

Power, Authority and Domination

A proposal of definition

Amedeo Bertolo

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In the course of my studies of techno-bureaucracy, self-management and utopia (6), (7), (8), I found myself up against the problem of defining “power”. On different occasions I defined it more or less explicitly, to suit the needs of the particular situation but these definitions were always partial and provisional, serving only to avoid possible misunderstanding in a discussion of other ideas. The basic problem remained and, for me, it became ever more pressing as my thinking went both deeper and wider (or at least so I was convinced).

The problem is, in fact, the need, if not necessarily to resolve, at least to focus clearly on a conceptual “knot” of extreme complexity – and not merely to agree on the words – a knot which is central to anarchist thought. Paradoxically, anarchism, which can be considered the most radical critique of domination to date both in theory and practice, has not yet produced a theory of power that is more subtle and highly developed than the apologies of domination.

There has been no further reflection to do justice to the brilliant “insights” of the “founding fathers” of anarchism. Those insights are still rich in promise and our anarchism, mine included, is built around them but, from the scientific point of view, they have remained little more than insights and, more than a century later, are running a serious risk of becoming mere stereotyped formulae, beliefs or taboos, thereby losing a large part of their value as fundamental hypotheses for the interpretation and transformation of reality. These insights have become petrified and the relative vagueness, of both concept and terminology, however inevitable and perhaps necessary it may have been in the early stages of reflection, become an obstacle to further thought and action; the source of both unjustifiable “orthodoxies” and of equally unjustifiable “heresies” of both “traditional” immobility and of “innovative” absurdities, of both discussions that are purely semantic and socially impotent.

Anarchists may find a certain consolation in the knowledge that orthodox science, in the last century, has thrown little light on that “whole” (made up of relationships, behavior, social structures ...) that goes under the name of “power” (or authority or domination). While power is not only a central element in the anarchist critique of existing reality, but also an undeniably central element to every system of social and political thought,¹ the concept of power is, at present,

¹ “Power is the decisive formal category in both the analysis of the structures and the analysis of the processes in society” [14, p. 155]; “In the entire lexicon of political science it is power that is, perhaps, the most fundamental

one of the most controversial and at the same time one of the least debated, being virtually excluded from the field of application of those analytic subtleties of which academics are so proud. Although it can be said that the analysis of power is sophisticated, this is more in the rather negative sense of falsification than in the positive one of refinement.

Even a quick reading of the literature on the subject will bring into evidence not only the considerable terminological confusion (Weber's term *Herrschaft* is translated into Italian both as *potere* [power] and *autorità* [authority]), but also an equal conceptual vagueness. As far as the interpretation and justification of the functions and genesis of power are concerned, academics seem to have more or less come to a halt at Hobbes and Locke, or even Plato and Aristotle.

This is, however, small consolation. The ruling science can well permit itself the luxury of being unconvincing on the level of pure logic, since it is supported by the force of both reality and of the unconscious imaginary which both shapes and is shaped by it. Furthermore, a certain level of confusion is useful to it as it renders the identification of social domination in theory and its destruction in practice difficult, if not impossible. Anarchist thought, on the other hand, must aim at the highest level of clarity if it wishes, as indeed it does, to be a subversive science, that is, an instrument for the understanding and subverting of the existing reality.

This essay puts forward certain definitions which the author feels could be of great use, not only in the debate among anarchists but also in the confrontation between anarchists and non-anarchists, which otherwise threaten to remain forever a dialogue of the deaf. It will be obvious that the work of definition is aimed not so much at the terms, as at the contents of these terms. In the same way the written (and verbal) symbol "house" may represent the concept of "a man-made shelter", the content underlying this concept may vary from the hut to the skyscraper. In this present essay I will limit myself to the definition of wide categories of contents (and of concepts) which will be useful for an initial, provisional reply to the following question: to what extent is that which is known as power made up of universal social functions and to what extent does it include functions which belong specifically to a relationship of domination?

It is normal usage, not only among academics, to begin a discussion on semantics with 1) a consideration of the etymological aspects and/or 2) of the historical ones. In the case under discussion neither would be of any particular value. The etymology of the terms that interest us here stretches too far back into the past to be more than linguistic archaeology and, moreover, two of the three terms under consideration originally had meanings that were virtually indistinguishable. And as for the historical use of the terms, this reveals a level of polyvalence and interchangeability over time that renders any such analysis irrelevant to our purposes.²

To put it briefly, the examination of the origins and use of the words that interest us here, over time and in differing socio-economic contexts, only tells us that, if we imagine a spectrum of meanings stretching from a positive to a negative pole with reference to the values of freedom and equality, the term authority comes in a midway position of neutrality, the term domination is generally placed towards the negative pole and the term power covers the entire spectrum thanks to its particular double meaning of "power to do" and of "power to make someone else do".

concept, the political process is the formation, the distribution and the exercise of power" [22, p. 90]; "The study of power is the principle of the science of sociology" [18, p. 20].

² For example, see (6).

An examination of the use of the three terms on the part of anarchists is of equally limited value (definitely more useful is an examination of the underlying concepts): whether we consider the “classic” writings or contemporary ones, whether in reflections or in propaganda, we usually find power/authority/ domination used as synonyms (and thus with negative connotations).

