



HAL
open science

Power, theory building, and heuristics

Jean-Claude Thoenig

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Claude Thoenig. Power, theory building, and heuristics. *M@n@gement*, 2011, 14 (1), pp.38-46.
halshs-00638230

HAL Id: halshs-00638230

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00638230>

Submitted on 4 Nov 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

POWER, THEORY BUILDING, AND HEURISTICS

1. Power as an opportunistic agenda

The way organizations are governed has been a lasting concern for my research agenda as a social scientist. To contribute to the advancement of the theory of power, as if it were a kind of lifelong concern, has not been of major appeal to me.

It is true that several if not many of my studies were dealing with manifest or latent power centers, and with dominant when not hegemonic social configurations such as the headquarters of multinational companies¹, or the French administrative, political and economic elites called Grands Corps, educated and selected by professional schools such as the Ecole Nationale d'Administration and the Ecole Polytechnique². Whenever some findings seemed to be worth being related to agendas about power, I did it. For instance I studied in depth how intergovernmental relationships were key to the allocation of political power and influence across local and national French polities³. David Courpasson and I have demonstrated how managerial domination regimes inside firms fuel the emergence and intensity of rebellion phenomena among their managers⁴.

Power games and regimes are not discarded. They deserve my attention, as such, or as far as they help explain or are related to other dimensions of societal structures and political dynamics. Nevertheless I consider them as marginal concerns, as factors or dimensions not to forget about. In other terms I feel like an amateur when I meet and discuss with power experts and scholars. My attention and my sense of curiosity are attracted by other topics and problems.

The research topics that attract my curiosity combine two dimensions. The first one is that, in my opinion, they are related to empirical phenomena and theoretical problems that have been neglected or at least poorly explored by social science inquiry. The second one is that, despite the fact that Max Weber already had tackled the problem in a such a comprehensive way that seemed too leave too much room to further generations of sociologists, I keep wondering how logics of action that are different and heterogeneous when not incompatible by their intrinsic standards could achieve some degree of compatibility. In other terms, collective action via organizing and organized arrangements is the main focus of my professional curiosity. This is why organization theory de facto has structured my agenda for more than forty years in a row. One collateral consequence was and still is that I do not separate content from structure, process from substance, power dynamics from cognition building and interpretation aspects when studying collective action taking.

¹ Michaud C. and J.C. Thoenig. 2003. *Making Strategy and Organization Compatible*, Palgrave Macmillan, London

² Thoenig J.C. 1987. *L'ère des technocrates*, L'Harmattan, Paris

³ Thoenig J.C. 2005. « Territorial Administration and Political Control. Decentralization in France », *Public Administration*, 83, 3 : 685-708

⁴ Courpasson D. and J.C. Thoenig. 2010. *When Managers Rebel*, Palgrave Macmillan, London

Grand theory has never really been my cup of tea. Middle-level theory fits much more my expectations about scientific achievement. On one hand I have been attracted by social sciences partly because global ideologies were in my opinion based on questionable beliefs in terms of relevance and dangerous when used as references for social life and action taking. On the other hand elegance and plausibility of models are easier to satisfy. So I have tried to get the best climbing on the shoulders of the giants. My purpose was also not to be cornered or blinded by one perspective only for the rest of my scientific life.

I have studied quite different types of organizations - business firms, public agencies, not-for-profit associations, city halls, the European Commission, etc - from very different angles - how they function internally as social and human set ups, how they interrelate with third parties and society, how they impact the production of public goods and services - and with various interpretative perspectives - bureaucracy, technocracy and democracy, policy analysis, cognitive theory, development, market and economic exchange, etc. To study an organization as a social order structure as well as an action system, I observe how its functioning and change is linked more or less to specific missions, decisions or stakes it is supposed to be in charge of, alone or with others. I also observe what consequences this induces in terms of content of policies and outcomes it is supposed to elaborate and deliver. In other terms, I study them under specific circumstances: whenever they are exposed or face a problem or a pressure for change from the environment, from outside stakeholders or from society at large that may challenge their routines, their missions, their existence. I have used for instance the decentralization reforms of public affairs in France as a revealer of the basic characteristics of French public administrations, decentralization as a policy being more a means or an opportunity to detect these fundamental organizational properties than an end or a topic per se.

