

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The word *power*, when used in a political sense, appears to signify the possession of the means of influencing the will of another, either by persuasion or threats; or of constraining his person by the application of physical force.

—GEORGE CORNEWALL LEWIS, *REMARKS ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF SOME POLITICAL TERMS* (LEWIS 1970 [1832], 227)

POWER ANALYSIS: IMPORTANT, DIFFICULT, AND RECENT

THE CONCEPT OF POWER HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS “PERHAPS THE most fundamental in the whole of political science” (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 75) and as “the most important single idea in political theory” (Elster 1976, 249). Countless other political scientists have made similar comments about the importance of power to the discipline.

In 2002, the newly installed editor of the *American Political Science Review* observed that “any real coherence in political science exists only at the broadest conceptual level, in the form of our widely shared interest in power” (Sigelman 2002, viii). In 2006 and again in 2013 *power* provided the theme for the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

CHAPTER 1

Widespread agreement that power is important, however, does not mean that there is equally widespread agreement on how to define the term or similar “power terms,” such as control, influence, persuasion, authority, coercion, and so on. Robert A. Dahl noted this lack of agreement at the beginning of his seminal article “The Concept of Power” in 1957, and nearly fifty years later, observed that “unfortunately, in neither ordinary language nor political analysis is there agreement on the definition and usage of what might be called ‘influence terms’” (Dahl and Stinebrickner 2003, 12), Steven Lukes, the author of a widely cited study of power published in 1974, wrote thirty years later that even “among those who have reflected on the matter, there is no agreement about how to define it, how to conceive it, how to study it, . . . [or] how to measure it” (2005, 61). Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye refer to power as “an elusive concept” (1977, 11). Hans J. Morgenthau (1964, 27n) suggests that “the concept of political power poses one of the most difficult and controversial problems of political science.” Kenneth N. Waltz (1986, 333) views power as a key concept in realist theories of international politics, while conceding that “its proper definition remains a matter of controversy.” Robert Gilpin (1981, 13) describes the concept of power as “one of the most troublesome in the field of international relations” and complains that the “number and variety of definitions should be an embarrassment to political scientists” (1975, 24).

Despite the numerous political thinkers who have used the concept of power down through the ages, including Thucydides, Kautilya, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, little attention was devoted to explicating the concept by anyone other than Hobbes before the twentieth century. Before World War II, this began to change, with contributions by Max Weber (1947 [1922]), George E. G. Catlin (1927), Charles Merriam (1934), Bertrand Russell (1938), and Harold Lasswell (1936). The most important turning point, however, came with the publication of Lasswell and Kaplan’s *Power and Society* in 1950. In what could be described as a veritable *revolution in power analysis*, a number of other scholars quickly built on the conceptual foundation laid by Lasswell and Kaplan. This group included Herbert Simon (1953, 1954, 1957), James G. March (1955, 1956, 1957), and Robert Dahl (1957), among others.

INTRODUCTION

During the last half of the twentieth century, contributions to the rigorous and systematic study of power came from scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, including sociology, economics, psychology, geography, and philosophy, as well as political science. In 2003, Dahl and Stinebrickner observed that “the last half century has probably witnessed more systematic efforts to define these [power] concepts than the previous millennia of political thought. As a result, there has been a considerable improvement in the clarity of the concepts” (12).

Although there were many points of disagreement, scholars working in the tradition of Lasswell and Kaplan, Dahl, Simon, and March agreed on at least four points: first, that power was a causal concept; second, that power should be viewed as a relational concept rather than a property concept; third, that power was a multidimensional concept; and fourth, that the bases of power were many and varied, with no permanent hierarchy among them.¹ These points and their implications for power analysis will be discussed in following chapters.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

This study has three main purposes: The first is to clarify and explicate Dahl’s concept of power. This is the concept of power most familiar to political scientists, the one most criticized, and the one most likely to be mischaracterized. What now passes for “conventional wisdom” with respect to Dahl’s concept of power goes something like the following: “It is primitive, narrow, restrictive, one-dimensional, pluralist, confined to overt conflict of preferences, based on compulsion, unable to account for agenda control or control over *B*’s wants, and has been superseded by more inclusive, more sophisticated, more nuanced, concepts that yield deeper understanding.” This narrative is misleading in almost every respect. Why does this matter? Although Dahl’s concept of power and the ensuing debate over community power

1 In this book these four points will often be referred to as the *Dahlian concept of power* or the *relational concept of power*.