It is true that we can probably identify a certain distinction, more or less explicit, between power and authority, but this is not unequivocal. For Proudhon, for example, power is a collective force whereas authority is alienation (monopolistic appropriation) of this collective force (28) (although he also uses the term “political power” to define this expropriation of social might). For Proudhon, therefore, authority could be seen as a negative term while power is, or could be termed, neutral. Bakunin, on the other hand, recognised the existence of a “neutral” authority.³ And – moving from the classics to our contemporaries – Giovanni Baldelli gives a decidedly positive meaning to the word “authority” (5), which he generally uses in the sense of moral and intellectual influence. The examination of the use of the three words today, both in common parlance and in scientific terminology, has a little (although not much) more meaning.

In everyday language, the two adjectives “authoritative” and “authoritarian” demonstrate the use, both positive and negative, of the noun “authority” from which they come, a noun which can indicate a role of political power or a particular competency or moral excellence. And, still in everyday language, the term power is applied to a whole range of situations from the ability to be or do, to the structure of social hierarchy. Only the word “domination” is almost unequivocally used in the sense of the power to impose (*de jure* or *de facto*) one’s will on others by means of physical or psychological coercion. This lesser ambiguity of the term domination (and of the relative verbs and adjectives) in comparison with those of authority and power also extends to the terminology of the social sciences. Perhaps because of the self-same negative emotional value that is so widespread in current usage, the term is rarely used or else is used with an explicit and negative moral value judgement.⁴ As far as definitions of power and authority are concerned, they can be found to suit all tastes. What, for some, is called authority, for others is influence or prestige, or – in another sense – that which some call authority is, for others, power, or rather legitimate or formal power ...⁵

³ “When I have to do with boots I bow to the authority of the shoemaker; when I have to do with a house, a canal or a railway I consult the authority of the architect or the engineer... I bow to the authority of specialists because it is this that my own reason dictates... We accept all natural authority and all the influences of fact but none of law or those which are imposed on us by officials” (3).

⁴ Among the cases when domination is used with a “neutral” meaning there are three which are particularly relevant: Simmel (31), for whom domination is a universal category of social interaction and power is one particular form of this; Dahrendorf (12), who proposes a definition of domination understood as “the possession of authority and thus as a right to give authoritative commands”; Lasswell and Kaplan (22), for whom domination (in the Italian edition the term is *dominio*, but the word actually used by the authors is “rule”, not “domination”) is the model of effective power.

⁵ The following are a few, rather random, examples: POWER. “Power is a) ability or natural faculty of action; b) legal or moral faculty, the right to do something; c) authority, especially in the concrete sense, the constituted body exercising that authority, the government” (19); “Power is the participation in decision making” and “A decision is a line of behavior which carries with it severe sanctions” [22, pp. 89–90]; “We can designate as power the ability of a social class to realise its specific objectives” [27, p. 410]. Power is “the ability to make and carry out decisions even when others are opposed to them” [33, p. 18]; Power is “a permanent body which one is used to obeying, which possesses material means of constraint and which is supported by the general opinion of its force, by the belief in its right to command, that is, in its legitimacy and in the hope for its beneficence”; “By power we can understand all the means by which a man can bend the will of other men” [25, p. 9]; “Power can be defined as the ability to realise one’s desires” [29, p. 29]; “By power we must understand (...) the possibility that certain commands (or that any command)

It is for these reasons that I feel that it is necessary to attempt, yet again, to define these terms; and our first step must be the identification of the underlying concepts, even if this naturally presents certain lexical difficulties. At times I will try to overcome these by an “intuitive” use of certain terms (depending on the particular context), at other times by paraphrasing, whether elegantly or no, and again at other times by anticipating the definitions to be presented at a later point. I will also resort to the frequent use of “banalities”, that is, of concepts which are taken for granted by anarchists or which are widely known and accepted in the field of non-anarchist scientific and philosophical thought; from an unusual combination of different banalities we may discover something new.

Let us begin in an (apparently) roundabout way. The freedom of the individual, understood as the possibility of choice between alternative actions, is not, has never been and could never be unlimited. It operates in the presence of limits and restrictions arising from both nature and culture. Any choice can only exist between certain *determined* possibilities. Even those fanatics of freedom that anarchists are agree on this (with the possible exception – more apparent than real – of some frantic individualists). But this definition is nevertheless incomplete and immediately sends us back to a higher level of freedom, paradoxically via the attribution of *determining* restrictions to the behaviour of the individual.

I am not concerned, here, with the limits (whether external or internal) imposed by nature because these in fact *limit* the choice of possibilities rather than *determine* behaviour and are, therefore, irrelevant to the present discussion. For example, physiology and anatomy certainly limit the frequency and the modes of sexual coupling but the factors which, within those limits, lead to specific models of erotic behaviour are entirely cultural. And yet another example: in the game of chess, the chessboard can be seen to represent the natural limits (in fact the sixty-four squares are obviously an artificial limit, being part of the rules, but let us imagine that they are imposed by nature); the rules of the game represent the cultural limits (the bishop can only move diagonally, etc.); the moves of the players represent the freedom of choice between determined possibilities.

