De-Facing Power

Clarissa Rile Hayward

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1 Introduction

On a mid-September afternoon, I rode the indirect route that public transportation provides to the core urban North End Community School.[1] The trip from the middle-class neighborhood that borders North End – two or three miles at most – takes multiple bus rides, and more than half an hour. The bus dropped me about a block and a half from the school, outside the public housing project where many North End students live.

Approaching the school building, I was surprised to see that the vast majority of the children playing outside wore uniforms: plaid jumpers with white blouses for the girls, gray pants, white shirts, and red ties and jackets for the boys.

I had come for an interview with the principal, Natalie Carson, to arrange to conduct participant-observation research in a fourth grade classroom throughout the academic year, and to work as a volunteer at the school.[2] Our meeting was short. Carson asked what I expected to learn while at North End. She asked which days I wanted to come, and which hours. She asked me for references, and she told me that the central district office would require me to undergo a security check.

Leaving Carson's office, I saw in the hallway a group of students who looked like fourth or fifth graders. They were standing in line, some pushing each other, some dancing. A teacher spoke in a raised voice, correcting children who talked and those who stepped out of line.

About two weeks later, I received a message on my answering machine from Monica Segal, a fourth grade teacher at Fair View Elementary, which is a public school in the affluent suburban community of Fair View, Connecticut.[3]

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the proper names of schools, school districts, and individuals in schools are pseudonyms. As a condition for access to the classrooms I studied, I agreed not to disclose these identities. For demographic and other data on the North End Community School and the North End neighborhood, see pages 59 and 62–3 and Appendix A, tables 1–3. [2] On my participant-observation research, see Appendix B.

[3] For demographic and other data on Fair View Elementary and the town of Fair View, see pages 114–16 and Appendix A, tables 1–3.

When we spoke, Segal told me a little about the school. There was a new principal this year, she said. She referred to her as "Anita."

She told me that the fourth graders were divided into five classes. At the end of each year, she explained, third grade teachers met and decided how to arrange the students for the following year, aiming for a balance in academic ability and classroom behavior.

Segal said that this year would be the first that the school did not offer an advanced math class, a change that, she reported, was currently at the center of a controversy. Parents of "gifted" children were unhappy with the decision to eliminate the class.

And Segal told me about her own classroom. She said that she had removed all the desks and replaced them with tables and chairs, as well as a couch and other comfortable furniture. She said that her students did most of their work independently, at their own speed. She told me that this year she was "letting the children make all of the decisions in the classroom." In fact, she said, it was the students who had decided that I could come in once a week to observe and help out.

The study of power

I arranged to participate in and to observe classes at North End and at Fair View, because I wanted to study a social phenomenon known as "power." Schooled in the political theories of power that developed in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century, I had learned that power takes many forms or, in the language of the political science power debate, wears many "faces." *The powerful*, I had learned, *have power* in the form of resources, the control of political agendas, or strategic advantage conferred by social structures. They *use power*, I had further learned, interfering with choices that the powerless would make, but for power's exercise. The powerful coerce the powerless. They manipulate them in ways that change their conduct. They teach them to anticipate defeat, and therefore not to challenge the *status quo*. At times, they even induce the powerless to misapprehend their own preferences and to act in ways contrary to their interests.

Political theories of power's many faces suggested questions that I should ask at the North End Community School and at Fair View Elementary. How is power distributed at each site? Who has power, who lacks power, and in what do power's mechanisms consist? How do powerful agents use the power they have? And how do their actions on power's mechanisms affect powerless actors?

What is more, sociological studies and educational theories of the role power plays in schools suggested explanatory hypotheses. At North End,

where students are members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and economic groups, teachers, administrators, and other powerful agents might use power to induce children to alter their behavior, desires, and attitudes, in ways contrary to their interests. At Fair View, by contrast, powerful teachers might *empower* privileged students, enabling them to realize their chosen ends, or their authentic interests and desires.