Such a trajectory may look like an erratically constructed patchwork, a sum of scattered attentions and contributions to quite different specialized domains: public administration, elites and social stratification, public policy analysis, cognitive sociology, etc. The fact is that I feel at ease and am able to dialogue on equal ground as well with political scientists as with sociologists, historians or management scholars.

2. Power as an analytical tool.

While power as a theoretical issue remains of moderate appeal to me, power as an analytical tool has persistently and intensively been part of my research tool kit.

In terms of heuristics, power provides empirical rules or guidelines that are pragmatic, simple and fast, and that facilitate fact-finding and context analysis. It makes complex problems and situations more easy to grasp, complexity meaning that too many variables and elements to consider would make analysis difficult to start, to handle and to interpret theoretically. More precisely, heuristics provides entrance tactics, ways to start an analysis. Being partly based on intuition and previous experience of similar situations, it suggests the idea of a proof. It is a pre-requisite when complex reasoning patterns are to be handled and explained.

Power as an analytical tool goes back to the heritage of the neo-behavioral revolution that started in Chicago in the 1920s under the influence of Charles Merriam, a political sociologist, and his students Herbert Simon and Harold Lasswell. It has been tested and made even more instrumental in the 1950 and the 1960s by two major streams in social sciences. One, located at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, was mainly studying business firms as

organizations, trying to understand how actually they function and make decisions. A pioneering contribution to power as an analytical tool was made by James March⁵. Another stream, located in the department of political science of the Yale University and headed by Robert Dahl, studied community politics and policy making processes. It gave birth to a seminal definition of power, combining behavioral and relational dimensions⁶. Defining power as the capacity of A to get from B a behavior B would never adopt if A would not be present or part of the specific situation linking A to B suggested a fruitful analytical agenda. Several scholars in the USA and in Europe have developed this perspective further. One elaborate and explicit grid or tool kit has been developed by the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations, taking advantage of the research program launched by its founder, Michel Crozier⁷.

An analytical agenda means that phenomena are not taken as a given but as a social construct, not as postulates but as hypothesis submitted to inquiry, as questions for research.

Power is contextual. For instance it is not by definition linked to personality characteristics – age, social origin, charisma - or to formal positions in an institutional set up – being the CEO of a firm or the mayor of a city. Local circumstances make a difference. Authority as such does not imply power. A recurrent finding of organizational sociology is that, most of the time, both do not coincide along the hierarchy of authority. Power holders are not only the persons or the groups at the top. Contextual refers more precisely to the goals actors want to achieve, to the problems they address and would like to solve. Herbert Simon had suggested that preferences, goals, stakes, problems actors want to satisfy, achieve, manage or solve, are volatile. Their content and intensity vary according to the specific situation in which at a given moment the actor operates. They blend content – preferences, goals, problems or stakes - with context – how far the actor is dependent from the behaviors of other actors such as B or C to address them, that B's or C's behaviors are more or less unpredictable by A, that A may have to pay a cost in return for their cooperation.

Power is relational. More precisely it is structured around and by interdependencies between actors. Heuristically speaking to state that A has power is poor analysis. Inquiry has to verify a few more information empirically. Over whom does A have power and over whom less or not, when and how far? In return, this does not mean that B and C are by definition powerless. Asymmetries are a question subject to verification. A more heuristic approach aims at verifying the cards as they are distributed and handled inside a web of interdependencies and interactions at work, between A and B, A and C and C and B. A may have more power over B or C than B has over A or C.

Power is enacted via behaviors. A may control some uncertainties B's stakes may depend from. But to exert his power on B, A has to behave in a certain manner, which is discretionary. Being transparent, therefore predictable by B, A loses his power capacity. In a way power games come close to poker games. Those that control winning cards have to play them to win, and they do it most of the time. And those who have the losing cards in their hands lose whenever they play with A.

