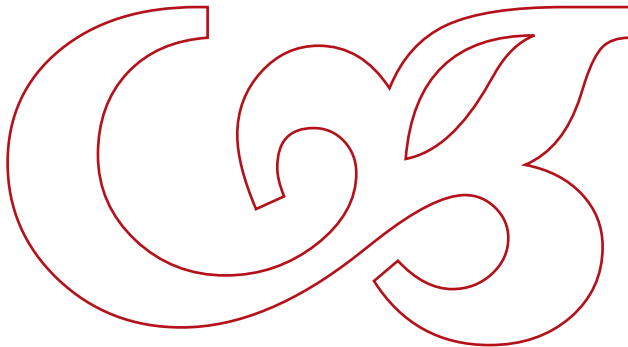




CHANGING MOMENTS AND STRATEGIES

2



Over the years, many of us involved in JASS have revisited and refined our understanding of power and strategies drawing lessons from our experiences in different contexts around the world. In the 1970s-80s, **popular education and grassroots organizing** experiences provided useful analyses and methodologies for confronting oppression and building people's collective power. Popular education's emphasis on social transformation, consciousness, and organization made it a compelling, yet incomplete approach, since it focused exclusively on class and overlooked other forms of subordination and resistance. During that same time, revolutionary struggles provided us with both inspiration and painful lessons about power and change.

As popular education became increasingly depoliticized and many of us got deeply involved in work on **women's empowerment and rights**, we adapted our strategies to respond to multiple forms of oppression. Influenced by feminist thinking and others, we re-emphasized power's transformational vision of change. These approaches were again adapted to respond to the promise of democratization in the '90s, where we engaged in strategies to claim rights and redefine citizen participation through **people-centered advocacy**. In recent years, the power of neoliberalism and fundamentalisms, coupled with the depoliticization of advocacy by some powerful NGOs eager for quick technical answers and concerned with branding, has led us back to the questions of organization, consciousness, and the issue of **movement-building**.

Let us teach both ourselves and others that politics does not have to be the art of the possible...but that it also can be the art of the impossible, that is, the art of making both ourselves and the world better.

Vaclav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia, 1990

When democratic politics can no longer shape the discussion about how we should organize our common life, when it is limited to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth functioning of the market: in these circumstances the conditions are ripe for talented demagogues to articulate popular frustration. We should realize that to a great extent the success of right wing populists... is due to the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things can be different. Of course this is an illusory hope, founded on false premises and on unacceptable mechanisms of exclusion in which xenophobia usually plays a central role. But when these parties are the only ones offering an outlet for political passions their claim to offer an alternative can be seductive. (*Chantal Mouffe 2002*)



CONTEXT: A SOCIAL FABRIC IN NEED OF REPAIR

People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

The Earth Summit's Agenda for Change, Rio de Janeiro, 1993

The global context shaping current possibilities for change presents a challenging panorama. Advances of corporate globalization, neo-conservative politics and fundamentalisms are tearing apart the social fabric of societies around the world, dislocating communities and ravaging notions of the common good and human solidarity.

These forces have eroded the role of the state as upholder and protector of human rights and undermined the idea of the public good in both the Global North and the Global South. Reinforced by the US administration's vision of power and morality, emphases on national security have bred new forms of militarism, eating up public budgets and intensifying divisions between nations and peoples. For women, this has meant dramatic reductions in basic freedoms in addition to virulent attacks on their reproductive rights. In most countries, public services aimed at addressing inequities have been drastically cut. Dominant ideologies delegitimize the mediating and redistributive role of the state, emphasizing private philanthropy as a substitute for government guarantees of basic well-being and further weakening the state's capacity to govern and contribute to a healthy social fabric.

With the unraveling of this fabric, a profound sense of isolation and alienation permeates many people's lives across class, race, gender and national divides. In the face of terror attacks, war, every-day violence on the streets and growing inequality, governments use fear and intolerance to control and manipulate people, increasing anxiety and alarm. To cope with insecurity and fear, people in all corners of the earth are seeking some sense of community. Under such conditions, any form of community can seem better than none at all. Fundamentalisms of all kinds have provided comforting worldviews that buffer and simplify the complexities of the world and promise some sense of community, and connection. These simplifications attempt to homogenize life, reinforcing stereotypes, "natural" hierarchy and privilege. They reduce life's complications to a simplistic vision of right and wrong, good and evil, where power relationships embedded in patriarchy, race and class are made invisible.

The increasing concentration of mainstream media outlets has facilitated the spread of western commercial culture and consumerism, further fueling anti-western and fundamentalist backlash. A trend toward sensationalized info-tainment has reduced the availability of thoughtful and rigorous information and news. Adults busy with economic survival and family responsibilities often have little time to seek out alternative explanations for what's happening around them.

Evolving communications technology and immigration have allowed people to connect globally forming new virtual and transborder communities that call into question fundamentalisms and build bonds that redefine and help to mend the social fabric. The ability to tap multiple sources of knowledge in exciting ways and build alternative networks offer enormous promise for justice as witnessed in the extraordinary work of the International Land Mines Campaign, the growing power of transnational people's movements and the thriving energy of the World Social Forum processes. Yet the ability to fully realize this potential for connection and action requires more equitable access across class and geography, and the strengthening of critical thinking skills to analyze the quality of information and develop alternative visions, ideas and strategies.

Given the centrality of dominant ideologies in the current global landscape, activists point to the need for developing strategies that reaffirm widely held values of dignity, fairness and community, and reinforce alternative worldviews and agendas for inclusive social, economic and environmental wellbeing. This renewed energy and more holistic vision of change provide inspiration and opens up fresh possibilities for revitalizing strategies and social movements. How we tap this *power of heart and soul and community* in the face of seemingly overwhelming counter forces becomes the challenge of our time.

We are struggling for the heart and soul of community – community built on a commitment to the common good and cooperation ... upheld by solid bonds of human relationships that respect diversity and human rights, a weave of justice woven with multiple threads of power and people...