CHAPTER 1

date back more than fifty years, contemporary scholars continue to anchor their discussions of power with references to that literature. It is thus imperative to be clear as to the nature of this intellectual anchor.

The second purpose of this study is to examine twelve controversial issues in power analysis. The goal is not so much to settle these issues as it is to alert the reader to their existence and to the need to come to terms with them.

The third purpose is to describe and analyze the role of the concept of power in the international relations literature with particular reference to the three principal approaches—realism, neoliberalism, and constructivism. It will be argued that a Dahlian perspective is potentially relevant to each of these theoretical approaches.

STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The book is organized as follows: Chapter 2 introduces the social power perspective with a principal focus on the work of Robert Dahl and his critics. This work provides the conceptual foundation for much of the thinking about power during the last half century. The thrust of the argument is that Dahl's approach to the study of power has been mischaracterized by many of his critics. Chapter 3 focuses on power analysis in general and considers twelve contentious "problems" in the power literature. These include theory-laden concepts, interests, essential contestability, zero-sum power, potential power, fungibility, intentions, measurement, reciprocal power, structural power, "power over" versus "power to," and the role of costs in power analysis. Thus, Chapters 2 and 3 lay the conceptual and analytical groundwork for the discussion of international relations theory in subsequent chapters. Chapter 4 is divided into two parts. The first is an intellectual history of the treatment of the concept of power in the international relations literature in America from World War I until the 1960s. The focus is on comparing and contrasting the treatment of power by Hans J. Morgenthau and his followers and the

INTRODUCTION

treatment of power by Harold and Margaret Sprout, Arnold Wolfers, Frederick Sherwood Dunn, Quincy Wright, Richard Snyder, Ernst Haas and others who viewed themselves as promoting the study of international relations as a social science. The second part of this chapter is organized in terms of different analytical perspectives on power in the IR literature. These perspectives include the treatment of power as identity, goal, means, mechanism (balance of power), competition, and capability. Chapter 5 discusses the role of the concept of power in generic realism, neo-realism, and offensive realism. The purpose is to focus on the role of power, not to provide an overall description or assessment of these theories. Chapter 6 discusses the constructivist approach to the study of power in international relations. The thrust of the argument is that this approach requires fundamental restructuring if it is to contribute to our understanding of power in international relations. The question of whether this approach has made contributions to knowledge in other areas is not addressed. Chapter 7 discusses neoliberalism and focuses on the influential book by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr. entitled *Power and Interdependence* (1977). The focus is on their treatment of the two central concepts mentioned in the title. The chapter also includes a discussion of Nye's concept of "soft power." It is argued that this is a useful concept for policy analysis but also one in need of further clarification in order to become a useful social science concept. Chapter 8 reviews the evolving role of the concept of power in international relations theories, summarizes the case for the contemporary relevance of a Dahlian approach to power analysis, suggests guidelines for future research on the role of military power in international relations, and concludes with consideration of the overall value of power analysis.

LIMITS OF THE STUDY

It is important to clarify at the outset what this book is *not* about. It does not present a theory of international politics, nor does it attempt to provide an empirical description of the role

CHAPTER 1

of power in international politics. Various theories will be examined, and various empirical examples will be used, but the purpose of the examples is to illustrate theoretical and conceptual points. This book does not attempt to analyze all theories of international politics that refer to power but concentrates instead on three theoretical traditions—realism, neoliberalism, and constructivism.² The discussion focuses on developments in the American study of international relations. This limitation is solely for the purpose of keeping the project manageable and is not meant to imply that non-American theories of international politics do not exist or are unworthy of consideration. Lastly, this book does not attempt either to identify or to answer the “big questions” in the study of international relations. Robert O. Keohane’s essay on “Big Questions in the Study of World Politics” notes, however, that “behind all these issues lurks the concept of power” (Keohane 2008, 709). Explicating this concept in relation to various theories of international relations is the central focus of the following chapters.

Most importantly, nothing in the following pages should be interpreted as an attempt to identify the “true” or “essential” nature of power or the “only sensible concept.” To argue that the Dahlian concept of power remains useful is not to imply that other concepts of power are useless.

