

# POWER AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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## Highlights from the Readings

### Martin Saar (2014) "Power"

"The Weberian idea that power refers to an actor's capacity to influence or determine another actor's behavior or to carry out his or her will, even against the other's resistance, has been the core of the traditional concept of power, and it has been reformulated in many ways" (1098) - RH

"Several theories of power have tried to [... focus] less on individual acts of power exercise between people and more on the very creation of social relationships or even social entities through power. [...] This sets power in sharp contrast to domination and expresses the idea that power has to be created collectively and is not just there to be found. But it also shows that power is the very basis on which collective social action is possible and that it can never be full substituted by the rule of force or violence. Power, as it were, manifests itself as empowerment, as the bringing about of new forms of agency" (1100). KS

"To say that power not only acts on but even "produces" bodies and subjects requires speaking about power in terms of social ontology and the very constitution of the social. This does not mean that power as constitution is not bound up with systems of control, repression, and hierarchization. On the contrary, one can argue that the efficacy of certain systems of control and regulation exist on the basis of their capacity to produce and shape the affects, mentalities, and self-conceptions of subject." (1100) - RH

### Christian Scholl (2016) "Prefiguration"

"The politicization of subjectivity and interpersonal relations has politicized integrity: people are now called upon to have their daily practice fully reflect their political values" (323). KS

"Conceptually, prefiguration marked a rejection of both centrism and vanguardism. For her part, Breines (1989, 6-7) distinguished between "strategic politics" aimed at structural changes, and "prefigurative politics" aimed at creating communal embodiments of the desired society. In this view "prefigurative politics" offered a means of moving beyond a demand-based politics focused primarily on socio-economic issues" (323) - RH

“As Engler and Engler (2014a) put it, ‘if the project building alternative community totally eclipses attempts to communicate with the wider public and win broad support, it risks becoming a very limiting type of self-isolation’” (324) - RH

### Frances Fox Piven (2008) Can Power from Below Change the World?

“I propose that there is another kind of power [interdependent power] based not on resources, thing, or attributes, but rooted in the social and cooperative relations in which people are enmeshed by virtue of group life. Think of societies as composed of networks of cooperative relations, more or less institutionalized [...]. Social life is cooperative life, and in principle, all people who make contributions to these systems of cooperation have potential power over others who depend on them.” (p. 5) - RH

“The actualization of interdependent power typically requires that people break the rules that govern the institutions in which they participate, if only because those rules are designed to suppress interdependent power. People must also recognize that they have some power, that elites also depend on the masses. People have to organize, to contrive ways of acting in concert, at least insofar as concerted action is necessary to make their power effective” (8). KS

“[...] social life is complicated, and political action takes form within a matrix of social relations. Those who try to mobilize disruptive power must overcome the constraints typically imposed by their multiple relations with others [...] Of course, the process of reform will be complicated and the outcomes shaped not only by interdependent power, but also by the complex institutional structures we inherit, cultural memory, and the concentrate power resources of aggrandizing elites. All that said, without the tempering influence of movements from below and the interdependent power they wield, our future is ominous.” (12) RH

### John Holloway (2002) “Beyond Power?”

This [document](#) is a subjective collection of quotes and passages from other chapters of *Change the World without Taking Power* (Holloway, 2002) that I have found generative and contextual to my personal understanding of chapter 3’s argument. - RH

“The notion of capturing positions of power, whether it be governmental power or more dispersed positions of power in society misses the point that the aim of the revolution is to dissolve relations of power, to create a society based on the mutual recognition of people’s dignity. What has failed is the notion that revolution means capturing power in order to abolish power” (20). KS

“All our categories of thought, all our assumptions about what is reality, or what is politics or economics or even where we live, are so permeated by power that just to say “no!” to power precipitates us into a vertiginous world in which there are no fixed reference points to hold on to other than the force of our own ‘no!’” Power and social theory exist in such symbiosis that power is the lens through which theory sees the world [...]. To try to theorize anti-power is to wander in a largely unexplored world. How can the world be changed without taking power? The answer is obvious: we do not know. That is why it is so important to work at the answer, practically and theoretically” (22).  
KS