Mutual but unbalanced dependence relationships are quite common. Though deprived of any resource in his relationship with the master who exerts full and global control over the life of

⁵ March J.G. « The Business Firm as a Political Coalition », *Journal of Politics*, 24, 662-678.

⁶ Dahl R. 1957. « The Concept of Power », *Behavioural Science*, 2, 18 : 201-15

⁷ Crozier M. 1963. *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

his slave, this latter controls one uncertainty the master is dependent from: his own life. Suicide or death may be a tragic resource for the slave, but his master faces it as a constraint or a limit to his power, force or domination. Without slaves a master no longer remains a master if his stake is to be a master. And formal control systems dictated by the hierarchy about how to behave are reinterpreted by those who have to implement them giving birth to local arrangements that are considered as legitimate by those who apply them and are tolerated by those at the top who have the formal authority to write them. Therefore power explains or is a key factor explaining actual daily behaviors. What are the key stakes actor A wants to satisfy, from what kind of resources controlled by third parties is A dependent from to satisfy his stakes, what kind of constraints does A control that these third parties are dependent from to satisfy their own stakes, are key factors that shape the actual behaviors occurring between A and such or such third party, and determine the conditions of exchange and the limits not to violate in their relationships.

Such a framework is heuristically fruitful because it pushes the analyst to study actual behaviors, acts and non-acts, decisions. To understand the real functioning of an organization at the level of specific actors as well as at the level of the organization as such requires specific techniques of in-depth interviewing, and, whenever it is possible, of shadowing. Attitude and opinion based questionnaires may provide raw materials. Nevertheless they have to be interpreted by the analyst. Interpretation means in this case that their content has to be referred to actual behaviors in interdependence relationships, for instance how an actor handles such contexts he may face or be part of. Tools such as sociograms – characterizing the feelings and judgments each actor expresses about other actors of the actions set - and behavioral grids – defining for each actor his stakes, resources, constraints, and behaviors in his relationship with other actors of the action set - help identify the usually latent stakes an actor tries to satisfy – avoiding being exposed to third party discretionary intervention, etc etc. Hypotheses about such behaviors and stakes should be considered as intermediary steps to identify power coalitions at the local as well as at the top level, who are their members, around what arrangements these coalitions are built and what their limits are, and why other groups are dependent from them⁸.

Power games and political dynamics provide heuristic added value as far as they open up organizations as black boxes. They allow the analyst not to be blinded by a narrow top down approach, and not to overestimate the importance of the formal design of an institution. Heuristics means in the case of power that it provides a procedure robust enough to check how far the design or the hierarchy of authority really shape the actual functioning and decision making processes. They also help identifying the latent norms and the implicit coalitions of vested interests around specific issues. To say it bluntly, though not an end by itself, such a heuristic paves the ground for further inquiry about collective action in organized settings, even if power as such is not the problem a researcher wants to explore, solve or explain at the end. Any organization is subject to power phenomena. Political dynamics are not pathological symptoms. They are key vectors for achieving compatibility. According to the consequences such power games generate for the organization, its missions, its members, its stakeholders, analysis shall determine whether the social production of compatibility is or not dysfunctional and of a pathological nature.

Such a heuristics can be applied to approach and explore other social configurations than just formal organizations. Whenever two or more formal organizations become interdependent

⁸ Crozier M. and E. Friedberg. 1980. *Actors and Systems : The Politics of Collective Action*. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

around a common task, problem or policy, whether they are linked by formal ties or because each of them in a way that is specific to it is a stakeholder or is part of a common action set, power dynamics occur and compatibility is at stake. Organizing and organized are processes at work well beyond the world of institutionalized organizations. One relevant contribution for methodological purposes I made early on in my career was tested by a study of cross-regulation processes linking through mutual action interdependence French mayors and local elected officers to State representatives heading local agencies of the national ministries⁹

3. Heuristics yes, theory no!

Power as a tool kit is fruitful not only to study formal organizations such as business firms and public administration agencies, but also to improve knowledge about other social objects and economic configurations.

