

Reflections on Kenneth Boulding's *Three Faces of Power*, in retrospect, and with the benefit of hindsight

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When I was contacted by the editors of the *Journal of Resistance Studies* regarding a possible contribution to a series describing seminal books in the field of resistance studies, my thoughts quickly gravitated to Kenneth Boulding's (1989) book on the *Three Faces of Power*. This may at first seem a surprising choice for this journal. It would definitely be a stretch to say that Boulding's book has had a large influence on how actual resistance movements operate. The book has not seen anything approaching the attention to other more prominent contributions such as Gene Sharp's (1973) *The Politics of Non-violent Action*, which has been disseminated and popularized in a number of subsequent training manuals published in different languages, and arguably influenced popular movement such as the Arab Spring. Moreover, although Boulding's 1989 book has received positive reviews and some attention in academic circles, it can hardly be deemed a classic or a game-changer, and indeed, other books by Boulding have received more attention and greater prominence. For example, although citations are not a perfect measure of influence, the *Three Faces of Power* has about 800 citations in Google Scholar as of July 2017, while Boulding's 1962 book *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* has over 2500 citations. Other books published in the same time period have received more citations; there are for example over 1300 citations Todd Sandler's (1992) much more technical volume, reviewing and discussing formal models of collective action and what has been learned since Olson's (1958) original work. However, I will argue that the *Three Faces of Power* deserves a wide readership as it provides a very useful analysis

of the concept of power, very prescient at the time that it was written, and with enduring relevance and much to offer people interested in resistance and dissent.

I will start with a brief overview of the book and its core thesis. Boulding's main purpose in the book is to understand the role of power in social systems. He notes that the common definition of power as the ability "to get what we want" is very encompassing, and hides many subtleties. For example, what we want depends on our preferences, and this in turn begs the question of what shapes our preferences and views on particular outcomes. Many types of possible behavior and actions are not limited by any obvious technical feasibility or what we could do in principle, but rather constrained by social norms and other non-material inhibitions. Finally, most decisions and outcomes ultimately result from complex interactions between individuals and collective actors such as organizations rather than individual preferences or decisions alone. There is a common tendency to associate power with specific sources of power, such as coercive military capabilities (as in Mao's famous quote that "power comes from the barrel of a gun"). At the same time, it is also widely acknowledged that many actors such as the Pope can be influential and powerful, even if Stalin is rumored to have insisted to the French foreign minister that the Pope could not be influential as he did not possess any military units (for a more contemporary analysis of the influence of the Vatican, see Genovese 2015).

As the title suggests, Boulding proposes that our understanding of power can be advanced by distinguishing between distinct types of power. Boulding's terminology at this point becomes somewhat less clean and three-partite than the book title suggests, as he distinguishes between both the consequences of power and characteristics of behavior. In terms of the former, he distinguishes between destructive, productive, and integrative power. Destructive power basically encompasses the ability to remove valued things, such as traditional military threats. By contrast, productive power means the ability to produce, or to create valued things such as improved technology and welfare. Finally, integrative power can be thought of as the ability to foster solidarity, which in turn influences the ability for

collective action. This typology maps – if not perfectly – onto three types of characteristic behavior, namely threat power, exchange power, and love. Threat power is the ability to get people to do things based on threat, while exchange power can be thought of as creating contracts or agreements whereby one actor does something in exchange for something else, while “the power of love” is the ability to get people to do something through identification, respect or legitimacy. Although the terminology shifts over time and the categories are not fully unique, the core distinction between destructive, productive, and integrative power is at least conceptually clear and analytically very helpful.

In an interesting and perceptive review of Sharp’s 1973 book and the associated “consent theory of power”, Boulding (1974) argued that Sharp placed far too much emphasis on threat power, and not enough on integrative power and the dynamics of legitimacy. One of Boulding’s core points in *Three Faces of Power* is that each type of power is normally not sufficient on its own, and that integrative capacity is often more important than threat power. For example, military power alone is unlikely to be effective if integrative capacity approaches nill, yet actors with sufficiently strong integrative power can be influential, even without notable military power. Armies are built on threat power, but is the ability to make people collaborate or fight as teams that ultimately make armies effective (see, e.g., Stouffer 1949; Turchin 2006) In a memorable section, Boulding notes how the extraordinary integrative power had helped the Jews survive as a group under extreme circumstances with low military power, while Israel’s growing military power and responses to external threats have arguable decreased community and integrative power (pp. 50-51). Boulding’s claim that the impact of war had been overestimated by historians must have seemed preposterous to many during the height of Cold War, when most of the material in this book was written, but astonishingly prescient after its first publication in 1989. The end of the Cold War emerged as a transformative event arguably as important as World War II, yet not clearly reducible to any clear changes in military power or threat capacity.

My own thinking about power and my core research interests have very much been shaped by this book, but not in a simple or linear fashion. I believe I first read the *Three Faces of Power* when I started my PhD in the Fall of 1995. I must confess that I at the time probably picked up a copy of the book in a second hand book store mainly since I was a PhD student affiliated with the Program on Political and Economic Change at the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado, which originally had been led by Boulding himself. Yet, I think I came to the book at the right time, both in terms of the salient events that the book helped me make sense of, and my own subsequent research interests and focuses.