The aspect that interests me here is, to be precise, these determining factors imposed by culture. Those two elements that, together, play such a considerable, if varying, role in the behaviour of animals, instinct and environment, do not have an analogous influence on the behaviour of that strange animal that is man. Man is not governed by instincts in the pure sense (that is, as precise and specific, genetically determined behavioural reactions to given environmental stimuli) but only shows traces or residues of instincts which have little or no social significance. Such are for example, the instinct of a new-born baby to suck or the pseudo-instincts such as the sexual “instinct” which, in reality, is a need which can be satisfied in ways (that is behavior or an overall series of actions) that are not necessarily determined. And, furthermore, man’s “environment” is considerably more cultural than natural, not only in the sense that he has transformed and is

will be obeyed by a certain group of men” (3); “Power is communication regulated by a code” (25). AUTHORITY: Authority is “any power exercised by one man or group of men over another man or group” (1); “Authority is a bond between unequals” [30, p. 15]; “Authority is a way of defining and interpreting difference in strength” [30, p. 118]; “Authority is a search for stability and security in the strength of others” [30, p. 178]; Authority is “an accepted dependence”: M. Horkheimer quoted in [16, p. 9]; “Authority is (psychol.) personal superiority or ascendancy ... and (sociolog.) the right to decide or command” (19); “The essence of authority... is to give a human being that security and that respect for his decisions that is logically given only to a super-individual and effectual axiom or to a deduction” [31, p. 41]; “Authority is the expected and legitimate possession of power” (22).

transforming nature but also in the sense that man's environment consists, above all, of relationships with other men and even his relationships with the world of "things" undergo a symbolic mediation.

During his long evolution into "human" form, man has lost those instinctual factors which determine his actions and has replaced them with cultural factors, that is, with norms, rules, codes of communication and interaction. It is precisely in this substitution that man's special freedom is to be found at its highest level: *self-determination*. In fact, those culturally determined factors are not given to man (by God or nature) but man takes them for himself. Norms do not merely reflect natural necessities but create arbitrary ones. That is to say that the creation of norms is necessary because it is "written" in man's nature (in man's freedom which paradoxically imposes his self-determination), but the individual elements of these norms are not necessary. Man must create norms, but he can create those norms that he wishes. The production of norms is therefore the central, founding operation of human society and so of "humanity" itself, as man only exists as such to the extent that he is a product of culture, that is, of society.

The function of creating and recreating the "social" dimension by inventing, transmitting and modifying norms is, by definition, a collective function of the human species (that is, of the groups and subgroups that make it up). Just as, by definition, there is no individual code of communication, so too there is no individual norm of social interaction. Therefore in the very moment that cultural determination decides the highest expression of man's freedom, his faculty of self-determination, it opens the way for a permanent asymmetry between the individual and the collective which means that the role of society in determining the individual is always greater than the individual's role in determining society. Man produces society collectively but is individually shaped by it.

The creation of norms obviously implies the application of these norms (a rule that is not applied is not a rule). On the other hand, since the norm does not possess the same overriding force as instinctive bio-chemical mechanisms, and nor does the general consensus (which is infrequent except for certain norms and in certain highly homogeneous and static societies) give it this compelling strength, *sanction* comes into play to render adherence to the norm, if not certain and universal, at least statistically probable. In this way every human group and subgroup produces models of behavior and related sanctions to induce its members to conform to these; sanctions, the severity of which corresponds to the degree to which the norm safeguarded by them is considered as fundamental for the group.

As Lasswell and Kaplan point out, these sanctions are severe "in terms of the prevalent values of the group being considered. While violence is certainly a sanction of extreme severity, there are, none the less, many situations in which dishonour, that is the drastic withdrawal of respect, can play an even more important role". Thus a sanction is severe if it is conceived as such in the collective imaginary of the particular group. And, naturally, the same applies to the gravity of the infraction. It is well known that the same behavior may be judged very differently in different cultural contexts with a consequent difference in the sanctions that are applied. A loud belch may be considered a minor offence and so be greeted with only mild disapproval or it may be considered a serious infraction and so give rise to a correspondingly severe sanction (for example, to expulsion from an exclusive club) or it may even be judged positively and receive a "positive" sanction (laughter, satisfaction...). We must, in fact, remember that there are not only negative sanctions which discourage behaviour that is disapproved of, but also positive sanctions which encourage approved behaviour. It is even possible, at least in theory, to conceive of a society in

which individual behaviour is determined purely by means of positive sanctions (although in this case the absence of positive sanctions could be considered a negative one).

The production and application of norms and sanctions, therefore, make up the social regulatory function; a function which I propose to call power.⁶

Power is thus defined as a socially “neutral” function which is necessary not only to the existence of society, culture and of man himself, but also to the exercising of that freedom as freedom to choose between determined possibilities from which this discussion began. The absence of cultural determination would mean, in fact, a meaningless vacuum in which there would be no choice but only pure chance. Freedom, as choice, can only be exercised in the presence of determining factors, just as the friction of the air is necessary for birds to fly.

However, the fact that human behaviour can never be completely undetermined (nor, fortunately, completely determined)⁷ and that the cultural determination of man’s behavior is not only inevitable but, in its turn, an expression of freedom, does not mean that the ways and means of the social regulating function are neutral with respect to freedom itself. It is fundamental for freedom as choice that the mesh of the determining factors be both wide and elastic and modifiable as, the greater is the range of possibilities left open by this “mesh”, the freer is the individual. And equally fundamental for freedom as self-determination is the level of participation in the regulatory process, as the freedom of the individual is greater, in this sense, when he has greater access to power. Equal access to power for all members of a society is, therefore, the first unavoidable condition for equal freedom for all; a condition necessary to equal freedom for all but not sufficient for a high level of freedom for each. Power can oppress all in the same degree and remain oppressive. There are examples of so-called “primitive” societies in which all have more or less equal access to power but in which those forces determining behaviour are so all-pervasive and/or traditionally exempt from modification that they give rise to a situation of socially diffuse “totalitarianism”.