Policy analysis studies from a political science or sociology perspective have underlined that in more than 70% of the cases a policy fails to generate the impacts policy-makers had in mind when designing the policy. What happens during the implementation stage is not in line with what formally the policy was to achieve. Implementation has to be considered as a specific political and social arena where, when applying the formal rules, instruments and instructions, those in charge of it tend to set up standards and to adopt behaviors that are different, given the specificities of the local contexts they are in charge of. Implementation gives birth to local power arenas including those who execute but also outside stakeholders. Specific impacts, some not intended and others expressing resistances are generated not because the parties involved in implementation processes are dumb, lazy or corrupted, but because of pragmatic purposes or of vested interests that have no direct relation with the policy itself. Those who implement locally set up compromises and arrangements that do not jeopardize their own local stakes, that are also to some extent acceptable by local constituents and that policy-makers at the top may tolerate. Quite common illustrations are linked to the way street bureaucrats such as police forces appropriate crime and law policies and regulations dealing with road freight transportation¹⁰. Such a phenomenon is quite identical to what has been observed in industrial plants where workers and foremen, when not their local managers, enforce work instructions designed by the headquarters. It has been defined by Jean-Daniel Reynaud as conjunct social regulation, the people at the local level inventing autonomous rules or informal norms that are not the same than the control rules imposed by the top¹¹

Heuristics and tool kits are not or should not be substitutes for the absence of specific theoretical agendas. To refer to power dynamics and structures as an analytical entry scheme or as an intermediary methodology, does not imply that the agenda of a study deals by definition with collective action. Power is a means, not an end. Otherwise power as heuristics may be a substitute for a theoretical framework entering through the back door more or less in a clandestine manner. For the concept of power carries by itself some specific theoretical postulates or assumptions.

One major postulate is about behaviors in interdependence local contexts. Individuals and groups are considered as strategic actors. Vested and particularistic interests drive them. Here

⁹ Crozier M. and J.C. Thoenig. 1976. « The Regulation of Complex Organized Systems », A) *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21,4: 547-570

¹⁰ Dupuy F. and J.C. Thoenig. 1979. « Public Transportation Policy Making in France as an Implementation Problem », *Policy Science*, 11, 1: 1-18

¹¹ Reynaud J.D. 1997. *Les règles du jeu : l'action collective et la régulation sociale*. Armand Colin, Paris.

the danger lies in the fact that an analyst may forget about other factors that shape behaviors and that are exogenous to the relationships studied such as culture, ideologies, social stratification, just to name a few.

Another set of postulates is that power games tend to give a premium to a Weltanschauung that defines organizations or polities as being polyarchic or pluralistic by definition. Here the danger may lie in the fact that the analyst underestimates the existence of domination macro-structures or games of the game that are for instance oligarchic regimes and cultural domination vectors – as illustrated for the capitalist regime of the first third of 1900s by Antonio Gramsci and his theory of hegemony¹².

In other words, methodologies as ends, heuristics forgetting about their underlying theoretic postulates, pave the way for two dangers or scientific abuses.

A first danger is that they are used as hammers looking for nails. The confusion made between methodology and theory opens the door to the illusion that anything can be analyzed and explained in a relevant manner through power lenses. The fallacy of misplaced concreteness means that any empirical phenomenon could be studied without questioning the relevance of their theoretical postulates for the problem under inquiry. This critique makes sense for strategic neo-behavioral approaches, local power dynamics being disconnected from broader structural factors and evolutions of societies, economies and polities. Local orders explain it all. Institutions do not matter much. And no global or exogenous factors are considered.

A second danger is that any social context and collective construction could be basically considered as understandable mainly as a power arena, and not much more, as if power would be in a way the ultimate key to social order and action. Such a deviation could be applied to approaches inspired by a biased understanding of class struggle paradigms or postulating that one hidden hand, center, elite or ideology manipulates and has full control of the periphery of an organization or of society. Why bother about local orders?

