

Power's Quiet Reach and Why It Should Exercise Us

It may seem somewhat odd in these loud, Trumpian times to make the case that, on a number of fronts, power as practised increasingly works through more subtle, quieter registers. After all, for those on the receiving end of a blunt, coercive threat or forcefully blocked at a national border crossing point, the experience is likely to be a bruising one. Even if we know that power is an abstraction, it can still leave its mark on those who come up against it.

Yet, for all that, I think if you take power to be largely a loud, in-your-face affair, you will miss much in the way that contemporary power shapes politics and public life. To my mind, not only would you miss how quieter, more muted registers of power frequently mask instrumental acts of control and constraint, you would also fail to grasp what has made that displacement possible; namely, the topological shifts in the spacing and timing of relationships that have enabled governments, authorities and political organisations to reach into peoples' lives in hitherto unforeseen ways.

For one thing, it is no longer possible to simply 'read-off' presence and proximity from the calibrations of physical distance. A changing mix of times and spaces embedded in the here and now has heightened the ability of political and institutional actors to make their presence felt in more or less powerful ways that cut across proximity and distance. Quieter registers of power, those of manipulation, dissimulation, enticement and veiled forms of authority, have come to the fore precisely because of their ability to be leveraged topologically.

As I see it, the ability to establish relational proximities over distance has opened up many more possibilities for powerful actors to shape outcomes through less strident means than those of overt domination or loud authority. When the same ends can be achieved by different means, when manipulative reach offers a more selective means of control than hit-or-miss compulsion, or the wants and preferences of citizens are marshalled more effectively through incitement and targeted suggestion than authoritative pronouncements, such quiet measures are more likely to be leveraged simply because they do not display the pronounced mark of power.

The ability of organizations and institutions to leverage an instrumental presence in the everyday of one kind or another is key. It is what differentiates quiet registers of power from 'soft' methods of power and persuasion (Nye, 2004) and from the all-encompassing constructions of hegemonic assent (Agnew, 2005). If it is illuminating to foreground persuasion or assent to the dominant values of the day without the need for intimidation or coercion, it is unhelpful to lose sight of the calculated instrumentality of such actions. There is nothing 'soft' or consensual about a system of authority and manipulation that is quietly exercised with a controlling purpose in mind.

It would, of course, be fanciful to suggest that harder, more conspicuous registers of power have simply been replaced by those of a more understated nature or that quieter modes are

not exercised together with those of a more strident kind. Rather, my argument is that more subtle means of control and constraint have displaced, not replaced, those of a more blatant sort. In the academic world of political theory, that displacement is reflected in a renewed interest in the 'power to' secure outcomes, as opposed to the more familiar kind of power that is wielded at somebody else's expense (Coleman and Agnew, 2018; Clegg and Haugaard, 2009). What is less well understood about that process of displacement, in both academic and political life, is how the 'power to' secure or influence outcomes more often than not morphs into one where the 'power over' others takes precedence, manipulating and closing down possibilities rather than enabling them. This, for me, is why we should be exercised about power's quiet reach into everyday life.

Cambridge Analytica and beyond

Much has been written about *Cambridge Analytica*, the British political consulting firm which harvested data on a massive scale to micro-target individuals for the purpose of political manipulation. Collecting and analysing data to predict the views of segments of the public in order to target them with messages that influence their behaviour is hardly new or novel however. Around election campaigns, political parties and their support organizations have invariably sought as much information as possible about their target audience. What was novel, back in 2018, when the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal first broke, and indeed came as a surprise to many, was the ability of the company to not only collect a truly vast number of data points about individual social media users, but also to reach directly into people's lives in real time with their tailored political messages (Risso, 2018). At its most basic, *Cambridge Analytica*, with their unauthorised data haul and on the back of an arrogant marketing strategy, simply took advantage of such topological times and spaces to embolden and enrich themselves. Their fall from hubris came later, simply because they failed to grasp the defining characteristic of political manipulation: the concealment of intent.

The ability to mould and shape the preferences of others without revealing the underlying motives or to tempt the public into arrangements not wholly transparent represents the hallmark of political manipulation. In *Cambridge Analytica's* case, the company was unable to resist letting all and sundry know that this was precisely their stock-in-trade. As a result, the inability of the company to conceal its intent subsequently led to the firm being wound up. Others in the same business, commercial companies and political consultancies employed by governments, campaigning organizations and political groups to engage politically on social media platforms presumably continue to ply their trade, albeit in a more circumspect manner.