A situation of “equal power for all” is not only conceivable but has also been documented by more than one anthropologist. It is, however, far from being the norm, either geographically or historically. It is far more common to find social systems in which the regulating function is exercised, not by the collective upon itself but by one part of the collective (generally but not necessarily a small minority) over another (generally the great majority); that is, systems in which the access to power is the monopoly of one part of society (individuals, groups, classes, castes...).

This brings us now to another conceptual category which we could call *domination*. Domination, therefore, defines the relationship between unequals, those unequal in terms of power and so of freedom; it defines the situation of superordination/subordination; it defines the systems of permanent asymmetry between social groups.

⁶ This proposed meaning corresponds to a certain degree with Proudhon’s power as a collective force and resembles Lasswell and Kaplan’s definition, cited in footnote 5, which does however refer to individual decision-making processes and not to the overall function considered here. Clastres also seems to mean something similar when he talks about power. “It is our view (...) that political power is universal, immanent to social reality (...); and that it manifests itself in two primary modes: coercive power and non-coercive power. Political power as coercion (or the relationship of command/obedience) is not the model of true power, but simply a particular case” [10, p. 21] and also: “the social cannot be conceived without the political. In other words, there are no societies without power” (ibid). Clastres’ coercive power seems to correspond to that which I will later define as “domination”.

⁷ Crespi would say that man “oscillates” between the determined and the undetermined (11).

The relationship of domination typically manifests itself in relationships of command/obedience in which the command regulates the behavior of the person who obeys. The command/obedience relationship does not in itself represent the regulating function. One does not “obey” a norm (for example that which forbids killing or requires us to drive on the right side of the road), rather one follows it. One obeys a command, that is the form in which the norm is presented in a society of domination. The fact that respect for the norm is seen in terms of obedience is, in fact, a result of the expropriation of the regulating function by one part of society which must therefore *impose* it on the rest of society. And the lower the level of access, whether real or fictional, to power in society, the more explicitly must this be imposed.

If, in order that the cultural determination may not only give meaning to behavior but also make it regular and foreseeable, the social norm has, by its very nature, a compelling aspect (that is, relevant social behaviour must be fitted to the norm if it is to be such), then it becomes coercive in a situation of domination. Thus it is imposed through a hierarchical chain of subordination along which there is one general rule: command/obedience as a fundamental social relationship.

“From its origins,” writes Clastres in *Society Against the State*, “our culture has thought of political power in terms of hierarchical and authoritarian relationships of command/obedience. Every form of power, actual or possible, can consequently be reduced to this privileged relationship which expresses, *a priori*, its essence” [10, p. 16]. But, “if there is one thing that is foreign to an American Indian it is the idea of having to give or obey an order, except in very particular circumstances” [10, p. 13]. “Therefore the model of coercive power is only accepted in exceptional circumstances, when the group has to confront a threat from outside... Normal civil power is based not on constriction but on *concensus omnium* and so is profoundly pacific.” [10, p. 27].

Evans-Pritchard also described a culture (the Nuer of Sudan) in which obedience is not conceived of, where command is an offence and where no one obeys anyone else. It is not by chance that these are societies in which the regulating function is collective, where “the word of the chief does not have the force of law”, where the chief can be an “arbiter” and express an “authoritative” opinion (of this we shall see more when we consider authority and influence) but cannot act as judge or apply sanctions. And even the Amba, whom Dahrendorf (12) considers in his attempt to show the universality of the “authority structure” (by which he means, with an ease which goes ill with his usual accuracy, both that which I have termed power and that to which I have given the term domination) show, like the Nuer, the Tupinamba, the Guarani..., the very non-universality of domination, demonstrating that the regulating function need not necessarily assume the coercive form of hierarchy and the relationship of command/obedience.⁸

Domination, as we have said, is the privilege of power. The holders of domination reserve to themselves the control of the process of production of the “social”, expropriating it from the others. This phenomenon is similar to that of the privileged possession of the means of material production (to which it is often, although not necessarily, related)⁹, but is still more serious as it concerns man’s very nature: domination is the denial of the humanity of the expropriated, of those excluded from the dominant roles of the social structure.

⁸ As Lasswell and Kaplan write [22, p. 24], “The closer it moves to anarchy, domination ceases to be such. The sphere of power is restricted to a minimum; moving to the point where compulsion ceases to exist. Social control, naturally, still continues to be, under different forms of influence, but it is not coercive control”.

⁹ It could be better said that the privileged appropriation of the means of production is in fact the appropriation of the power of regulating one sector of social life: it is therefore one case and one form of the more general phenomenon of domination. With reference to this see (20) and (21).

Power, understood as the regulating function of society, is not the only form of cultural determination of behavior. There is a vast range of asymmetric relationships between individuals in which certain behavioral choices are totally determined by the opinions or decisions of others, decisions to which are given a particular and determining weight.

These relationships may be either personal or functional. By personal I mean those relationships in which the subjects interact as persons; by functional those in which the subjects interact on the basis of roles which define social functions (the distinction, as usual, is partly arbitrary, insofar as all personal relationships are, in some degree, also interactions of roles and vice versa). In the case of personal relationships, we can define the asymmetry as *influence*, while for those functional roles, it can be defined as *authority*.