Epistemological over-simplification is a kind of infantile disease still at work today. Academic scholars having not benefited from a solid education to the basics of sociology and political science, as it is the case sometimes for business schools faculty, ignore the lessons as well as the analytical trades of former generations of scholars. They are prone to follow the latest intellectual fads. An exclusive reference to quantitative measurement and statistical data banks in some cases, the accumulation of fishing expeditions, meaning research without theoretical frameworks and without fruitful heuristics, for others, are two common sins among their ranks.

One of the least desirable consequences has to do with the disconnection between global and local, between macro and micro, as if social action and order would be a struggle between two extremes. Organizations and organized set ups as meso levels or action arenas or are underestimated as having their own dynamics. For instance institutional theories of all kinds are misunderstood when they become substitutes for hyper-deterministic paradigms. Or network analysis ignoring its intrinsic limits to explain collective action and order, becomes a hammer looking for nails of any kind. Societies, polities and economies are assumed to be linear and simple constructs, as if observing what happens at the top would suffice to

¹² Gramsci A.1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers

understand what happens at the bottom or, vice-versa, what happens at the micro-level may give the key to understand in a relevant manner what happens at the macro-level. The hypothesis of meso-order and action arenas, therefore of discontinuities, is discarded or perceived as not worth considering. Discontinuities, variations at the intermediary levels are just exceptions to an iron law: at the end of the day what matters is either what is global and macro, or the global is nothing else than an addition or combination of micro or very local set ups and dynamics. Power as heuristics gives a better chance to consider at the same time an action and order system as driven by endogenous dynamics and as determined by exogenous forces.

Using power analysis as a heuristic tool does not imply that no other tool kits have to be discarded. Other methodologies are needed according to the problem to be studied. More important, power analysis is compatible with theoretical agendas that are not linked to power theory. To give just one example, I have recently studied firms, their functioning, their government and their policy-making processes from a cognitive perspective. How the various actors involved at the level of the business units and in the executive suites build and mobilize implicit knowledge and interpretation schemes for action taking was my theoretical agenda. Actors, whether single or collective, are not mere power players, which means mere cultural idiots. They also think, interpret, theorize and believe. How do they create compatibility by sharing cognitions is a key to clarify by research. Specific methodologies were required for that purpose. Nevertheless power heuristics helped a lot to make sense of how cognitions circulate, evolve or not, and are or not made compatible between actors¹³.

4. Scientific enigmas about power as a problem for knowledge

Is the agenda about power nowadays of declining return in terms of knowledge? No, much is still to be explored.

Social scientists sometime define as “emergent” or “new” facets of power that are not new or emergent from a historic perspective, but that they had not yet studied. Marketing is part of their trade. Not enough importance is usually given to forms of power, hegemony, domination and resistance that are declining or disappearing in societies, politics and economies. Zones of ignorance are still numerous and provide research niches for several years to many social scientists. What kind of problems, topics or issues would attract my own curiosity if I were to study power in the coming years?

- Which consequences shall the current evolutions of the academic institutions, its emphasis on standardization of performance and excellence, its growing reference to quasi-market mechanisms of management and competition, have now that the importance of academic professions seems to plateau, that state steering is transforming, and that organizational rationales get more and more importance at the level of single universities?
- Is it true or not that the social elites in business and in politics have seen their forms, resources and positions of power and authority modified since globalization had experienced an extraordinary acceleration?
- Do old forms of cultural hegemony inside work organizations really decline, and do new forms have a growing influence, how, how far, and with which implications?

¹³ See Michaud and Thoenig, above.

Jean-Claude THOENIG

Jean-Claude Thoenig is emeritus research director at the CNRS and affiliated with Dauphine Recherches en Management, a joint lab of the University Paris-Dauphine and the CNRS. He has been a professor at INSEAD. jeanclaude.thoenig@free.fr.