Mexican and Central American Women Leaders, JASS Movement-Building Institute, September 2006



Our physics lessons failed us – we forgot the basics that for every action there is an equal or greater reaction.

Mexican feminist activist on the backlash against women's rights

4

While power is an integral dynamic of change, it turns out to be one of the more difficult and unsettling topics to address. Power can seem especially monolithic and impenetrable for individuals who have lived under regimes that deny freedoms or repress people's voice and participation. Power is seen as a win-lose kind of relationship. Having power is a zero-sum game, involving taking it from someone else, and then, using it to prevent others from gaining it. Such a one-dimensional view can paralyze analysis and action. When people see power as sinister and unchanging, they are unable to recognize their own sources of power.

In reality, power is dynamic, relational and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstance and interest. Its expressions and forms can range from domination and resistance to collaboration and transformation. This is good news for social justice promoters whose strategies depend upon new opportunities and openings in the practice and structures of power.

Did We Forget About Power?

Despite the dynamic nature of power, programs and strategies promoting human rights, equality and justice the world over have seemingly gotten stuck in superficial approaches to power, and an over-reliance on policy and technical solutions. The failure to deal with the complexities of power can lead to missed opportunities and poor strategic choices. Worse, it can be risky and counterproductive.

Common approaches to citizen engagement such as the World Bank PRSP³ process and the plethora of "citizen summits" and "listening sessions" emphasize bringing everyone to the table as 'stakeholders,' but fail to recognize that underlying power dynamics between conflicting interests have a huge impact on people's capacity to participate and influence outcomes. All stakeholders are not equal, yet they are often treated as such, while agendas and parameters of discussion are defined in ways that leave out crucial issues (Rowden and Irama 2005). Consequently, these processes usually produce neither new policy directions nor real changes in the way decisions are made and can reinforce people's cynicism about the value of "participating." In fact, they often reinforce, rather than alter, the profound power dynamics around race and ethnicity, class and gender that shape people's expectations and behavior concerning whose agendas get heard and addressed.

Internationally, the 1990s were the heyday for civil society activists who utilized important UN conferences and international gatherings to achieve critical policy successes and shifts in discourse on a range of issues from the environment to women's rights.

Today, many realize that they did not fully anticipate the backlash or diversionary forms of power that got triggered by their victories. In recent years, advocacy experiences raise questions about the continued relevance of these types of policy openings for advancing social justice goals.⁴ Some global activists believe that these are becoming 'black holes,' diverting advocates and resources from national-level opportunities for change and more pressing political concerns. Many feel that the focus on policy and campaigning has contributed to the general depoliticization of social justice strategies and a growing disconnect between local, national and global work, and between advocates and social movements.

The current context presents considerable challenges for activists. New bold efforts are needed to reclaim the power and vision of movements for justice. Yet among busy and pragmatic organizers and activists, there is sometimes resistance to re-examining basic assumptions about power and change, or studying theory and history, which are considered impractical abstractions. There is often a sense that concepts are for researchers, not doers. This false dichotomy can have crippling effects on action since it denies activists the systematic analysis and knowledge of past experience. Having a conversation, in a deliberate and collaborative way, about how power and change operate in light of real-life politics and organizing experiences is absolutely necessary in order to articulate how we expect to promote change. This conversation is in itself an *organizing and empowerment strategy*.

Basic Concepts of Power

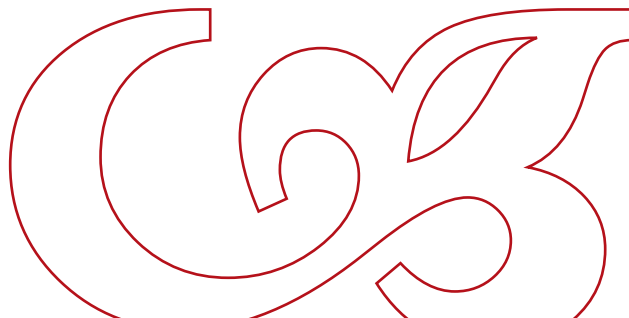
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the US civil rights leader who challenged racism and economic injustice during the mid 20th century, defined power as "the ability to achieve a purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change." Whether power advances justice and transforms inequities depends precisely on its purpose, the values guiding it, and the way it is used.

Sources and Expressions of Power

Power is categorized in many ways, often as economic, political, social, or cultural. Women's rights advocates and feminists have developed other categories that clarify the diverse sources and expressions of power – both positive and negative. These include the most common controlling forms of power – *power over* – and more life-affirming and transformational forms – *power with*, *power to*, and *power within*. Naming such dynamics can be liberating and mind-expanding. By using these types of analytical categories, people can better understand how forces of subordination and inequity operate in their own lives and envision alternative strategies and visions of power through which they can challenge injustice.

Justice and power must be brought together, so that whatever is just may be powerful, and whatever is powerful may be just.

Blaise Pascal



Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power ... The extent of power of an individual or group is correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and control. Different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law, etc ... There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge by the less powerful and marginalised sections of society, resulting in various degrees of change in the structures of power. When these challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can result in the total transformation of a power structure.

(Srilatha Batliwala 1995)

Power Over

The most commonly recognized form of power, *power over*, has many negative associations for people, such as repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption, and abuse. At its most basic, it operates to privilege certain people while marginalizing others. In politics, those who control resources and decision-making have *power over* those without and exclude others from access and participation. When people are denied access to important resources like land, healthcare, and jobs, *power over* perpetuates inequality, injustice and poverty.

In the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the *power over* pattern in their personal interaction, values, communities, and institutions. For example, to maintain emotional relationships with men that are crucial to their family stability and economic survival, women often feel they must give up much of their own power or use it in a manipulative way. When women or people from marginalized or “powerless” groups gain power in leadership positions, they sometimes “imitate the oppressor.” For this reason, activists cannot expect that the experience of being excluded prepares people to become democratic leaders. New forms of leadership and decision-making must be explicitly defined, taught, and rewarded in order to promote democratic forms of power. As part of this process, values need to be challenged, reclaiming those that support justice, equity and compassion.

