

Title of essay: Website review: *Powercube*

Website Reviewed: *Powercube: understanding power for social change*. Open-access website <<http://www.powercube.net>>. Participation, power and social change team, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

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Introduction

Powercube is a wide-ranging website (an earlier version, usefully included in PDF form, runs to over 100 pages) outlining a method of analysing power in its different dimensions, together with a range of tools and resources for using this analysis in teaching and practice situations. The project apparently relies on funding from the Swedish and Swiss aid budgets, and (through the Citizenship Development Research Centre project) the UK budget. The material itself (going on the acknowledgements in the text version and the resources) seems to have been primarily developed through work with international development NGOs in particular (Oxfam, Christian Aid, Carnegie Trust as well as other, smaller organisations and students) and is oriented in particular towards the problems of relatively isolated, issue-focussed campaigning groups seeking the ear of local, national or international policy-makers.

The website is nicely presented (unlike the text version, which suffers from formatting problems) and is easy to navigate. At its core is an analysis of power along three dimensions. One is a development of Lukes' three dimensions, as visible, hidden and invisible forms of power. Another is an analysis of closed, invited and claimed spaces of power. The third is the local-national-global dimension. This analysis is the core contribution of *Powercube*. It is expanded into a wide range of workshop resources geared to teachers and facilitators, including case studies, handouts, papers, pictures (cartoons etc.), websites and some video, and a considerably thinner (in quantity as well as substance) section on strategy and action.

Three dimensions of writing popular agency

To adopt *Powercube's* mode of analysis, we could say that there are three dimensions of political writing as they relate to popular agency: the dimension of safety, the

dimension of praxis and the dimension of pedagogy. In all three of these *Powercube* falls towards the middle of the spectrum.

Safety

Firstly, the dimension of *safety*. Some texts and materials are written in what can best be called a mode, not of active citizenship, but of good-little-citizenship: the legitimacy of the established order (state, capitalism and all the rest of it) is taken for granted, and the primary orientation if anything is to motivate readers or students to have faith in it and, hence, to participate in the pursuit of legitimate goals: interest-group politics for the poor. In Alinskyite or what used to be left-labour models, there is an understanding that organising popular power is an important backup to this process, but only important insofar as it gives weight to this process¹.

Conversely, some texts and materials are written in what can be called an unprotected mode: willing to discuss processes of state formation, whether through military conquest or through democratic, nationalist or socialist revolution (which, after all, most of the world has experienced within living memory), issues of military, police and paramilitary violence, and upheavals such as those experienced in Latin America over the last ten years or, less optimistically, in the Muslim world under the impact of western invasion.

Powercube operates somewhere in the middle, in what can be called a cautious mode: willing to acknowledge the existence of some of these on an episodic level without really taking them on board centrally - and, hence, presenting the macro-organisation of power in the contemporary world as though it was not the outcome of major confrontations and conflicts, but was rather the operation of routines.

The defect of this, from a strategic point of view, is that it pushes to the margins of attention the moments at which routines are imposed. In Ireland, for example, it would encourage us to complain about the effect of the IMF on policy-making without paying attention to the processes whereby elected parties and mainstream trade unions colluded in what was in effect a bloodless coup in the interests of bondholders, the European banking system and property developers. On a wider scale, reading *Powercube* it would be hard to get a sense of the scale of the global challenge to neo-liberalism and war, or the extent to which it has been successful in undermining the legitimacy of both as well as stalling some of their core mechanisms over the last ten years.

Furthermore, violence, in *Powercube*, is allowed to appear in intimate relationships, or in extreme situations such as Colombia - but not as a constitutive part of the 'normal' institutional structures which the authors seem to want to encourage social movements to participate in. A key reason for this is no doubt the underlying assumption of the fundamental legitimacy of the current social order, and the emphasis on encouraging groups to participate more fully and effectively within it. Little attention is paid to the fact that many states - and some non-state actors, such as corporations or landowners - are capable of extreme and sudden violence in pursuit of their goals, and that 'civil society' has to face these realities routinely², particularly when its constituents are ethnically or economically marginal and can be killed without significant repercussions.