My aim in this book is to make the case, not only that the hypotheses suggested by studies of power in the classroom are wrong, but also that the questions informing these hypotheses are, in important ways, misguided. At North End power is located, not only and not principally in mechanisms that teachers and other people who seem "powerful" possess or direct (such as rules requiring children to wear uniforms and to stand in line), but also in boundaries to social action that no actor "has" or "uses." Key political mechanisms include the bus route that makes it impossible to ride public transportation directly to and from North End and the middle-class neighborhood adjacent to it. They include the zoning, the housing, and the other laws and policies that shaped the decision to site public housing units in this particular urban neighborhood. They include the institutional rules that render the city in which North End is located a municipality and a school district, distinct from suburban municipalities and districts.

Power's mechanisms shape social action at North End, what is more, by constraining and enabling the forms of action that are possible for *all* actors here. They affect the fields of action, not only of students, who seem relatively "powerless," but also of teachers, administrators, and other actors who, by the prevailing view, "have" and "use" power.

Furthermore, the privileged world of Fair View is not a site of unambiguous "empowerment." In this resource-rich suburban school, the fields of action of teachers, students, and other agents are not only enabled, but also constrained by boundaries that include social definitions of what it means to be "gifted" and the social standards Segal relies on to define academic ability and to distinguish good classroom behavior from bad. Children in Segal's classroom do not, in fact, decide everything. What is more, what they do not decide – the particular norms and the particular standards that are placed beyond students' reach at Fair View – delimit and circumscribe social possibility in ways that warrant the attention of those who would critically analyze power relations.

In the pages that follow, I argue that students of power should *de-face* this concept. We should define power, not as an instrument some agents use to alter the independent action of others, but rather as a network of boundaries that delimit, for all, the field of what is socially possible. This

alternative conceptualization rejects the unsustainable definition of freedom, implicit in accounts of power's various "faces," as a state in which action is independently chosen and/or authentic. It directs attention toward a series of relevant empirical questions that students of power-with-a-face tend to overlook. And it suggests conceptual and normative links between theories of power and theories of democracy. Power relations that warrant criticism, my view suggests, are those defined by practices and institutions that severely restrict participants' social capacities to participate in their making and re-making.

Social action, social boundaries

The argument is, of course, not divorced from other social theorizing about and empirical work on power relations. As a preface to elaborating my critique of definitions of power-with-a-face, and my positive claims about power, I want to comment briefly on similarities between my view and what I take to be three kindred approaches to conceptualizing the relation between social boundaries and social action.[4]

The first is captured in work by social scientists who, beginning in the late 1970s, contributed to literatures often grouped together under the banner of the "new institutionalism." New institutionalists told stories about the "why" of social action, which they opposed to purely behavioral accounts that bracket questions of how strategies, goals, preferences, and identities are socially shaped. Rather than taking desires, aims, ends, and interests as starting points, that is to say, asking only how these affect policy decisions and other political outcomes, new institutionalists emphasized that, and explored the ways in which, institutions shape what actors can do in particular social contexts, what they want to do, and the ways in which it is strategically rational for them to pursue particular aims, ends, and interests.[5]

Theorists of power's so-called "third face" studied the ways in which power's mechanisms shape desires and preferences.[6] Structural power theorists viewed power relations as shaped by institutional roles and relations.[7] But these and other students of power-with-a-face were united by

[4] Throughout this book, I use "action" broadly, to mean not only how individual and collective actors conduct themselves, but also what they believe and perceive, what they want, and with whom they identify.

[5] This brief description does not do justice to a complex literature composed of what some have characterized as divergent historical, sociological, and rational choice variants. See Hall and Taylor (1996) and Smith (1992).

[6] Gaventa (1980) and Lukes (1974 and 1976).