In the first case the asymmetry can be attributed to differences – moral, intellectual or of character – between individuals due to which one personality is in some way “stronger” than another and influences the other more than he or she is influenced.¹⁰

In the second case there is a type of delegation of decision-making, tied to the expectations of a role and justified (explicitly or implicitly) by “competence”. The ambivalence of this term (which can mean ability or decisional capacity) makes it well-suited to the ambivalent nature of the asymmetry of ability and of the faculty of decision-making which is typical of a complete social division of labor into differing functions and roles.¹¹

Now, neither influence nor authority, as defined above, necessarily implies a permanent social asymmetry. It is perfectly possible to imagine a social system in which a multiplicity of single asymmetrical relationships results in an overall equilibrium of influence and authority for each individual (or, at least, for the latter, which is conceptually closer to power and so to domination). The asymmetric parent/child relationship is reshaped over a lifetime in an “egalitarian” cycle: the asymmetry of professional roles between individuals of differing professions can adjust itself through reciprocal services; a function of coordination can be carried out in rotation... The authority of a role does not infringe the freedom of one who accepts it voluntarily and critically; it can even be complementary by helping to avoid dispersion into a thousand insignificant rivulets: by simplifying a large number of individual choices we can render it possible to “concentrate” freedom on those choices that the individual holds truly important (the individual himself and not others on his or her behalf). And, analogously, by choosing not to participate, or to do so only passively, in certain social decision-making processes (which is very different from being excluded from them) an individual is able to take a full part in those which interest him most.

It is, however, true that in a society with a hierarchical division of social activity, there is, necessarily, a corresponding *hierarchy of authority* and therefore a *permanent asymmetry* between the holders of different roles. And it is also true that certain roles are “authoritative” insofar as they are articulations of the power to regulate society and so, in a system of domination, are hierarchic articulations of domination itself and so, by definition, permanently asymmetric. Thus the diversity of roles becomes social inequality.

In the same way, the existence of domination as a central category of the social imaginary determines permanent asymmetries of influence, since personal relationships are also perceived

¹⁰ This definition of influence is approximately the same as Sennet’s, cited in footnote 5, although he extends it also to asymmetric interactions of role (including the roles of power and domination).

¹¹ This definition of authority is approximately the same as Sennet’s, cited in footnote 5, although he applies it only to roles of power and domination.

in terms of the hierarchy of domination. Thus individual differences also contribute to social inequality.

Therefore, while in the abstract those relationships which we have termed influence and authority can be “neutral” categories, in the concrete situation of existing society of domination they take on a more or less pronounced value of domination and so they too often manifest themselves in relationships of command/obedience.

To sum up, I have identified four conceptual categories which, in current and scientific usage, all fall more or less under the umbrella of the same term: *power*. I have proposed that this term should be retained only for the first category: the social regulatory function, the sum of those processes by which a society regulates itself by producing and applying norms and ensuring their observance. If this function is carried out by only one part of society, that is, if one privileged (dominant) sector has a monopoly of power, it gives rise to a second category, to a set of hierarchical relationships of command/obedience which I propose to call *domination*. And, finally, I propose the term *authority* for those asymmetries of roles which cause asymmetries of reciprocal determination, and *influence* for those asymmetries arising from personal natures.

I must reiterate that my main interest is not the terminology, the formal aspect of a proposal of definition, but its substance, the identification of concepts. It is not the name that we give to colors that is important (even if it is useful to agree on these names if we wish to understand each other quickly, without having to resort to long paraphrasing) but rather that we agree on the existence of different colors, which correspond to different bands of frequencies of the visible range of light.

My proposal is intended as an *initial* differentiation and identification of the groups of concepts which can then serve for a general analysis of social phenomena. Further and differing differentiations (corresponding to various forms and contents of power, domination and authority) will of course be necessary for deeper and/or more detailed analyses, but I believe that the four categories proposed above will suffice for an initial anarchist approach to the problem.

In any case, it seems to me to be *necessary* to differentiate between that which I have called power and that which I have called domination. This is a fundamental qualitative difference which anarchists have always perceived more or less clearly (when, for example, they distinguish between society and the State); indeed it is this that is the hard core of the insights central to their thought. But they have not always been successful in making this difference explicit in their analyses, in clearly identifying the two conceptual categories. This has led them to theoretical and practical aberrations in widely differing directions (as for example to the rejection in theory and practice of all norms and sanctions or – as with their participation in the Republican Government during the Spanish Civil War – to practise and, at least partly, theorise a form of domination).

Non-anarchist thinkers have generally shown themselves to be incapable of perceiving the difference between power and domination and, in any case, have not been willing or able to explicitly differentiate between them either in concept or terminology. But this, as we said above, is not a defect in their case, given their institutional role of providers of rationality within an ideology of domination.

As I have already said, what I have offered here is a proposal for the identification of concepts rather than for a definition of terms. And for this reason I would hope that the discussion – which I profoundly hope will be provoked – will concern the concepts rather than the terms. I would like these concepts and the contents of the proposed categories to be analysed critically and contested. For example, if a norm must needs be supported by severe sanctions is it “simple”

power or does it fall into the category of domination? Or, again, is it necessary, at this point in the debate, to distinguish between that which I have called influence and that which I have called authority? Or would it be useful to distinguish between the asymmetries of effective ability and those of formal roles?