TERMINOLOGY

Before proceeding, it should be noted that the terms *power* and *influence* are used interchangeably throughout the following pages. This practice follows that of Dahl in his 1957 article and Nagel (1975), even though Dahl later adopted the usage

2 The importance of these three theories was confirmed by a recent survey identifying the fifteen most influential international relations scholars in the last twenty years. The group included five realists, four constructivists, and four neoliberals. Teaching, Research, and International Policy 2014 Survey, College of William & Mary.

INTRODUCTION

of Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), which treats power as a subtype of influence. At least one writer strongly objects to using these terms interchangeably. Peter Morriss (2002, 8–13) asserts that this practice has had “disastrously stultifying results over the last fifty years or so” (8). He bases this assertion on two lines of argument: (1) that influence has a verb form while power does not; and (2) that the two terms are not *completely* synonymous, that is, they have similar but not identical meanings.³

Despite the objections of Morriss, the terms will be used interchangeably here for the following reasons: (1) There is precedent, as the usage by Dahl, Nagel, and others indicates; (2) there is a desire to focus on the broad generic core meaning of various “power terms,” such as control, persuasion, coercion, deterrence, compellence, and so on, rather than the distinctions among such terms—important as those may be for other purposes; (3) there is a similarity in meaning of the two terms, as indicated by the fact that nearly all dictionaries list them as synonyms, and they are frequently used interchangeably in common parlance;⁴ and (4) whereas Dahl’s treatment of the concept of power/influence is clearly intended to facilitate the work of political scientists, Morriss appears to have little interest in this goal. He observes that he has “next to nothing” to say about how his concepts “would work when people are involved in trying to change each other’s behavior” (2002, xxxv) and dismisses the suggestion that power is the “subject matter of the discipline of

3 It should be noted that Morriss’s objections are not based on Lasswell and Kaplan’s *Power and Society* (1950), a work that seems to have escaped his attention. His objections also fail to take account of the discussion of this matter by Nagel (1975, 7–9), another work that he seems to have overlooked.

4 Most people would regard the following pairs of statements as expressing similar or identical ideas:

Britain was the most influential country in the nineteenth century.

Britain was the most powerful country in the nineteenth century.

The NRA is the most influential lobby in Washington.

The NRA is the most powerful lobby in Washington.

The United States used its resources to exert influence in the United Nations.

The United States used its resources to exercise power in the United Nations.

CHAPTER 1

political science” as “stupid” (44). Most political scientists and most international relations scholars, however, *are* interested in how some people get other people to change their behavior and do not regard the suggestion as “stupid.” The fifth, and perhaps most important reason for using power in a broad sense is that the term has long been embedded in the international relations literature. Even those who would do away with the term *power* altogether are willing to admit that it is too deeply embedded in the vocabulary of politics for this to happen; see, for example, Sprout and Sprout (1971, 168).

The discussion follows standard practice in the literature on power by designating the actor possessing or exercising power as *A* and the actor actually or potentially influenced as *B*. These actors can be individuals, groups, states, or nonstate actors. When giving an actual or hypothetical example, however, the actors may be referred to as individuals, countries, or states. This is solely intended to make the text more readable and should not be interpreted as implying a state-centric approach.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Why does it matter how one thinks about power? Definitions are neither true nor false but only more or less useful, so what is wrong with conceptual anarchy? First, even if one accepts this view, a scholar is obligated to state clearly what concept is being used and to defend its usage. Conceptual anarchy is no excuse for muddled thinking. Communication among scholars does not require that everyone use the same concept of power, but it does require one to be clear about which concept one is using. It is also helpful if one chooses a concept with full awareness of the arguments for and against that particular concept.⁵ Second, how one thinks about power has important consequences for the real

5 For an exemplary case of thoughtful consideration in choosing a concept of power, see Mansfield (1994).

INTRODUCTION

world—especially for international relations scholars. As Dahl has observed:

The analysis of “power” is no merely theoretical enterprise but a matter of the greatest practicality. For how one acts in political life depends very heavily on one’s beliefs about the nature, distribution, and practices of “power” in the political system one confronts. (Dahl 1970, 15)

In a world where some countries have the ability to destroy not only other countries but also life as we know it on this planet, clear thinking about power is not a luxury but a necessity. International relations scholars debate questions of great importance, such as the following:

1. Is U.S. power declining?
2. Do nuclear weapons make a country more powerful?
3. Should the rest of the world fear the growth of China’s power?
4. Does the United States have the power to bring peace to the Middle East?

Such questions can neither be understood nor answered without a clear understanding of what *power* means in each instance.