“The struggle to liberate power-to is not the struggle to construct a counter-power, but rather an anti-power, something that is radically different from power-over. Concepts of revolution that focus on the taking of power are typically centred on the notion of counter-power. The strategy is to construct a counter-power, a power that can stand against the ruling power. Often the revolutionary movement has been constructed as a mirror image of power, army against army, party against party, with the result that power reproduces itself within the revolution itself. Anti- power, then, is not counter-power, but something much more radical: it is the dissolution of power-over, the emancipation of power-to. This is the great, absurd, inevitable challenge of the communist dream: to create a society free of power relations through the dissolution of power-over.” (p. 36-37) -RH

### Charlene A. Carriuthers (2018) Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements. Excerpts

“There are three collective commitments our movements must take up to regenerate: 1. Building many strong leaders, 2. Adopting healing justice as a core organizing value and practice, 3. Combating liberalism with principled struggle.” KS

“Everyone invested in collective liberation must answer the following questions critical to determining the health and success of our movements: Who am I? Who are my people? What do we want? What are we building? Are we ready to win?” KS

“Community organizing for our collective liberation requires interpersonal and sound relationships with the natural world around us. I believe in organizing with groups of people to create the type of world we want future generations to live in. The gap between the world as it is and as I want it to be expands and contracts, and I can’t control the size of the disconnection, but I believe the gap gets smaller when I organize with people along lines of shared interests, values, and vision.” -RH

“Principled struggle means that we talk with each other from a place that allows mutual dignity. Principled struggle means that our conclusions about people, events, and organizations are as sound as possible, grounded in observation, and recognizing that even then our assessment may not be valid.”

-RH

### adrienne maree brown (2017) Emergent Strategy

“Small is good, small is all.

Change is constant. (Be like water).

There is always time for the right work.

There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it.

Never a failure, always a lesson.

Trust the People. (if you trust the people, they become trustworthy).

Move at the speed of trust. [...]

Less prep, more presence.

What you pay attention to grows” (41-42). KS

“How we live and grow and stay purposeful in the face of constant change actually does determine both the quality of our lives, and the impact that we can have when we move into action together” (69) KS

**“Do you already know that your existence--who and how you are--is in and of itself a contribution to the people and place around you?** Not after or because you do some particular thing, but simply the miracle of your life. And that the people around you, and the place(s), have contributions as well? Do you understand that your quality of life and your survival are tied to how authentic and generous the connections are between you and the people and place you live with and in?” (91) KS

### Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit

“In this volatile moment, racial justice advocates face an urgent mandate to inspire visions of a future America based on inclusion and interdependence, rather than on division and domination. This future requires building mass consciousness to see race not as the classification of human difference, but as a mythology created in service to broadly damaging systems of plunder and control. It requires engaging in rigorous political imagination and struggle to forge new ways of seeing our humanity in one another across race and national borders. Building this consciousness is as much a cultural project

as it is a political one. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us, “hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness.” (4) KS

“The original mission of the Asian American movement was to contest the underlying forces behind those experiences – racism, capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism – by working across ethnic, racial, and national boundaries. [...] The interests animating the Asian American movement today are the same as they were 50 years ago – to end war, violence, poverty, racism, and xenophobia. The stakes are tangible and deep” (5). KS

“We acknowledge that we, as Asians, have often been used as part of a “divide-and-conquer” strategy to uphold white supremacy. We refuse to be used as tools to uphold a racist and violent system” (317). KS

### Regotsofetse Chikane (2018) Breaking A Rainbow, Building a Nation

“Can coconuts be trusted with the revolution? Can they undergo a process of rejection that involves the removal of their complicity within a system that offers them opportunities for advancement, while simultaneously explicitly denouncing it, using the privileges the same system has vested in them?” (15) KS

“Coconuts and the black elite, like any other group within #MustFall movements, will try to steer the movement in a direction that favours them best. But unlike other groups who compete for the soul of the #MustFall movements, we hide in the tall grass, hoping that no one sees us, yet banking on the knowledge that enough people can sense our presence. We unconsciously influence #MustFall politics to protect our self interest under the impression that our acts are for the greater good. The presence of a bigger villain allows the gaze to turn away from us. We are asked questions we’re never truly expected to answer and as a result, in the same way that we traverse our post-apartheid society, coconuts chart the landscape of #MustFall politics; cautious, conniving, curious and always cunning” (234). KS

### Patrisse Cullors (2019) “Abolition and Reparations: Histories of Resistance, Transformative Justice and Accountability.”