Praxis

Secondly, the dimension of *praxis*. At one extreme are what Gramsci would describe as purely contemplative approaches: the desire to analyse, understand and explain as

an end in itself, with perhaps minor outcomes in terms of legitimation or delegitimation within a narrowly-defined sphere of professional intellectual work. At the other is what is normally translated as 'directive' intellectual work but is perhaps best seen simply as active approaches: theory-for-action, 'a vision of the world and a line of conduct in alignment with that'. Here the focus is above all on distilling principles for action which can be used in different campaigns, movements and local situations.

Powercube is again neither the one nor the other. It is perhaps best described as practice-relevant: deliberately avoiding explanatory theory, it is also positioned in a space which pays far more attention to analysis and description than it does to action. At times this becomes painfully obvious: it is more hand-waving than helpful comment to write things like

Linking strategies for change across the three dimensions of the powercube is a huge challenge, both within each of the dimensions, but also made more difficult by their interaction. For any given issue or action, there is no single strategy or entry point. Much depends on navigating the intersection of the relationships, which in turn can either contribute to new misalignments and distortions of power, or simultaneously creates new boundaries of possibility for strategic action. For instance, linking local-national-global campaigns to open up previously closed spaces may be important, but in so doing, they may re-enforce forms of hidden and invisible power, if they simultaneously exclude certain potential actors or forms of knowledge. On the other hand, the opening of previously closed local spaces can contribute to new mobilizations, which may have the potential to open other spaces more widely, and to create momentum for change at national or global levels. The process of change is constantly dynamic – requiring strategies which allow constant reflection on how power relations are changing and the agility to move across shifting spaces, levels and forms of power.

The strategy section is by far the thinnest of the three main sections (by comparison with analysis and pedagogy); much of it consists of simple statements of the obvious (action can be taken at household, local, national or international levels, for example), with any real discussion referred elsewhere rather than to internal resources.

Powercube would not be a very helpful tool for (e.g.) anyone wanting to organise a major challenge to neo-liberal institutions at national level or to construct a substantial, long-term movement alliance against a war; it is more useful as background education and training for people who are professionalising themselves as community workers, NGO staff and so on, aiming to sustain a mildly critical view of their institutional operating environment but without fundamentally stepping outside it.

Consistent with this, the strategy section has (limited) discussion of how to challenge closed spaces or to participate in invited spaces, with discussion of creating claimed spaces referred to Action Aid. Bizarrely, the emphasis in the discussion of invited spaces hammers home the need for ‘shifting from more confrontational advocacy methods’ - in a decade which has seen exactly the reverse, the massive rejection of fake consultative processes geared to supporting the legitimacy of international financial institutions and international trade agreements in favour of popular organisation on the ground³.

Pedagogy

This brings us to the dimension of *pedagogy*. As noted, *Powercube* is not theory-heavy; it is not geared either towards the writing of PhDs or the organisation of the kind of movement-grounded analyses which have enabled the Latin American pink tide, the global resistance to Bush’s wars or the ‘movement of movements’ against

neo-liberalism. Nor, however, is it basic material for those who are new to the field. In fact, it would be quite hard to work with this material if one did not have a basic grounding in some of the ways of thinking involved. Thinking about it on the basis of my own work with activists and students, it strikes me as most suited to the construction of conversations between professionals who have already encountered much of this material in other contexts.

This is reinforced by the marginalisation of substantial critical theory: relegated to an 'other' category, the selection of theories of power is fairly thin (Gramsci, Scott, Hayward, Foucault, Bourdieu) and if brought down to the specifics thinner still. The section on Gramsci, for example, largely relies on a generic textbook, misattributes the theory of 'trade union consciousness' to Lenin (the concept was Kautsky's) and flattens Gramsci into a perspective on building civic capacities to think differently, to challenge assumptions and norms, and to articulate new ideas and visions.

In fact, despite the usual ritual critiques of Marxism, *Powercube* itself tends to fall into a mode of thinking which implies that if only one had the correct analysis (the model of aligning a Rubik's cube is explicitly used) everything else would follow. There is often surprisingly little sense *either* that one's opponent(s) are smart and capable of changing the rules of the game *or* that successful confrontations, processes of awareness-raising and events completely outside one's control can lead to large-scale and surprising mobilisations (as well as demobilisations): NGOs and community groups are no more all-powerful than small political sects. This kind of pedagogy is perhaps not the most helpful; or rather it works if there is a powerful 'hidden agenda' of being accepted by the powers that be. As a guide to independent action it would be seriously misleading.