I do believe, nevertheless, that it is worth spending some time on the proposal for the terminology which could be “delicate” among anarchists, in view of my use of two labels (“power” and “authority”) which are not neutral for anarchists, and for concepts which are, or at least which seem to me to be, neutral. As I said at the beginning of this article, anarchists use the terms power, domination and authority, particularly the first two, as synonyms, obviously with negative connotations (they stand for the “-archy” which they deny and oppose).

Why then am I proposing an anarchically neutral use of power and authority? In part it is to be provocative, to let a small semantic scandal focus more attention on the substance of a debate, to underline what seems to me to be a certain conceptual originality (small or great!) with a linguistic novelty. And also because it seems to me absurd that our terminology, the anarchist terminology, has three terms for one concept and none for the two others. But, above all, because I believe that what are termed power and authority in both common and specialist terminology are in fact what I earlier defined as power and authority *plus* domination. So if we take away domination from power and authority, making it a conceptually distinct category on its own, even if in all existing societies (except the residual forms of primitive societies) it is in fact superimposed on the other two, we are left with those types of relationships which I have proposed calling power and authority.

On the other hand, no anarchist would give a positive use to the term “powerlessness” (political, social, economic...) as a synonym of the absence of domination, as the power whose absence is indicated by this word has the positive connotation of “the power to do”, to exercise one’s own freedom.¹² And I am sure that the expression “power for everyone”¹³ does not sound heretical to most anarchists as, in this case, it is the individual’s capacity to decide and/or participate in the social decision-making processes that is meant.

Let us now leave the nominal question and turn our attention to that of the substance. In what way can the proposed conceptual definition be useful to anarchist thought?

They (or any other definitions which distinguish two or three or ten colours in that undifferentiated or barely differentiated area that we call power) allow us to understand and express better the central negation of anarchist philosophy (that is of the anarchist interpretation of the world) and so of its central affirmation, of its founding value: freedom. Furthermore, this definition paves the way for a better formulation of an infinite number of problems for anarchist “science” which studies both the “laws” (uniformity, constantly recurring relationships, causal connections, necessary conditions) of domination and the “laws” of freedom.

To give just a few examples.

In the field of politics, this allows us to think more clearly about the gap between norms and the law, to bring into evidence the substantial difference between the freedom of the liberals and

¹² With regard to the relationship between will and freedom (which are, emblematically, defined in Russian with the single term *volija*) see (2).

¹³ As, for example, in the following: “The power of all... means that each individual must hold sufficient (real) power to influence and control political decisions concerning his life, to the degree that this is compatible with an equal power for every other individual in society, so that everyone has, in every moment, the maximum possibility that is compatible with the maximum possibility of every other person, to realise the best life he can.” (26)

the freedom of the anarchists, to analyse the social decision-making processes, to go deeper into all that “has already been said” about assemblies, rotation of responsibilities, delegation, revocable mandates, etc. It could be said that these definitions, or at least a definition that distinguishes the regulating function from its possession by a privileged section of society is a necessary starting point for the construction of an anarchist political science (and for the working out of an anarchist “law”). It is certainly not by chance that anarchists have generally rejected “politics”, maintaining that it is the science and practice of power and identifying power with domination (an identification which is in fact the rule in existing societies).

In the realm of sociology these definitions could serve to distinguish better between the differences and the inequalities between individuals, roles and social categories; it could be useful for the identification of the institutions and mechanisms of domination, differentiating them from the structures of power; it could throw new light on the forms and contents of cooperation and conflict.

In economics these definitions will allow a more effective formulation of economic power (and domination). They allow us to see economic power as distinct from economic domination and so to distinguish more clearly between general economic “laws”, the economic “laws” which are common to all societies of domination and those which are peculiar to particular societies of domination.

In the field of psychology, they will allow us to distinguish between those asymmetries between individuals which are unavoidable and those which could be avoided, between personal and role differences (positive or neutral in terms of freedom) and inequalities which deny freedom. It will allow us a more effective study of the “libertarian personality” and the “authoritarian personality”.¹⁴ It may also help us to understand why, except in very particular periods, the anarchist message is incomprehensible for the great majority of people, why the Kropotkinian “spirit of revolt” is normally not as strong as social conformism.

In the field of education, these definitions may permit us to resolve the contradiction between the authority of the adult and the freedom of the minor¹⁵ and to understand why “permissiveness”, understood as the acceptance of anomie, is no more suited to libertarian education, that is, to the process of constructing the libertarian personality, than is discipline imposed through coercion.

And, furthermore, (speaking among anarchists) how many of our useless diatribes could be avoided, how many arguments between the deaf, could be resolved in rational confrontation? We need only think of the recurrent discussion on anarchist organisation in which, for a century now,

¹⁴ Or, as De Jouvenal says, the libertarian personality and the securitarian personality. “At every moment in any society there exist individuals who do not feel sufficiently protected and others who do not feel sufficiently free. Let us call the former securitarian and the latter libertarian” [15, p. 352]. The “securitarians” are those who need the highest possible level of cultural determination. “Once the ‘libertarian’ and ‘securitarian’ sentiments have been conceived (...) we can represent any society (...) as a multiplicity of points that can be ordered hierarchically according to their libertarian index. The most ‘securitarian’ will be situated towards the bottom and the ‘libertarian’ ones higher up” [15, p. 358]. (And so, voilà, we have domination and the “libertarians” become members of the dominant social groups. And thus an interesting idea turns into the same old story!).