INVITED OR CLAIMED?

The failures of policy in delivering the kinds of real change that activists are seeking has led to a closer, more nuanced analysis of policy spaces to assess their degree of strategic relevance. The following distinctions can be helpful in determining how much to engage or not, and when to disengage. A **closed space** is one where decisions are made by an elite group, such as government officials, behind closed doors without any pretense of public participation. Civil society often works to challenge and open up these kinds of closed spaces to create **claimed spaces** where there is enough room to negotiate their own agendas. The participatory budget work in Porto Alegre, Brazil is a well-known example. Civil society groups also create **autonomous spaces**, like the World Social Forum. They provide groups a chance to develop agendas, knowledge and solidarity without interference or control by corporate or government powerholders. With growing pressure from civil society over the last decade, powerful policy institutions have established **invited spaces** where a select group of civil society actors, usually from larger NGOs, are invited to participate in a policy consultation hosted by officials. The overall agendas and scope of decisions are ultimately controlled by the official institutions and are often not open to change or negotiation. While invited spaces can offer possibilities for influence and networking, they rarely produce long-term results on vital justice issues. The more pressing danger, however, is that they can serve to legitimize the *status quo* and divert civil society energies and resources (see endnote 4).



THREE VISIONS OF VITAL POWER

...forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?

bell books

6

Practitioners and academics have searched for more collaborative ways of exercising and using power. Drawing on their own positive and negative experiences with power, feminists use the notion of vital or life-affirming power. They see this form of power as a way to focus on building alternatives that emphasize the affirmation and development of life, based on the responsibilities involved in caring for life in all its forms. The parameters and ethics for using such power come from a focus on both rights and responsibilities and an emphasis on the renewal and regeneration of life with all its energies, forces, creativity and chaos. It envisions multiple forms and hubs of leadership emerging from different places according to needs, events, moments and language.⁵ This quest for alternatives is ongoing and offers new insights on how we can express and use power as seen in the three visions presented below.

These alternatives offer positive ways of expressing power that create the possibility of forming more equitable relationships and structures and transforming *power over*. By affirming people's capacity to act creatively and collectively, they provide some basic principles for constructing empowering strategies.

Vision 1: Power With

Power with has to do with finding common ground among different interests in order to build collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity, collaboration and recognition and respect for differences, *power with* multiplies individual talents, knowledge and resources to make a larger impact. *Power with* can help build bridges across differences by openly acknowledging conflicts and seeking to transform or reduce them for a larger aim. *Power with* can generate a larger impact but can also provide a grounding sense of community and spiritual connection. At this moment when social justice efforts feel over-institutionalized and fragmented, deliberate strategies to construct and promote *power with* are vital, including alliances and movement-building. All of these require processes to acknowledge diversity and disagreement while seeking common ground around values and vision.

Vision 2: Power To

Power to refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. Education, training and leadership development for social justice are based on the belief that each individual has the *power to* make a difference, which can be multiplied by new skills, knowledge, awareness and confidence.

When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or *power with* others. For organizing and advocacy efforts to succeed, they must tap into and nurture people's *power to* potential. This is especially critical coming on the heels of an era that emphasizes top-down expertise and technical solutions. These have tended to undermine people's sense of *power to* – deepening withdrawal from public life and producing a sense of resignation.

Vision 3: Power Within

Power within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. It is grounded in an ethical value base that fosters a vision of human rights and responsibilities and an ability to recognize individual differences while respecting others. *Power within* is the capacity to imagine and have hope; it affirms the shared human search for dignity and fulfillment and is strengthened by an understanding of power and the common good, and a constant practice of questioning and challenging assumptions. Spirituality, story telling, music, dancing and critical reflection can affirm people's *power within*, which can serve as a nourishing force, energizing the tireless efforts of social justice activists. Effective grassroots organizing efforts use such methods to help people affirm personal worth, tap into their dreams and hope, and recognize their *power to* and *power with*.

All these expressions of life-affirming power are fundamental to the concept referred to as *agency* – the creative human capacity to act and change the world – a term used by scholars writing about social change and development. The notion of agency draws on sources of power implicit in these different expressions such as the power of numbers, confidence, experience, critical thinking, knowledge, organization, vision, humor, persistence, commitment, solidarity, song, poetry, spoken word, rap, and story. Seemingly simple, these positive ways of thinking about people's power can lead to more effective and integrated movement-building strategies. They help to ensure that strategies for change aren't reduced to lobbying or a mechanical formula, but consider and account for the ways people feel empowered, fired up and connected. In tapping into *power to*, *power within* and *power with*, strategies must deal with the psychological and social dimensions of oppression and subordination that – because of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation and other factors – leave people feeling inferior, isolated, cynical and often angry.

One of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic ... power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And the Personal Is Political

Re-focusing on power bring us back to this well-known feminist adage. One would think that the HIV/AIDs crisis – a disease transmitted through sexual contact – would have helped to refocus change efforts on the interconnections between the personal and public dynamics of power. Instead, programs that only emphasize condoms and abstinence fail to take into account that women, particularly married women, are often unable culturally to negotiate safe sex with their partner.

Practitioners and scholars familiar with the challenges of women’s empowerment explain that power takes shape in three interacting levels – the public arenas as well as the private and intimate realms. The public realm of power affects women and men at work and in their community. The private realm of power refers to relationships and roles in families, among friends, sexual partnerships, marriage, etc. The intimate realm of power has to do with one’s sense of self, confidence, psychology and relationship to body and health.

For an individual woman or man, the experience of power and powerlessness differs not only because of identity (race, class, age and sexual orientation, etc.). It may also be contradictory in different realms of her/his life. For example, a woman

politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate role in her family; she may even survive abuse from her partner while keeping up with the demands and image of her public duties. It is common worldwide for a woman to face the same work demands as her male partner, but be primarily or solely responsible for cooking, cleaning and the care of children and parents. Despite gender equality advances in other arenas, this debilitating workload changes little. What seems to be a contradictory level of acceptance for a woman who appears “empowered” is often a complex negotiation of the personal costs and benefits of her empowerment. Because the power dynamics reflected in these roles are so deeply normalized, women who challenge them, even indirectly through small changes in their daily behavior, can face isolation, criticism, ridicule or even violence from their partners, families or communities.