[7] Ball (1975a, 1975b, 1978, and 1992), Barnes (1988), Benton (1981), Isaac (1987a and 1987b), and Wartenberg (1990 and 1992).

the assumption that elaborating normatively compelling arguments about power requires dichotomizing, both between agents who have power and actors who are powerless, and between actions agents choose or authentically desire, and those that are socially constrained: impeded or otherwise altered by the actions of others.

To de-face power is to emphasize, with the new institutionalists, that social boundaries to action circumscribe *all social action*. Mechanisms of power – boundaries that, by my view, include but are not limited to institutional rules, norms, and procedures – define and delimit fields of action. They do so, not only for those who seem powerless, like students, but also for teachers, principals, and other apparently "powerful" agents. Power's mechanisms influence what these actors want to do in the school and the classroom, what they believe they need to do, and should do. And they delimit options for realizing pedagogic aims and ends.

A second approach to conceptualizing the relation between social boundaries and social action that has important affinities with my own is that outlined by Michel Foucault in his historical writings and programmatic statements on power, and expanded on by some poststructuralist theorists and philosophers.[8] Although Foucault and those who drew on his work tended to emphasize, as key political mechanisms, less institutional rules and procedures than discursive norms and social identities, they shared with new institutionalists, and with my own view, the rejection of the premise that power is directed by agents who "have" or "use" it. In a frequently cited passage, Foucault asserted that power "comes from below . . . there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations."[9]

But Foucault and Foucaultians pushed even further than the new institutionalists – and usefully so – this claim that (at least some forms of) power "[circulate] without voice or signature."[10] The difference was the product of Foucault's Nietzschean ontology. Whereas many new institutionalists began with Giddens's theory of "structuration,"[11] assuming that agents act upon, and are simultaneously constrained by social limits to what they might do, be, and desire, those who adopted a Foucaultian view emphasized, as key political mechanisms, boundaries that define the agent itself, this social being that does, that is, that wants. Power does not simply act *upon* a (pre-political) agent, that is to say, constituting its preferences and delimiting how it might rationally act to realize them. It also produces this agent. It forges a coherent, responsible, rational, modern

[8] Foucault (1970, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, and 1982), Brown (1995), Butler (1997), Connolly (1991 and 1995), Honig (1993), and Wolin (1996). [9] Foucault (1980a: 94).
[10] Butler (1997: 6). [11] Giddens (1976, 1979, 1981, and 1984).

subject out of a human "material" that does not fit this or any identity without "remainder."

Although these claims are not demonstrably true, any more so than are Giddens's ontological presuppositions, or for that matter those that sustain behavioralism, they are arguably Foucault's most important claims about power. The significance of the archaeological[12] and genealogical[13] arguments that power is "productive," that human agents are not only its targets but also its "effects,"[14] lies in the fact that, in refusing (with Nietzsche) to assume that some essence is at the root of human subjectivity, they raise the possibility that *every* ordering of social relations, and *every* ordering of social selves (every inter- and intrasubjective power relation) bears some cost in the form of a violence it does to "what might be" in the self and in the social world.[15]

Foucault provides a good starting point for critical analyses of power relations. It is a point, however, from which I start an analysis that neither Foucault nor his more recent appropriators likely would endorse. This is the case because I am largely persuaded by arguments by Jürgen Habermas and others[16] that archaeology and genealogy *alone* are conservative forms of political criticism, that resistance to and transgression of extant social boundaries *alone* define an unnecessarily constrictive vision of political change. My argument shares with the Foucaultian view the "hypothesis" that "power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network."[17] Yet it is decidedly un-Foucaultian in its effort to elaborate critical arguments about particular relations of power and to draw distinctions grounded in democratic norms and values.

These departures from the Foucaultian tradition point to a third understanding of the relation between social boundaries and social action that bears affinities with the argument for de-facing power: discourse theoretic models of politics as the collective definition of social possibility. Work by Habermas and those who drew on his theory of communicative action[18] has the advantage over Foucaultian archaeological and genealogical analyses of emphasizing that legal and other boundaries to social

[12] That is, the claim that the modern subject was an epistemological impossibility prior to modernity, that only with Kant and the dawn of the "Age of Man" did it become possible to conceive "a being whose nature . . . is to know nature, and itself, in consequence, as a natural being" (Foucault 1970: 310).