¹⁵ We can consider, in this light, Bakunin’s contribution (14). For Bakunin, the educative process is a progressive movement from “authority” to “freedom”: the smaller the child, the greater is his need for external determination, as he grows the asymmetry between him and the adult decreases and with maturity he becomes a man in the full sense of the word and as such can and must reach the highest possible level of self-determination.

the lack of understanding on a semantic level has been at least as relevant as the disagreement on the substance.

There are many questions to which my proposal could help in reformulating the problem (and the examples I have given above refer to the conventional subdivisions of the study of man and society) and among these there is one in particular which arises almost inevitably in the course of any reflections on power and which, in particular, is evident in more than one of the steps of logic in the process of identification and division which I have followed. How, why and when are power, authority and domination born?

With the definitions that I have proposed this question only arises, in fact, in the case of domination. For authority and for power the answer is implicit in the respective definitions. If we accept the anthropological assumption that man is devoid of instinctual determination and that, vice versa, he is, thanks to the particular evolution of his cerebral organ, capable of producing a normative symbolic universe, it follows that the cultural regulating function is both *possible* and *essential* for him.¹⁶ In the same way, in my definitions, authority follows as a corollary of the postulate that society structures itself in functional roles.

Domination, on the other hand, has no inevitable foundation in the nature of man and his society. And it is for this that its origin becomes a problem in my definitions.

Let us see, first of all, what solutions non-anarchist thinkers have put forward. As we have already seen, they do not distinguish clearly between power and domination. Even when they hint at a conceptual difference they see the passage from one to the other as automatic – and do not deem it necessary to demonstrate this. This passage is frequently from domination to power (that is, the contrary of my logical process) and there are only a few who see it moving in the opposite direction. But even for them the process is indisputable and, in consequence, the two are born together: from the necessity for one comes the necessity for the other.

Let us now consider those “explanations” which seem to me, from my reading, to exemplify the main approaches to the justification of domination. One approach is that which, proceeding from domination to power, justifies the former with innate “natural” psychological mechanisms: there are some personalities naturally endowed for domination and some naturally endowed for subjugation.¹⁷ After laying this first stone in the theoretical edifice, the apologists of power-

¹⁶ “The primordial role of culture is to ensure the existence of the group as a group, and so to replace chance by organisation” [23, p. 75]. Culture provides a normative regulation for that which nature has “forgotten” to regulate through biology: man’s social behavior. In this it seems that there is no clear-cut gap between man and the other animals; “everything seems to take place as if the great apes, already able to disassociate themselves from the behavior of the species, did not however succeed in re-establishing a norm on a new level. Instinctual behavior loses that clarity and precision that it has for the majority of mammals; but the difference is completely negative, and the ground) abandoned by nature remains unoccupied territory” [23, p. 45].

¹⁷ “The majority of men are timid, modest, passive beings, who represent the plastic material of Power, being born to obey. The race of masters is a minority with a more intense vital force; they are the ambitious, the active, the imperious ones who need to affirm their superiority in thought and in action” [17, p. 301]. This vulgar commonplace with its racist overtones follows, surprisingly enough, observations of a very different quality, such as the following: “The beginnings of legitimacy are the justification of the right to command since, of all the inequalities between humans there is none that has such important consequences and so such a need for justification as the inequality deriving from power” [17, p. 27]. And “if, apart from some rare exceptions, all men have the same worth why should one have the right to command and the others the duty of obeying?” [17, p. 28]. Analogously, but more “dialectically”, Simmel speaks of the “will to dominate” and writes that “the human being’s feelings with respect to subordination are twofold. On the one hand he, in fact, wants to be dominated. Most men cannot only not exist without a guide but also feel this: they seek a superior force which will free them from responsibility (...) Nevertheless they have no lesser

domination hasten to vest it with more attractive structural elements and we are told that this “natural” subdivision of man into two categories (the potential masters and the potential slaves) is beneficial to both parties and that, basically, it is an admirable artifice of nature or providence to bestow on mankind the consequent advantages.¹⁸ Sennet’s explanation can also be seen to fall into this type of approach although it formally starts from influence, then moving through authority to power and domination.¹⁹

The second type of approach is the cultural one, of which Dahrendorf (12) is exemplar, with his thesis that no “natural” explanation of power-domination can be sustained: it is not the effect of a pre-existing inequality but, on the contrary, it is the cause of the first fundamental inequality between men. But as he does not distinguish between power and domination, for him the necessity of domination derives logically from the necessity of power (which he terms authority), that is from the regulating function. For him the regulating function and the privileged possession of it are one and the same thing.

The approaches to the problem of the genesis of power-domination can also be classified from another point of view: into those who assume, explicitly or implicitly, that they are contemporary with man and/or his society and those who postulate their appearance at a certain point in history. For the latter it is not, curiously (in the case of those theories which distinguish between power and domination), power-domination that appears but, generally, only domination that breaks into a social space which is undefined and is defined as the state of nature.²⁰

Where does the problem of the genesis of domination enter into the logic of my proposed hypothetical definitions? Since, within that logic, everything begins from the postulate of man’s cultural plasticity, it excludes any hypothesis based on innate bio-psychological elements such as the “will to rule” or the “instinct of domination”, etc. (and as a necessary counterpart the propensity to obey, will to be ruled, etc.). In the perspective of man’s cultural self-determination, his behavioral models are not inscribed in his nature, and no more in the gregarious-authoritarian one than in the anarchist one. (It is not that I wish to deny with this last statement that a “naturalistic” interpretation of anarchism is possible – it is in fact considerably diffuse. There is a form of anarchism which postulates man’s natural “goodness” in the sense of a natural self-regulative potential of human society which does not require normative limits. However even this anar-

need to oppose this power of direction (...) Thus it could be said that obedience and opposition are the two aspects or elements of what is in fact coherent human behavior” [31, p. 55].