Acknowledging the layers of people’s experience with power and powerlessness can be helpful in understanding the tensions and contradictions women face when they get involved in social justice efforts. Change strategies that focus solely on the public realm may overlook the complex demands on women’s time and energy and thus, fail to engage them effectively.

ONE OF THE WAYS DISCRIMINATION WORKS

Discrimination is embedded in all societies in a variety of ways so that resources and benefits are distributed unequally according to race and ethnicity, gender, class, religion and location primarily. Discrimination and exclusion depends on who has access and who has control of these.

Access: the opportunity to make use of something for a larger gain

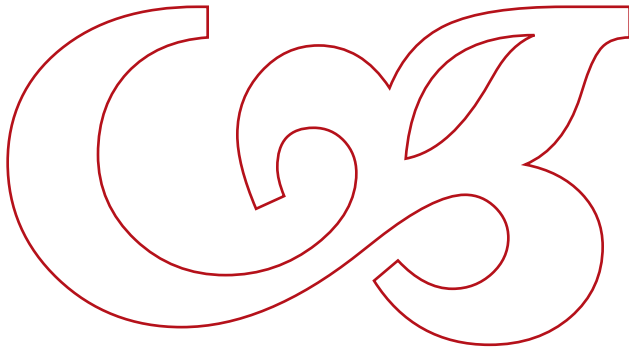
Control: the ability to define its use and impose that definition on others

Resources can include:

<p>economic or productive resources, such as land, equipment, tools, cash, employment</p>	<p>political resources such as representative organizations, leadership, education and information, experience in the public sphere, self-confidence and credibility</p>	<p>time which is particularly scarce and critical for women</p>
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Benefits address basic needs – these benefits include food, clothing and shelter, income – and provide less tangible advantages that improve a person’s position – such as education, asset ownership, political power, prestige, connections and opportunities to pursue new interests.

Equality of opportunity – a common policy to facilitate access – usually fails to rectify discrimination because people are not in the same position to be able to take advantage of the opportunity due to historical disadvantages. Socialization plays a big role in keeping things this way by normalizing inequality as both “natural” and having to do with individual ability, including traits people are born with.



White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious.

(Peggy McIntosh 1988)

8

INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

In the face of deeply ingrained social structures and norms that reinforce discrimination and oppression, people experience power dynamics differently according to the social characteristics or identities that make up who they are. Everyone of us has multiple, often nuanced identities— based on gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, education, age, sexual orientation, ability, etc. Because of this, we can experience privilege and subordination simultaneously. For example, anywhere in the world, a medical doctor or an NGO leader who is respected in her profession may suffer domestic abuse at home. In one setting, a person may be more powerful while in another setting, face discrimination. For example, in the United States, a powerful African American professional may find himself unable to hail a taxi successfully because he's stereotyped as dangerous by the media and popular culture.

Understanding these interactions of power and identity can help untangle the contradictory dynamics that confuse and confound people as they work for social justice and equality. By naming differences and commonalities, this intersection of personal characteristics, called *intersectionality*, allows us to find points of unity and common action.

Intersectionality is an analytical tool that helps us understand and respond to the ways in which each person's social characteristics or identities interconnect and contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality helps to move beyond overly simplified conceptions of identity —“women” or “working-class” or “indigenous”— to surface the complexities of privilege and subordination that are sometimes ignored or glossed over. Disparities in power and privilege within a group cannot be addressed unless they are first surfaced and acknowledged. Feminist interpretations of women's experience over the years offer rich insights into the dynamics of power and oppression. While class remains a powerful determinant of inequality and people's sense of power or powerlessness, gender and race are often equally potent given the strong biases of socialization that “keep people in their place.”

Some well-intended efforts to develop new consciousness and affirm people's sense of self-worth and pride in their identity have inadvertently isolated people and led to a political dead end. This kind of identity politics fails to affirm people's multiple identities, common problems, and basic sense of responsibility to one another. In this way, it hinders the growth of thoughtful and inclusive alliances where people engage as active agents and citizens, rather than victims. An over-simplification of identity as the basis for political action has contributed to the fragmentation of social movements, including women's movements and the demobilization of potentially vibrant constituencies.

The challenge of identity and intersectionality lies in recognizing and addressing differences and inequalities, but not allowing them to become unbridgeable chasms that prevent people from identifying common ground and building relationships of solidarity. Potentially powerful alliances for social justice — from North-South coalitions to linkages between grassroots constituencies and global policy advocates — confront important questions connected to privilege and control. In some cases, unresolved tensions stymy progress while other alliances manage to recognize differences within their ranks. For example, the emerging food sovereignty movement is piecing together common ground among diverse groups, tapping into the needs and concerns of small-scale farmers, anti-hunger activists, peasant federations and middle-class consumers worried about health and food quality.



POWER OVER: MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS⁶

First they gave us a day for women. Then they gave us a year. Then they gave us a decade. Now we're hoping for a century – and maybe then they'll let us in for the whole show.

Bella Abzug, US feminist

During the last decade or so, rights and social justice strategies have increasingly focused on a single aspect of power – the most visible (see below). This focus on policy goals, litigation, elections and the mainstream media has been encouraged by different factors, including earlier successes in this arena and donor priorities. But as we enter the 21st century, the palpable force of ideologies in shaping the possibilities and directions of social justice remind us that *power over* operates on multiple levels. Activists are realizing, once again, that social justice is ultimately a battle of hearts, as well as minds, and they are looking for ways to understand and address the multiple dimensions of power.

To help navigate *power more* effectively, we present three interactive dimensions of *power over* that shape the parameters of political action and change, marginalizing some people while privileging others. These range from the more obvious and visible to those hidden and invisible that operate behind the scenes. While they are presented separately, in practice they interact and reinforce one another and need to be viewed holistically, as do strategies for challenging their webs of discrimination and subordination.