Broader questions

All of these dimensions, of course, represent necessary choices; and as educators or organisers we make different choices for different contexts (not always getting it quite right, of course). My problem with *Powercube* is not this; it is rather its lack of clarity about the choices involved and the political fudge involved in failing to be clear about this. It is, after all, one thing to say 'this has been developed out of conversations between university-based adult educators and NGO workers and assumes a basic institutional stability while avoiding issues which might be politically contentious, risky to mention or disrupt the smooth institutional running of workshops'. It is another thing to assume and imply that the level on which people are working is the only level there is; that history is dead, and no other *kinds of problems* will present themselves (how to respond to a call for a general strike, to the withdrawal of funding, to the imposition of military rule, or to an opportunity for alliance with other movements around broader themes, for example). It is particularly strange for a work of this nature to remain silent about the choices it is making, and it is not clear (to this reader at least) whether this is due to hidden power (funding criteria, the politics of transnational NGOs etc.) or to invisible power (a genuine internalisation of the fundamental legitimacy of the international order and a sincere belief that the world is now immune to serious political change).

Writing in the broader mode, of course, is extraordinarily difficult, and massively conditioned by context. I have noted above the need to account, historically, for the everyday *routines* of power within which people find themselves in 'ordinary' periods (periods within which that power is not facing serious challenges, or after the establishment of a new kind of power).

Some understanding of the extraordinarily rapid processes within which first empires and then independent nation-states were constructed in the majority of the world, or through which monarchies and dictatorships were overthrown and replaced by parliamentary democracies, welfare states or other kinds of dictatorship is needed - and no less today, as new kinds of puppet state are constructed in Afghanistan and Iraq, South American states experiment with different relationships to social movements and to the once-New World Order, and states like India and China struggle with unruly popular agency.

The dramatic indigenous uprisings which have been central to much Andean politics in particular over the last decade - uprisings of groups organised in ways that cannot easily be assimilated into the smooth world of 'policy formation' - are perhaps particularly difficult to theorise, because of the sharp way in which they throw up these kinds of problems.

Whose empowerment? Political limitations

The theoretical explanation of the way in which power presents itself, along the different axes covered in *Powercube*, is thus a crucial one. To analyse (categorise and generalise) without explanation is at some level an unhelpful exercise, and one which can be quite disempowering. Gramsci, Foucault or feminism are treated as marginal to *Powercube's* attention, but if we want to know *why*, despite our best efforts, a particular structure reasserts itself, or why we lose a fight which it looked as though we were winning, we need some model of explanation - which goes beyond secret and hidden dimensions of power to explain *why* those exist, why they exert so much greater power than what is visible (which is of course not always the case) and - crucially - what we can do about it.

This returns us to the question of practice. If there is some truth to the conservative critique of the 'poverty industry' as having a built-in interest in the continuation of the problems which create unemployment, it is perhaps also true to say that there is a kind of 'empowerment industry', powerfully represented by many of the experiences discussed in this website, which consists of well-meaning but fundamentally uncritical actors within highly problematic institutions aiming more at the elaborate *simulation* of popular agency than anything else.

There is little or no serious consideration, in *Powercube*, of the politics of land occupation in Brazil or indigenous self-assertion in North America, of popular insurgency in India or mass direct action in Argentina, of labour activism in China or movements of the poor in South Africa, or even of the 'setting of limits' to elite arrogance by self-respecting and partly 'empowered' populations which underlies, for example, the relative decline in the use of state violence against popular movements in western Europe and north America.

Thus there is a kind of empowerment which depends on selecting particularly *disempowered* populations and emphasising strategies which see success as meaning participation within the existing institutional order. An exploration of *what popular power looks like*, and how to construct it - the meat and drink of social movements - is largely missing, and has been replaced by 'civil society' and NGOs, neo-liberal mechanisms for the simulation of consent. The same is true for direct confrontation of the institutions within which such movements are supposed to participate.