¹⁸ “This polarisation of man into masters and servants seems admirably suited to the pre-arranged order in human nature” [17, p. 40]; “At its origins, power (...) is originally a form of defense against the two greatest terrors afflicting man: anarchy and war” [17, p. 30]. “Power is a social necessity. It is thanks to the order which it imposes and the agreement which it institutes that men can live a better life” [15, p. 29].

¹⁹ “Authority is a way of defining and interpreting differences in force. In a certain sense, the feeling of authority is actually the recognition that such differences do exist. In another and more complex sense it is one way of remaining aware of the needs and wishes of the weak and the strong” [30, p. 118]. Then “the synonym of force in political terminology (is) power” [30, p. 25]. Finally, “the existence of power between two people means that the will of one intends to prevail over that of the other” and “the chain of command is the structure through which this disequilibrium of will can be extended to thousands or millions of people” [30, p. 155].

²⁰ One example: “The natural society is small and the passage from the small society to the big cannot come about by the same process. Some factor is required to produce coagulation and in most cases this is not the instinct of association but the instinct of domination (my italics) (...) The creative principle behind the great aggregates of conquest: sometimes the work of one of the elementary societies of the social whole but more often of a warrior band coming from afar” [15, p. 103]. And again: “Thus the State has its origins, essentially, in the successes of a ‘band of brigands’ which suppresses individual small societies; a band which (...) exhibits an attitude of pure power with respect to the conquered, the subdued” [15, p. 104].

chism cannot explain domination “naturalistically” but only “culturally”, that is, as arising from man’s intervention).

Following a totally cultural interpretation of man, it is not strange that we find, in cultural situations of domination, character traits modeled on and for domination. Nor should we be surprised at not finding those traits in cultures characterised by the absence of domination (the already-mentioned inconceivability of command and of obedience, the fact that, as Clastres writes, “no one feels the absurd desire to do, have or seem more than one’s neighbour...”). It is the cultural context that gives meaning to the differences of character that serve it. It is thus evident that, in a context of domination, the individual character differences are forced into models leading to either pole of the command/obedience relationship.

But this still does not tell us when and how domination came into being. And I certainly do not pretend to be able to answer this here. The problem is perhaps destined to remain forever open, scientifically, if, as seems likely at least in our present state of knowledge, the possible answers are unprovable suppositions, since they are empirically “non-falsifiable”. We are therefore less likely to develop scientific theories about the origins of domination than “myths” (apologetic or critical).

For now, I will limit myself to a sketch of an explanatory hypothesis from an anarchist and “culture-based” point of view. My hypothesis is that domination appeared at a certain point in the history of the human race as a “cultural mutation”. We have recently begun to apply the principles of natural evolution (chance mutations and the positive selection of those characteristics best fitted to survival) to man’s cultural evolution.²¹ Domination could be seen to be a mutation (that is as a cultural innovation which, in certain conditions, proved advantageous, in terms of survival, for those social groups that adopted it, for example for greater military efficiency, and so it was imposed as a model either by conquest or by imitation for defensive purposes.

One variant of this hypothesis, which I find reasonably convincing, is to suppose that the domination mutation did not appear completely *ex abrupto* but rather that elements of domination (that is to say, social relationships partly or temporarily modeled on the command/obedience relationship and on the inequality of power that this implies) have always existed, or at least pre-dated the society of domination, as for example in the man/woman, old/young, warrior/non-warrior, chief/tribe relationships. (In these relationships domination could have existed as a cultural *imitation* of asymmetries seen in – or rather interpreted from – nature, that is in the “social” animal hunted or reared or otherwise observed.²² But this is yet another hypothesis.) These elements of domination would have been kept “under control” in the earliest human societies and so could not become generalised as elements central to culture and society, until changed “environmental” conditions allowed their transformation into dominant regulatory models. At this point came the mutation from which only those groups which were geographically and/or culturally isolated were immune.

This hypothesis of mutation opens (or, better, restates) a whole series of problems related to the project of abolishing domination, which is the central, identifying feature of anarchism, since, in this light, the anarchist transformation of society can also be seen as, essentially, a cultural mutation. In that project, the anarchists are mutants who tend to multiply or to transmit their

²¹ See (9).

²² This is one point of view from which we can consider Clastres’ observation that the politics of the primitive societies studied by him was organised around the understanding that coercive power in itself “is nothing other than a surreptitious alibi of nature” [10, p. 38].

cultural “anomaly” (in the face that is of the normality of the dominant model) and, at the same time, to create the “environmental” conditions which will favor their mutation, that is the generalisation of the mutant character. This could open up the way for a whole new interpretation of the relationship between existential anarchism and its educational, revolutionary or other forms.

But all this is taking us too far from the original aim of this article which was begun with the idea of offering some preliminary reflections on power, limiting these to the ambit of a proposal of definitions. So, at least for now, that is all.

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Amedeo Bertolo
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