Visible Power: Observable Decision-making

A conventional understanding of power assumes that contests over interests are visibly negotiated in public spaces with established rules. These public spaces are often viewed as an even playing field – where logic, factual information and the power of persuasion and persistence are vital to winning compromises. Much current advocacy and campaigning focus on these visible faces and arenas such as public policies, legislatures, government agencies, court systems, political parties and elections, corporate by-laws or non-profit policies. Strategies such as lobbying, media, litigation, research and analysis are crucial.

Yet contrary to the belief in the even playing field, there are two main ways that visible power discriminates against certain interests and people:

- ✎ Biased laws and policies that may seem ‘neutral’ but clearly serve one group of people at the expense of others, such as health policies that do not adequately address women’s specific needs, or age and gender requirements for employment;
- ✎ Closed, corrupt or unrepresentative decision-making structures that do not adequately involve the voices or interests of the people they are intended to serve.

Advocacy strategies that target this dimension of power often

try to change the ‘who, how, and what’ of policy-making—the decision-makers, the transparency and inclusiveness of the process, and the policies – so that decision-making is more democratic and accountable, and people’s needs and rights are addressed. However, challenging and focusing on one dimension of power is never enough to promote or sustain change over the long run.

Hidden Power: Setting the Political Agenda

Certain powerful actors who may not be formal decision-makers (elected, appointed or otherwise) nevertheless maintain their influence by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda. Hidden power works to exclude and devalue the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups, like women, racial minorities, small farmers and the urban poor. Difficulties in gaining positive and fair media coverage can further inhibit visibility and legitimacy, and leave ordinary people confused and misinformed. As the mainstream media is increasingly controlled by a small set of corporations, the potential for getting a balanced view or any coverage at all shrinks. Media analysts and critics show how limited, negative coverage of women, workers, immigrants, racial minorities and their issues reinforces stereotypes and biases.

How issues are framed and presented illustrates the way this type of power operates behind the scenes to exclude issues. For example, feminism is deemed elitist or a western import that destroys families. Framing the situation in this manner deflects attention from the economic realities that break families apart. Similarly, environmentalism is painted as an impractical, academic exercise that can destroy good jobs; many political leaders frame policy decisions as security interests, manipulating fear and anxiety to justify war and reduce civil liberties while obscuring the economic interests.

In addition to controlling the public agenda and public debate, public and private institutions are often structured to systematically exclude and discriminate against certain types of people and ideas. By preventing important voices and issues from getting a fair public hearing, policymaking can be skewed to benefit a few at the expense of the majority. To strengthen and gain legitimacy for marginalized groups and their issues, strategies aimed at challenging hidden power dynamics often stress leadership development, organizing, coalition-building, research, media and public education efforts. By combining actions that build and utilize the power of numbers, solidarity, and information with “name and shame” tactics, these types of initiatives can expose who’s under the table calling the shots and reveal their real interests.

People of color and the poor have been laboring in a society in which many believe that we have transcended our racist past and can blame poverty on personal failure. As we think about racism, we look for the individual engaged in a discrete act or acts; we understand racism as primarily a psychological event located in the mind of a racist actor. Similarly, when we think of poverty we primarily think of either an individual's bad choices or bad luck. These individualist approaches not only affect how we understand issues of race and poverty, it also affects what issues we see and don't see, and the solutions that we support.

(john powell 1993)

WHAT IS OUR VISION OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS?

A way of seeing and making sense of the world, grounded in a belief in fairness, tolerance, and compassion. Shaped by a continuous awareness of power, privilege and inequality in both the private and public spheres, a person with a political consciousness struggles to respect and understand difference while seeking common ground among people. (Adapted from *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics*, p. 62)

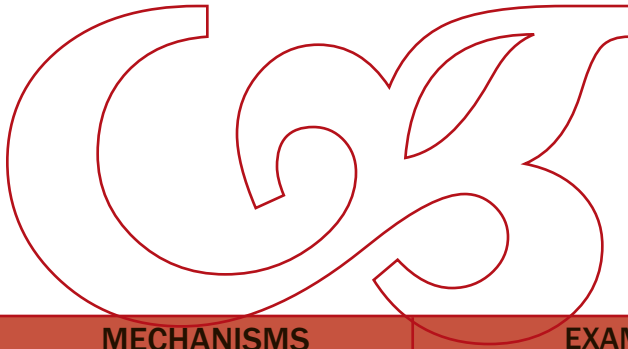
Invisible Power: Shaping Meaning, Sense of Self and What's "Normal"

Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of change. Significant problems and ideas are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the minds and consciousness of the people involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self, and acceptance of the status quo – including their own sense of superiority or inferiority as “natural.” Processes of socialization, culture and ideology perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, “true,” and acceptable. These processes also operate in ways to make injustices like poverty, racism, sexism and corruption invisible to the society at large, and make those who experience systematic discrimination the object of blame, including blaming themselves.

Similarly key information is kept secret from the public so that issues remain invisible and cannot become part of the decision-making process. For example, tobacco companies knew for years that cigarettes and second-hand smoke caused cancer, yet their research was concealed from people. Hence cigarettes and its fumes were not deemed a health issue until that information was finally uncovered through other sources. The fact that weapons of mass destruction did not exist was kept from the world and used to justify the war on Iraq with dire results. Similarly the US administration supports the powerful oil lobby by concealing and downplaying information that demonstrates the dangers of global warming to the planet.

Change strategies to counter invisible power target social and political culture. They seek to make alternative values and worldviews alive and visible through public education and creative media and communications strategies, using poetry, theater and music as well as news. Most importantly, popular education and empowerment strategies focus on confronting dominant ideologies and strengthening critical thinking skills, visions of the common good, and individual and collective consciousness. These strategies can help transform the way people perceive themselves and those around them, and how they envision future possibilities and alternatives. In addition, research to uncover and publicize concealed information, such as the many *right to know* strategies used to expose dictators, polluters and corporate corruption, can be invaluable for unmasking and challenging this type of power.

