the United States, just like the process of de-colonization in some instances was forced by wars, and the establishment of new states out of former colonies often resulted in autocratic regimes trying to bend these new states to their will.

The philosopher Joseph Raz distinguishes between two kinds of authority. **‘Normal’ authority** is when people accept someone’s authority because it is in their interest. **‘Deviant’ authority** is when one feels obligated to obey, like deference to one’s parents or by ideas like nationalism or religion.

(Joseph Raz, *Authority*, 1990)

Multi- and unilateralism

During the second half of the twentieth century, international cooperation prevailed. These decades were dominated by leaders who favored cooperation and negotiation with an international focus. They adopted a **multilateral** approach, seeing benefit in international cooperation. The number and types of international treaties were unprecedented. But while many leaders may have aspired to world peace, the goal of the multilateral approach ultimately remained national: only through multilateralism could conflicts about trade, values, and the use of resources be prevented and, consequently, the national interests be safeguarded. Since the second decade of the 21st century, however, we have been observing an increase in popularity of leaders who are tough, less diplomatic, and with an exclusively national focus. They resort to a **unilateral** approach, meaning that they see no benefit in international cooperation to promote national interests. (For the resulting global trend – and to some: global challenge – of ‘multipolarization’ that is taking place since the 2010s, see chapter ‘Post-colonialism and decolonization’.)

Multilateralism refers to two states or more communicating in the pursuit of their interests. **Unilateralism** refers to the preference of a state to pursue its interests without consulting, agreeing or cooperating with other states.

The reasons for the unilateral approach can be found in the 3-Is and appear to be two-fold. On the one hand, the sentiment held by these leaders is that the results of international cooperation are not enhancing but limiting the national *interests*. This was one of the main reasons for the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union in 2020: while there were plenty of benefits from being part of this regional organization, it was considered better to be able to make decisions without the influence of European rules. Whereas this motivation for unilateralists is related to interests, the other motivation is about *identity*: the unilateralists feel that internationalization and globalization is contaminating their national identity, and they therefore resort to politics of defending and restoring that identity.

In either case, unilateralists feel the need to detach themselves from multilateral obligations so that they can set a national agenda in accordance with their own wishes. As a result, we can observe the debate about states rescinding their

membership from international organizations and agreements increase. Also, we can see an increasing popularity of *hard power*, unrestrained by international customary rules or agreements.

The way we think about power

In addition to this shifting trend in the international practice of power, the second half of the twentieth century also gave rise to a new way of thinking about power. This manifested mostly in academic circles. The academic approach of considering people as part of a social, cultural, religious or ethnic group, was gradually replaced by the new point of view that these groups were not fixed social categories but flexible social relations. In other words: these groups were the product of social relations, and they also produced social relations themselves. For example, it only makes sense to talk about a social underclass if there is a social upper class, just like it only makes sense to talk about men if there are women, or the religious if there is a secular. These social positions are considered not to be static, but subject to relations of power. For that reason, the term 'slave' has been replaced by 'enslaved', to indicate that it is a social situation that can only occur if somebody is doing the enslaving and that the status of slavery is not a matter of choice for those who are subjected to it.

This way of viewing relations between people has become dominant since the late twentieth century, both in the academic and in the political domain. An important consequence is that certain social and political situations are not considered static or self-evident, such as the dominant position of the West, the patriarchy or the authority of the clergy, but that they are products of power relations. That means that such relations do not need to be accepted as fixed but can be challenged. Whereas opposition to power relations is of course not new and humankind has a long history of challenging those in power, what has shifted is that these power relations are no longer considered in terms of *groups* of fixed social status (women, laborers, the enslaved) who revolt against their oppressor, but as relations that *individuals* have with their social environment. This view allows for more realism when describing social situations but also creates more complexity. For instance, the laborer who protests the abuses of his employer may very well find it natural that his wife should obey him and that he should abide by the counsel of the local priest. Just like a former colony can still suffer from the continued political and economic power exercised by the former colonizer and at the same time maintain a harsh security apparatus and outlaw homosexuality. (See also Chapters 'Equality' and 'Identity').

Further reading

Michel Foucault, *Power. Essential Works 1954-1984*, Penguin Classics, 2020

Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, Public Affairs, 2011

Joseph Raz, *Authority*, NYU Press, 1990

Mario Telò, *Multilateralism Past, Present and Future: A European Perspective*, Routledge, 2023

Christopher Walk and Jessica Ludwig, *From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power'. Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World* (report), National Endowment for Democracy, 2017