[13] That is, the historical argument is that there emerged around the time of the French revolution a regime of "bio-power" that grew up around the "modalities" of disciplinary control of the individual body and control of the life of the population (Foucault 1979 and 1980a).

[14] Foucault (1980b: 98).

[15] Connolly (1993).

[16] Habermas (1986 and 1987b: chs. 9 and 10). Other important expositions of this line of criticism are Fraser (1981) and Walzer (1983).

[17] Foucault (1980b: 142).

[18] Habermas (1984, 1987a, and 1998).

action constrain *and* enable. Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz's slogan (his assertion that politics is "war by other means"[19]) is, then, an overstatement. Norms can be the product of, not only strategic action, but also what Habermas called action "oriented toward mutual understanding."

It is not enough to demonstrate that particular mechanisms and relations of power "might be otherwise." In addition, social critics need to elaborate criteria for distinguishing better from worse forms of power relation, or, more specifically, relations that promote participants' political freedom – that is, their capacity to act in ways that affect norms and other political mechanisms defining the field of the possible – from those that approximate states of domination. To this end, Habermas relied almost exclusively on the discourse principle (to which he referred as "D"): "Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses," where rational discourses include "*any* attempt to reach an understanding over problematic validity claims insofar as this takes place under conditions of communication that enable the free processing of topics and contributions, information and reasons in the public space constituted by illocutionary obligations."[20] Privileging law, however, when analyzing boundaries that define and delimit social action, functioned as a crutch that enabled Habermas and others to wish away the constraining effects of the deliberative and discursive norms "D" presupposes.[21] Power's mechanisms include social standards, such as standards of discursive competence and rationality. They include socially valued ends and social identities. Habermas and deliberative democrats, then, tended to skirt hard questions about how best to organize power relations in polities, economies, communities, families, schools, in selves, if these relations involve irreconcilable conflict, if every possible order involves some element of coercion.

None the less, I want to emphasize – and this I see as a central point of agreement between my view and Habermas's – that power relations might, to a greater or lesser extent, enable those they position to act in ways that affect their constitutive boundaries. Students of power should consider the extent to which, and investigate the ways in which, particular relations of power enable and promote this social capacity for action *upon* boundaries to action.

[19] Foucault (1980b: 90). [20] Habermas (1998: 106–7), emphasis as in original.
[21] On the differential constraining effects of communicative norms and standards of rationality, see Fraser (1992) and Young (1996).

Outline of the argument

De-facing power is a matter of conceptualizing political mechanisms as boundaries, at least in part the product of human action, that facilitate and limit action for all actors, in all social contexts. Power's mechanisms include laws, norms, standards, and personal and social group identities. They demarcate fields of action. They render possible and impossible, probable and improbable, particular forms of conduct, speech, belief, reason, and desire. Freedom, by this view, is not "negative freedom," a state or a "space" in which action is chosen, independent of the action of others.[22] Instead, it is political freedom: a social capacity to act, alone and with others, upon the boundaries that define one's field of action. Power relations enable and constrain participants' freedom, to varying degrees and in varying ways. Therefore, developing critical accounts of power relations, accounts that might inform strategies for changing them in freedom-promoting ways, requires attending to the ways in which power's mechanisms enable and disable this capacity for "action on" power.

I begin making the case for de-facing power by critically engaging the power debate in political science. I argue that participants in this debate arbitrarily excluded from their analyses some realm of social action they defined as "free," the effects of power on the action of agents they defined as "powerful," and the ways power is exercised in the absence of interaction and other clear connections between the "powerful" and "powerless." I argue that students of power relations should ask, not "How is power distributed?" and "Do the powerful interfere with the free action of the powerless?" but "How – that is, through which mechanisms and through which political processes – do people define and order collective value and meaning?"