On the following page is a matrix about power that can be applied as a tool for joint analysis, planning, and assessment.



THE POWER MATRIX

This matrix presents how different dimensions of power interact to shape the problem and the possibility of citizen participation and action. The distinctions among the different dimensions are not neat or clean. The arrows are intended to indicate the interactive nature of these various manifestations of power.⁷

POWER OVER

MECHANISMS <i>Through which dimensions of power over operate to exclude and privilege</i>	EXAMPLES <i>Power Over</i>	RESPONSES & STRATEGIES <i>Power With, Power Within, Power To</i>	
<p>Visible: Making & Enforcing the Rules</p> <p>Presidents, Prime Ministers, legislatures, courts, ministries, police, military, etc. United Nations, IMF, World Bank; World Trade Organization, Multinational corporations (Haliburton, Nike, Coca-Cola), private sector actors, chamber of commerce, businesses, etc.</p> <p>Instruments: Policies, laws, constitutions, budgets, regulations, conventions, agreements, implementing mechanisms, etc.</p>	<p>Biased laws/policies (e.g. health care policies that do not address the poor or women's reproductive needs)</p> <p>Decision-making structures (parliaments, courts, IFI governance, etc.) favor the elite or powerful and are closed to certain people's voices and unrepresentative</p> <p>Principle of 'equality' may exist in law, but parliaments and courts are not fairly representative of women and minorities</p> <p>International financial/trade bodies dominated by G-8 despite rising economic power of others</p>	<p>Lobbying & monitoring</p> <p>Negotiation & litigation</p> <p>Public education & media</p> <p>Policy research, proposals</p> <p>Shadow reports</p> <p>Marches & demonstrations</p> <p>Voting & running for office</p> <p>Modeling innovations</p> <p>Collaboration</p> <p>Etc.</p>	Building collective power
<p>Hidden: Setting the Agenda</p> <p>Exclusion & delegitimization:</p> <p>Certain groups (and their issues) excluded from decision-making by society's unwritten rules and the political control of dominant and vested interests. They & their issues made invisible by intimidation, misinformation & co-optation</p> <p>Examples: The oil-gas industries control on energy/environmental policies & public debate about global warming and climate change; the Catholic Church's influence on global reproductive health policy in Latin America and elsewhere, etc.</p> <p>Often, formal institutions with visible power, also exercise hidden power</p>	<p>Leaders are labeled trouble-makers or unrepresentative</p> <p>Issues related to the environment are deemed elitist, impractical; feminism blamed for male violence/breaking families/sex industry. Domestic violence, childcare are seen as private, individual issues not worthy of public action; peasant land rights/labor rights are 'special' interests and not economically viable.</p> <p>Media does not consider these groups' issues to be mainstream or newsworthy</p>	<p>Organizing communities and active constituencies around common concerns, and mobilizing to demonstrate clout through numbers and direct action</p> <p>Strengthening organizations, coalitions, movements, and accountable leaders</p> <p>Participatory research and dissemination of information/ ideas/images that validate and legitimize the issues of excluded groups</p> <p>Use alternative media outlets/internet/radio to name and shame - exposing the true agendas and actors dominating public debate, agendas and policy</p>	Confronting, engaging, negotiating
<p>Invisible: Shaping Meaning, Values & What's 'Normal'</p> <p>Socialization & control of information:</p> <p>Cultural norms, values, practices, ideologies and customs shape people's understanding of their needs, rights, roles, possibilities and actions in ways that prevent effective action for change, reinforces privilege-inferiority, blames the victim and "manufactures consent". Dominant ideologies include neoliberalism, consumerism and corporate capitalism, patriarchy-sexism, racism, etc. Key information is kept secret to prevent action and safeguard those in power and their interests</p>	<p>Socialization/oppression</p> <p>1) Belief systems such as patriarchy and racism cause people to internalize feelings of powerlessness, shame, anger, hostility, apathy, distrust, lack of worthiness etc. especially for women, racial-ethnic minorities, immigrants, working class, poor, youth, gay-lesbian groups, etc.</p> <p>2) Dominant ideologies, stereotypes in "popular" culture, education and media reinforce bias combined with lack of information/ knowledge that inhibits ability to question, resist and participate in change</p> <p>Examples: Women blame themselves for domestic abuse; Poor farmers for their poverty despite unequal access to global markets or decent prices or wages</p> <p>Crucial information is misrepresented, concealed or inaccessible (e.g. WMDs & Iraq).</p>	<p>Popular education, empowerment, new knowledge, values and critical thinking tied to organizing, leadership and consciousness for building confidence, collaboration, political awareness and a sense of rights/responsibilities/citizenship which includes such strategies as: sharing stories, speaking out and connecting with others, affirming resistance, analyzing power and values, linking concrete problems to rights, etc.</p> <p>Doing action research, investigations and dissemination of concealed information and also using alternative media, etc.</p>	Building individual and collective power

TRANSFORMING POWER



CORRECTING STRATEGIC POWER IMBALANCES

Economics is politics in technical drag.

British feminist economist, 2005

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In the current political context, it is nearly impossible to make policy headway on issues such as health, education, housing or water without challenging the multiple dimensions of power at work—for example, the neoliberal worldview which narrows budget and policy options, downplays the notion of rights and leaves fulfillment of basic human needs to the vagaries of the private sector. These battles cannot be fought without re-claiming the concept of the common good and re-focusing attention on the long-term strategic importance of government as a guarantor of basic rights, especially economic and cultural rights.