“Abolition calls on us not only to destabilize, deconstruct, and demolish oppressive systems, institutions, and practices, but also to repair histories of harm across the board” (1686) KS

“Abolition must be a cultural intervention. It must produce a new way of being even in the most challenging and difficult moments. We have not collectively practiced abolition so it’s hard for us to understand its significance. But, if we implement a new practice that is centered in care and dignity, we might find a practice that challenges our instinct to “cancel” each other. Abolition is about how we

treat each other. It is about how we show up in relationships. Abolition is about how we respond to harm caused and how we respond when we cause harm. It is differentiating between large-scale systems that have been built to perpetuate our harm, and individual harm caused against one another. I don't believe abolition is about bullying, but I do believe abolition is about standing up for yourself. We need to be committed to building a culture that is rooted in care, dignity, and accountability”  
(1694) KS

### Antony Dapiran (2019) “Be Water!': seven tactics that are winning Hong Kong's democracy revolution.”

“Hong Kong's young protesters are eschewing the fixed, immobile occupation strategies of the past, in favour of a highly mobile, agile style of protest. A rally may turn into a march; a march may begin in one direction and abruptly change to another direction; the focus of a particular protest action may only emerge in the course of the march itself. [...] As Bruce Lee said, “Water can flow, or it can crash!”  
KS

### Jacqueline Villarrubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez. (2019). “Puerto Rico: The Shift from Mass Protests to People's Assemblies.”

“It is too soon to know whether this newly acquired power will lead to a radical change in the political structure of the island and, if so, what type of change. What is certain is that the sense of empowerment produced by people's participation in the mass mobilizations has undoubtedly led to a political awakening. These assemblies suggest that people are beginning a process of appropriation and probing of participatory democracy and its vectors—that is, empowerment, self-management, and self-determination. The shift from street demonstrations to people's assemblies suggests “the proposal behind the protest,” a principle that challenges those mobilized by grievances to construct their own solutions and present them as alternatives to the current state of affairs.” KS

### Youth United for Change (2019) “Y'all Tryna Win or Nah? Lessons on Organization Development and Youth Organizing on Shifting Terrain.”

“In the United States, young people of color generally become conscious of unjust power dynamics, resource inequity, and institutional racism within the school classrooms they inhabit the majority of their fledgling lives. This is why YUC's organizing is aimed at establishing educational/ economic justice through systems change, as well as encouraging broader engagement of civil society by Black and Brown youth and their communities. [...] In the midst of all of this activity, the adult staff and

membership of YUC have been wrestling with what “winning” actually looks like for our people. Though we take pride in what we have been able to achieve thus far, more is needed if true equity and justice are ever to take root in our society. [...] For us, we are clear that operating as a special interest advocacy group is not enough. We need to develop a new generation of visionary and progressive leaders committed to compelling America to live up to its ideals by all means at their disposal” (4). KS

“Winning requires a collective commitment to complex authenticity, perpetual learning, and hard-nosed rigor. Winning requires an unrelenting, ruthless criticism of all of our assumptions about our world, our work, our people, and ourselves. Winning requires sharing uncomfortable truths about our practice and organizations, not to shame or ostracize one another, but to help all of us avoid repeating mistakes that inhibit our collective ability to achieve liberation. Finally, winning requires taking calculated risks based on material assessments and shedding obsolete organizing practices and tactics when they outlive their usefulness based on such assessments. If our sector begins to do such things at a mass scale in partnership with other key social movement sectors, we can potentially witness a progression of societal transformation we have not seen since the advent of Reconstruction” (5). KS

## Class Notes

### Readings on Power

- Readings by organizers/facilitators -
  - invite us to consider power in a personal sense, how we understand ourselves in movement work (be gentle with ourselves, be in community with others)
- Readings taking us to the frontlines -
  - “Y’all Trying to Win or Nah,” “Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit” (300 pages of facilitation modules on engaging in anti-racist work)
  - Prefiguration, new forms of being and being in community with each other
- Current/Recent Movements
  - Puerto Rico
  - Hong Kong