Like most people, my own understanding of power started from the traditional view that power is defined primarily by resources and that more thus is always mightier. Indeed, I can recall having rather conventional and conspiratorial views about social issues, with a tendency to assume that “powerful” actors inevitably dominate the world, and that bad outcomes must reflect their entrenched interests and overwhelming resources. But this was difficult to reconcile with my knowledge that non-violent resistance often had been much more effective than violent resistance against dictatorships. This was informed by both older historical examples – such as the Norwegian non-violent resistance during World War II (see Gleditsch 1997) – and also seemed to be confirmed by the role of popular mobilization leading up to the end of Socialist dictatorships in Eastern Europe that I had seen unfold around me while growing up in the late 1980s.

Reading literature on non-violence such as Sharp (1973) and Martin (1991) helped me realize that power ultimately rests on some kind of compliance, and that leaders and autocratic regimes could collapse when this was successfully withdrawn. However, these were less helpful when it came to understanding what influenced collective responses and the ability to motivate or prevent people from acting.

After starting to study Political Science in 1992 I came to understand the broader implications of collective action problems, beyond the standard examples such as underprovision of public goods or the tragedy of the commons. In brief, shared interest is not enough to foster collaboration or common action, especially if individual action is costly (e.g., Olson 1958; Sandler 1992). This helped me understand barriers to collective action and why achieving political protest and change is difficult, even when dissatisfaction is widespread. More generally, I also came to appreciate how many “bad” outcomes and social dilemmas may not actually clearly benefit anyone very much in particular, but it is simply not in any single individual’s interest to change her or his behavior under the status quo, and difficult to get coordinated collective responses that allow people to reach feasible outcomes that are better for all.

In short, I learned much that was helpful for understanding the barriers to collective action, and why this is difficult, but not so much about positive influences that could enable collective action, especially when conventional threat power defined by military coercion is low. This is where Boulding is helpful in suggesting exchange power and integrative power as possible components that can make actors potentially powerful. It is easy to see the relevance of potential integrative power in terms of in-group solidarity and out-group distinctions. Shared identities and symbols that create solidarity and capacity for collective action, such as ethnicity and nationalism, can clearly help create effective movements. These ideas informed much of my subsequent thinking about mobilization in ethnic civil wars (see in particular Cederman et al. 2013), and they are also helpful for understanding many of the nationalist movements that brought down Socialism in Eastern Europe, even if we may regret the exclusionary nature of many nationalist movements.

However, the role of exchange power is also helpful for understanding prospects for political change, and these ideas in turn shaped my work on democratization and the diffusion of transitions, including Gleditsch (2002) and Gleditsch and Ward (2006). In principle, non-material common ideas such as democracy and political freedom could help provide a common platform, but motivation is often not

enough, and some observers cast doubt on how widely-held such ideals actually are among participants in anti-regime uprisings (see, e.g., Beisinger 2013 for discussion of evidence from Ukraine). However, the concept of mutual gains from exchange provides a helpful way to think about how rules for political competition can serve as a rational compromise and response to conflict between heterogeneous and diverse actors (e.g., Olson 1993; Vanhanen 1990). Consent and legitimacy often arise not because of the specific content of a decision or the outcome, but because people accept the process leading up to it as fair, and the loser has a fair chance to win on another occasion (e.g., Anderson et al. 2007). Beyond process, material incentives matter in the sense that bystanders and individuals on the side of opponents can be won over if you can offer them tangible benefits or the promise of making them better off. In this sense, the revolutions in Eastern Europe happened to a large extent because opportunistic elites defected as they came to believe that socialist rule was unviable, and many of the same individuals that had held power before later returned to political influence.

The strengths of the conceptual focus of the *Three Faces of Power* and its ambitious scope is perhaps also its greatest limitation. The book is full of examples, but all of these are rather selectively chosen, and there is little attention paid to systematic empirical analysis or how the different sources of power may be measured empirically. This, in turn, limits the direct applicability of concepts and insights from the analysis. Although the book starts in the social sciences, and probably should remain there, Boulding is unable to resist the temptation to extend his perceptive eye to look for analogies between the three types of power and evolution in the natural sciences. This discussion is entertaining and insightful, but does not help advance the coherence of the book.

However, my rereading of the book for this essay helped bring out new sides of the analysis and rediscover the richness of the analysis. Boulding's book also has much to offer current students and practitioners in resistance, in particular with regards to recognizing the diverse sources of power in many strategic settings and the complementarity between the faces of power. Boycotting companies with

practices that we do not like might make us feel good, but we can be more effective enacting change if we use exchange power productively to innovate, enlist, and reward alternative practices, and make these profitable. Accentuating our disdain for “baskets of deplorables” may help us achieve a greater sense of community, but focusing on highlighting differences alone is unlikely to win over opponents. *Three Faces of Power* may not present all the answers, but it certainly does help to pose several very good questions.

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