From a pragmatic standpoint, many organizers and activists are re-focusing their efforts on invisible and hidden power because the current potential for real gains with formal institutions and structures is sharply limited (Bradley 2005). Rather than an obstacle, this closing off of opportunities in the visible realm of power presents big possibilities for re-energizing education and organizing strategies that nurture new leaders and voices. By challenging dominant ideologies and worldviews, people not only deepen their understanding of power dynamics and themselves, they can begin seeing the potential of solidarity and the common good. Organizing around worldview involves the creation of new spaces for inclusive, empowering community reflection and dialogue about what's going on and why. These processes can build movements of active, informed citizens with the power and organization needed to reclaim the policymaking desert and transform it into fertile soil for action that truly responds to people's interests and needs. These processes also help to answer the question "what do we stand for?" by supporting the articulation of alternative worldviews and agendas that incorporate rights, justice, equality and democracy.

Creating new spaces for the articulation of alternatives is an increasingly urgent task, because submerging the debate about neoliberal and fundamentalist worldviews presents troubling implications for democracy as well as rights. Without channels for surfacing and resolving conflicts through collective mobilization and engagement in democratic politics, there is a danger that anger and frustration will curdle into extremism.

Power and Knowledge: Contemporary Dilemmas

"Knowledge is power!" has been a universal mantra for social justice activists for decades. Over the years, revelations of truths about powerholders have sparked many social justice struggles, from the battles fought to clean up toxic waste dumps led by working class housewives in the US in the 1970s to the Right to Know movements that have galvanized poor communities

in India to confront corruption in local and state governments in recent years. Knowledge is a crucial element of building and transforming power, but it's also a powerful tool for domination and oppression. Much depends on how it is used and generated.

In today's political context, *power over* is frequently exercised through the production and control of knowledge. In the USA, the Bush administration has proven adept at the manipulation of information and perceptions about the events of 9/11, openly promulgating misinformation that casts responsibility for the tragedy on Saddam Hussein and the previous administration, despite clear evidence to the contrary. One Bush aide publicly stated, "We create our own reality."

As the ever-expanding market economy and Information Age converge, knowledge becomes a highly valued commodity. In the knowledge market, corporations and entrepreneurs compete to patent, own, sell and control information, making intellectual property a global trade priority. Huge profits are gained from the control of information on seeds, drugs, weapons, software, herbal remedies, music, fashion and even, social change, generating big winners and big losers. These include small farmers, who are forced to buy patented seeds each planting season rather than collecting their own seeds from harvests,⁸ and indigenous women, who risk violating patent laws if they continue to use their own herbal remedies handed down through the generations because they are now packaged by powerful pharmaceutical companies.

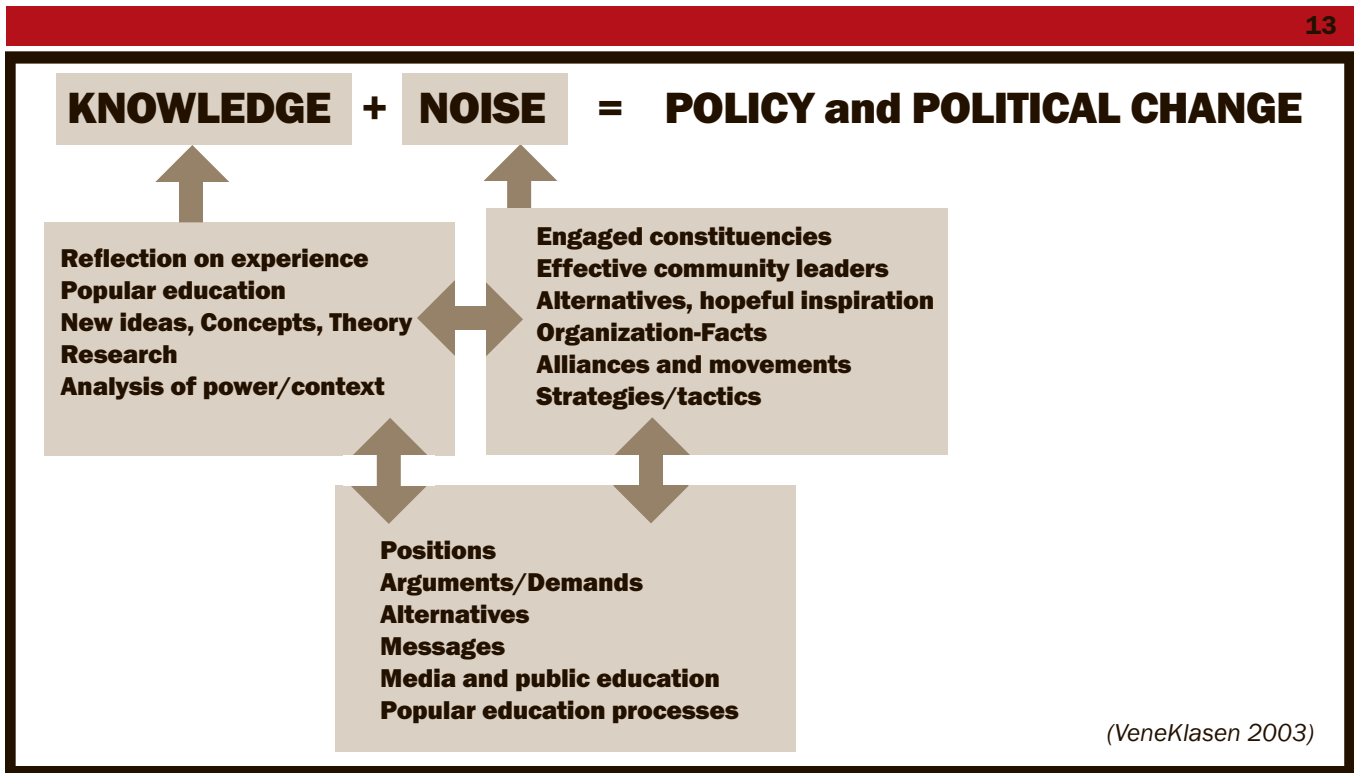
Civil society advocates and organizations also compete in the knowledge market. Indeed, larger NGOs increasingly use the gathering of data and packaging of information as their primary strategies to win-over policymakers and the public. While a critical part of the political game, a troublesome by product of this approach is the increasing emphasis on the top-down delivery of expertise – in messages, values, slogans and simplified pamphlets – as the focus of education activities with communities and the public. NGOs continue to assume – usually incorrectly – that information alone will empower and motivate people to act in disregard for the many other power dynamics shaping disengagement. Effective popular education and communication strategies offer alternative approaches for using critical analysis and new information that deepens what people already know from living injustices.