Characteristically, a resource on 'democratising trade politics in the Americas' mentions the popular derailment of the WTO process at Seattle and subsequently only in passing, has equally little to say about the Zapatistas, the *Argentinazo*, events in Venezuela or those in Bolivia, and explicitly acknowledges its avoidance of

discussion of the indigenous movement, which has been central to attempts at asserting popular control over economics in the region in recent years.

Instead, attention is focussed on the democratisation of trade *policies*, with the result that the main interest is institutional, on relations within the space where NAFTA, MERCOSUR or FTAA are fundamentally accepted, and the analysis focuses on the critical participation of NGOs and some movement organisations within institutional processes they do not control. This sidelines the much broader and more interesting space opened up by the disruption and contestation of these processes by the movements mentioned above.

In something of a contradiction to *Powercube*'s emphasis on multiple levels and forms of power, it repeatedly seems that the most interesting forms of power are the official ones, not those created directly by popular movements. Elsewhere too, 'claimed spaces' (a better phrase would be created spaces, or what used to be called dual-power institutions), although mentioned in the typology, appear as far less interesting to the authors than gaining access to closed spaces or strengthening participation in invited spaces.

The missing critique was supplied by Piven and Cloward many years ago: strategies whose unspoken emphasis is on the activity of a small number of professional advocates tends towards demobilising others, and undermining the real power of the advocates - which is their relationship to powerful and unruly others. Disruption, and the creation of people's own spaces, are central to real processes of constructing popular power and arriving at self-awareness; simulating the latter with a view to putting accredited advocates in spaces constructed by political and economic elites is an inherently limited strategy.

Comment: Reference needed: it is Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor people's movements: why they succeed, how they fail*. New York: Vintage, 1979

Conclusion

These are perhaps harsh comments, but *Powercube* sets itself ambitious - one might say exhaustive - tasks (the provision of a generally applicable method of analysis for social change), and to this reviewer's mind meets them only in part. It is unsurprising, and in itself not illegitimate, that this partial success lies in the area of interest marked by the IDS' funders and partners. What is problematic is the substitution of this part for the whole, particularly given the potentially far more wide-ranging scope of the analysis. Another way of putting this is to say that the power relations which are constitutive of *Powercube* itself are not acknowledged, let alone seriously reflected on, and the net effect is the provision of material which would be severely restricting to the work of many social movements, particularly at the present time. More broadly, it seems fair to say that *Powercube*, to adopt Jai Sen's useful terminology, is a resource for 'civil' rather than 'incivil' society; and this needs to be acknowledged rather than glossed over.

Popular movements do need to reflect on power; but they need to do so in ways which involve *explaining* and not simply describing the power constellations they run up against; which have a sense of history and not simply of eternal routine; and which do not contain a built-in bias towards participation in whatever institutional structures happen to be available. *Powercube* rightly comments on power-to, power-within and power-with; but these are most strongly manifested not in participation in top-down structures but in the active creation of new and alternative institutions of popular power. These latter do not have to be the whole story; but an analysis of power which leaves them out is faithful neither to the historical record, nor to the present conjuncture, nor indeed to the needs represented by popular agency.

Comment: Reference needed: it is Sen, Jai 2005. 'On incivility and transnationality: towards alliances of critical hope'. Paper to IACS conference 'Emerging inter-Asian subjectivities in cultural movements', online at <http://www.cacim.net/twiki/tikiread_article.php?articleId=58&page=1>

Notes

1. This perspective is, however, present in some of the supporting documents. *Making change happen*, for example, proclaims 'knowledge + noise = policy and political change'. Well, maybe. Sometimes. Not in opposing the Iraq war in 2003, and not in Burma in 2007. Sometimes noise is not enough.
2. Given that 'civil society' returned to academic popularity in the 1980s in the context of Soviet bloc dissidence and independent activism under Latin American dictatorships, the absence of violence and repression is perhaps particularly strange here.
3. At this point, an attentive reader of *Powercube* might suspect the presence of what it describes as hidden power relations - in this case, perhaps, the relationship between western governments' aid programmes, international NGOs and well-resourced academic institutions (IDS claims a staff of 180 and 150 students).