I then take up the example of power relations in the classroom and the school, to make the case that difficulties with definitions of power-with-a-face extend beyond the conceptual problems that plague debates among political theorists. I consider critical pedagogy, a literature that applied definitions of power-with-a-face to the specific case of power relations in schools. My central claim in chapter 3 is that viewing power as an instrument powerful teachers have and use to interfere with the free action of powerless students introduces into empirical analyses assumptions that deflect attention from questions crucial to developing critical accounts of power relations in the classroom.

What alternative account might a de-faced view provide? In chapter 4, I draw on participant-observation and other data from the North

[22] Berlin (1969).

End Community School to argue that power shapes freedom there in significant part via rules, norms, social group identities, and other boundaries defining pedagogic practices and municipal and educational institutions, boundaries that no agent has, uses, or directs. Institutional and other limits to action work together to define for adults at this core urban school a set of immediate problems to which some refer as "the environment." Power shapes fields of possibility by requiring these actors (who by the prevailing view "have power") to respond to problems that threaten their students' basic well-being, and to do so before they address other, perhaps equally valued, pedagogic ends. Power's mechanisms define, as well, a limited set of possibilities and strategic options for responding to these problems. And they do so in ways that render locally *enabling* what some critics label "authoritarian" approaches to teaching and disciplining children.

In chapter 5, I turn my attention to Fair View Elementary. My account of power relations there highlights striking differences, not only in resources but also in pedagogy, between North End and Fair View. These include the more participatory and internalized disciplinary style at Fair View, the emphasis there on independent work and active participation in what some teachers call "the learning process," and the stress on student self-motivation and self-regulation. These differences, my account suggests, contribute to inequalities of access to skills and dispositions that are rewarded with recognition, status, and highly compensated and relatively autonomous jobs. That greater rewards are attached to the actions and attitudes cultivated at Fair View does not, however, mean that actors there choose freely, or have a wider range of actions and attitudes from which to choose, than do actors at North End. The central claims advanced in chapter 5 are three. First, depoliticized standards of conduct and character, ends of learning, and social identities, which help define power relations at Fair View, are as firm limits to action as are the hierarchically imposed and enforced rules at North End. Second, transgressions of these limits are punished at least as severely, if not more so, at Fair View. And third, the depoliticization of key norms, identities, and other boundaries defining pedagogic practices at Fair View reproduces and reinforces inequalities, both within and beyond the bounds of the community.

The analysis of power relations at these two sites points, then, to a distinction between being privileged and being socially enabled to act in ways that contest and change the power relations in which one participates. Fair View actors, although privileged, are not so enabled. This claim does not, however, translate into the assertion that all power relations are equivalent. In the concluding chapter, I ask, "If we de-face

power – if we expand the definition of power to include mechanisms no actor possesses or manipulates, boundaries that affect the action of even actors who seem 'powerful' – then how might we criticize particular power relations?" I argue that students of power de-faced should criticize relationships that prevent or discourage participants from acting in ways that affect their constitutive boundaries to action. Such criticism requires asking (with Habermas) whether power relations defined by social practices and institutions enable those whose action they affect to participate in determining the norms that comprise them. It requires asking (with Foucault) whether some collective norms are depoliticized in ways that legitimize the discipline and punishment of those who transgress them.

By the view that predominates in political theory, and in political science generally, power is directed by the teacher who raises her voice at the North End Community School, inducing her students to be quiet, to stand in line. It is directed, as well, by the Fair View Elementary teacher who empowers her students, letting them "make all of the decisions in the classroom." Power, most theorists and most empirical researchers who studied the concept agreed, is a tool people either have or lack, an instrument that some agents use to interfere with the free action of others. In the pages that follow, however, I make the case that those who would critically analyze the ways in which human agents enable and constrain political freedom, understood as the social capacity to help shape the terms of one's life with others, must reject this assumption that power wears the "face" of agents who use and direct it.