These innovative approaches draw from the notion of knowledge democracy (Batliwala 2005). In contrast to the knowledge economy where knowledge is bought and sold, knowledge is viewed as a shared resource, jointly generated and publicly owned. It is a tool for empowering and mobilizing marginalized



When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.

Ethiopian proverb



groups, and therefore, recognizes that there are different kinds of knowledge (from experience, from reflection, from intuition, from culture as well as expertise) and each must be deepened and integrated into movement-building. Knowledge is also used to advocate and negotiate justice-oriented change, including reforming the patenting laws that steal cultural heritage for profit!

Knowledge Plus Noise

Policy choice is the product of competing political interests in an uneven playing field. Policies and agendas change little without significant sustained political pressure on policymakers and powerful interests that drive the policy process and control the agenda. Knowledge, facts and information are important tools for creating pressure, but insufficient for holding powerful interests accountable or shifting the policy agenda to accommodate new issues and alternatives. Policymakers and others in power can be masterful at spin and use or invalidate demands if there isn't a larger political force of organization and legitimacy countering them. For most marginalized groups, the only way to create meaningful pressure is by building broad-based organized alliances and movements capable of mobilizing informed, active people combined with strategic public media attention to create

“noise.” Creating “noise” is a matter of building people power through popular education, leadership and organization to carry out a range of strategies that push (with numbers, persistence, credibility, creativity and media) from the outside and engage strategically on the inside (with legitimate connection to the “outside”). For all of these strategies and more, all kinds of NGOs, grassroots organizations and social movements use and generate facts and analysis to strategize, build alliances and develop their positions, demands and alternatives.

Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are people who want crops without ploughing the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning, they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters ... Power concedes nothing without a demand, it never has and it never will.

Frederick Douglass



TOO MUCH INSTITUTIONALIZATION?

Development NGOs function as a corollary of the international aid system ... an NGO advocate may be profoundly committed to social change, but their thinking and vision are often dampened by the narrowed tactical possibilities for change within [their] space.”

A global campaigner, 2005

The NGO Industrial Complex. Not a very flattering term for the growing population of big civil society organizations working at national and global levels on a range of concerns from economic development to HIV/AIDS.

Since the mid - 1980s, NGOs have proliferated around the world with a handful becoming huge and influential. This is good news and bad news. Good, because well-functioning large institutions are needed to ensure the effective delivery of services to those who need it, and make an impact on the world’s worst problems. Bad because, at a certain point, institutional interests may collide with social justice goals and opportunities. When an NGO’s budget reaches a multi-million dollar level, it’s not surprising that demands for fundraising and branding overwhelm the behind-the-scenes, long-term community work and potentially more risky social justice strategies, particularly at a difficult political moment. A splashy rock concert with appearances of movie stars is a terrific public media draw, and thus, can be an easier investment to justify to board members who care more about “bang for the buck” than supporting elusive and more controversial strategies like women’s empowerment and land rights for small farmers.

While applauding the large-scale NGO campaigns that draw public attention to poverty and war, many worry that over- institutionalization (NGO-ization) has created troublesome tensions and fragmentation among civil society actors working on different issues, levels (local-national-global), and strategies. These disconnects translate into a lack of effective linkages to constituencies in both the Global North and South – undermining the political clout of organizations’ messages and lobbying. NGO dominance has generated debates with other important civil society actors, like social movements (peasants, trade union, indigenous, immigrant) and grassroots groups. Concerns about the concentration of resources and visibility in a few players and the political compromises they’re forced to make are top among these debates. In this way, NGO-ization – while tapping into various kinds of power – is a challenge for building the power of numbers, unity and collectivity.

THE POWER OF NUMBERS AND MOVEMENTS

There is probably no more compelling form of power than the force of large numbers of different people united in a collective cause for justice. Current challenges with fragmentation and disconnection have generated renewed interest in movement-building. Movements are fundamentally made up of people and communities who share common concerns. They can include organizations like NGOs, but clusters of NGOs are not movements. One long-time rights activist points out that, “NGOs are made up of managers, employees, boardmembers and beneficiaries. It’s very hard for them to connect to a political cause without having their institutional interest and two-year plan block the way. It happens, but with the rise of the NGO professional, not that often.” Even NGO networks struggle to generate the collective social justice energy needed at this moment in history.⁹

Respect for diversity among social justice actors is critical, but it also presents new challenges with regard to building bridges for collective, unified action. But fresh commitment to re-building movement has produced innovative alternatives, such as the Women’s Network within the MesoAmerican Peoples Gathering, which brings together women from across social movements, from grassroots as well as policy and research groups, to develop a women’s agenda as an integral part of a people’s agenda. Rather than get bogged down in institutional representation debates, activists explain that “she who volunteers and stays involved” is a member. Similarly, the emergent Autonomous Women’s Movement of Nicaragua defines membership on an individual basis, though recognizing that many of its members are employed primarily in women’s NGOs.

These Activists highlight the following ideal characteristics of women’s movements to work toward:¹⁰

- ☞ Creative capacity to think and act beyond the confines of existing rules
- ☞ Autonomy and ability to overcome competitiveness
- ☞ Respect for inclusion and diversity with clarity about multiple interests
- ☞ Defined vision and shared ideology (that recuperates feminisms)
- ☞ Specific demands in relation to changes in the political context
- ☞ Political and social activism and the ability to encourage action
- ☞ Alliances with other social movements
- ☞ Intergenerational and collective leadership to ensure continuity and reflect our diversity

In order to build agile, collective power, many social justice activists feel that more structured spaces for political education and conversation are essential. They emphasize the need for new ideas and vision that bring people together across differences for a larger purpose. They highlight the need to improve ways of dealing with and negotiating disagreement and conflict.