### Orientations

- What is “power”? What work do (theories of) power do/not do?
  - John Holloway:

- “Power and social theory exist in such symbiosis that power is the lense through which theory sees the world... To try to theorize anti-power is to wander in a largely unexplored world.” (pg 22)
- Power-to vs. Power-over - power over relies on the ability to control another person’s power to. How does this interact with “power within”? Power within is socially constituted, through community (intersection with Piven)
- Questioning power as circumscribed by the state, assumptions about the sovereignty of the state, central focus of reform/revolution on seizing contro of state
- “Power is always social” (pg ~28)
- Saar - Dominant and prevailing definitions of Power
- Piven - Interdependent power
  - “Why are people without what we usu-ally call power resources able to win anything ever?” (pg 4)
  - Reframing power from institutions to power, from the top to the bottom
  - Power as not only originating from dominance, but also from community
  - “I propose that there is another kind of power... rooted in the social and cooperative relations...” (Pg. 5)
  - “The actualization of interdependent power typically requires that people break the rules...” (Pg. 8)
  - First strategy to build power is to break the rules. Institutions/rules often serve to dominate, maintain the status quo. How do we break the rules in a way that doesn’t break collective solidarities?
- What might it mean to reimagine power and ourselves in relationship with one another for the purposes of social transformation?
  - Tendency to reproduce relations of dominance results from lack of consideration around what power we are trying to acquire, what types of power are we trying to produce and sustain
  - adrienne maree brown reimagines power - swarm, shoal, murmuration moving toward a common goal. But who gets to define what is the good of the collective? Who gets to define the collective?
    - *Unapologetic*: caution against valorizing single, charismatic leaders that are not accountable to communities.
  - Is there a way to build power that does not simultaneously shift our capacity to exist in this transformed world? Does being empowered ever disempower others?
  - So much of what we think about justice is corrective, addressing past injustice. Are there other ways of envisioning justice? (E.g. prison reform vs. prison abolition)
  - *Unapologetic* by Charlene Caruthers



- Healing Justice - Reclaiming healing from medical industrial complex, healing as coming from relationships with each other, our own capacity to restore one another and ourselves. Justice isn't given by the power-over, instead given by power-within. Restorative justice is about healing trauma, being whole. Acknowledging fetishization of burnout and exhaustion in organizing spaces, when we deserve to have fun, to have pleasure, to be loved (similar to brown).
  - Is there an ableist bend to this? Is this inclusive of those who cannot be healed? If we prioritize healing ourselves before engaging in organizing, do we re-marginalize others?
    - Can we organize without making spaces for ourselves to heal first? Being whole cannot be a requirement for organizing because we will never move. But organizing cannot be sustained without love and an attempt to heal.
    - Maybe healing and restoration don't necessarily mean returning to a previous state, but moving forward with those scars and traumas.
    - Some interpersonal harms are the result of structural harms.
  - Punishment is easy; accountability is hard (drawing on Marian Caba). Confusion between power, punishment, and accountability.
  - Love as a praxis: if movements are going to be sustained and generative in order for another world to be possible, we need love.
  - "There are three collective commitments to our movements must take up to regenerate: 1. Building many strong leaders, 2. Adopting healing justice... 3. Combating liberalism with principled struggle."
  - "Everyone invested in collective liberation..."
  - "Principled struggle means..."
- Let's read more sci-fi! (E.g. Octavia Butler, *Xenogenesis*, collection by adrienne maree brown, MK Jermason's *Broken Earth*, *M Archive*)
- Hallway's Vision of Revolutionary Politics: "Anti-politics is the explicit affirmation in all its richness of that which is denied..." Dignity is everyday acts of love, choice to exist in the world in a different way, existing as a collective and not individuals.
- What praxes suit the reconfiguration/dissolution/prefiguration of power and society a we know (or don't yet, know) it?
  - Prefiguration in Hong Kong Protests - no leaders (in part bc leaders were being targeted and imprisoned). Open source means of protest. Using mass communication, trust, mutual/collective care, group protective strategies, murmurations.

## Working Groups

- Tools for creating public-facing media

- Knight Lab
  - “Timeline” online application
  - Immersive Experiences, e.g. VR Photo Essay
  - StoryMap
- Vitale Media Lab at Van Pelt