Leaving to one side the overblown nature of some of the claims made for online political manipulation, what is striking about the practice of micro-targeting individuals is the ability of the data analytics companies to edit and adjust their missives in real time to resonate with their intended audience. Such a capability, to leverage a direct presence into everyday life, at an unprecedented scale and scope, alters what we conventionally take to be the

practice of political influence. If the work of the computational propaganda project based at the *Oxford Internet Institute* is to be believed, the affordances of social media technologies – algorithms, automation, and big data – have reconfigured both attempts to tailor political influence and its spatial reach. The Institute’s researchers found current evidence of social media manipulation by governments and political parties across the globe, with ‘computational propaganda’ increasingly used as a tool of information control to shape public opinion (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019).

The characterization of the process as one of ‘computational propaganda’, though, is revealing and displays a lack of understanding about the role that political dissimulation plays in shaping politics and public life. Dissimulation, as an exercise in manipulation, is best thought of as a specific form of concealment; one that diverts attention from a political organization’s actual motivation and interests. There is no strategy of deception involved, as is the case with propaganda, only a lack of disclosure as to the actual motive and drive behind a particular action. Dissimulation involves holding back what is fully at stake without the need for disguise; to quietly present yourself as you actually are without revealing all (Allen, 2016). By virtue of that trait, it is obviously hard to say how far political campaigning groups and commercial organizations perform their online and offline activities in this manner. But there are certainly grounds for taking this to be more and more the case, not least because it plays up attempts to co-opt citizens rather than dupe them.

The sense of co-option implied here has little to do with arm-twisting and more to do with the framing of preferences and the alignment of interests to enrol a target audience. Simply put, it involves being responsive to existing political dispositions in order to elicit a particular response. Dissimulating organisations that seek to shape political behaviour are more likely to tap embryonic concerns by feeding information that the targeted individuals are predisposed to believe. On the face of it, they do nothing more than reaffirm a set of interests that already exists. As such, the manipulation of wills is not on show, but nor for that matter is what is fully at stake. While such organizations do not disguise the fact that they seek to influence public behaviour by expanding access to information on potentially divisive topics, they are less revealing about the fact that only some futures enter the frame, while others are held back.

This should matter to us, for the nature of the manipulation remains concealed, unrecognized by those who have been subject to its application. It is the point at which the ‘power to’ influence behaviour, to secure a particular outcome, turns into the ‘power over’ others, where possibilities are closed down and choices never revealed. The employment today of such quiet, instrumental means at ever greater reach and accuracy, afforded by topological shifts in the spacing and timing of relationships, was clearly not lost on *Cambridge Analytica*.

Nor, for that matter, has it been lost on states determined to control the lives of migrants within their borders.

Borders within

I said at the beginning of this piece that the experience of being forcefully denied entry at a national border crossing is a bruising one and, indeed, with the hardening of borders in Europe and elsewhere apparent today that experience has clearly been amplified. High walls and border fences aimed at restricting the right of movement and blocking access inevitably holds the attention. Yet, if the focus is only on the building of walls and fences, you will miss the fact that border controls in any number of countries now reach into everyday life, unsettling the lives of migrants long after arrival and entry (Allen and Axelsson, 2019, Yuval - Davis et al, 2019). Not all political forces show their hand and, indeed, some are barely noticeable unless, that is, like many of the 'Windrush' generation in the UK, you are on the receiving end.

What the 2018 scandal around the 'Windrush' generation, those who arrived in the UK from the Caribbean in the 1950 and 60s, graphically demonstrated is that the seemingly unified space of the nation state is now stratified by 'borders within', borders that harbour a multiplicity of spaces through which the rights and protection of a migrant population are determined. Etienne Balibar (2002) said as much about European borders a while back, but those of the 'Windrush' generation wrongly denied their legal rights and threatened with deportation after living and working the UK for any number of decades experienced it at the sharp end. Walls and fences may well attract noisy political attention, yet alongside them a quiet system of authority has progressively been put in place to filter, channel and remove those already on the 'inside' of a sovereign territory. Such a displacement represents a less familiar politics of enforcement, one made possible by states able to reach directly into their own political communities to exclude and include in ways not previously undertaken (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012).

It goes without saying that political borders no longer simply map onto the 'inside' and 'outside' of state territories in any meaningful sense. For some, that is largely down to the development of 'high-tech' forms of border control at and away from territorial borders, most notably biometrics and pre-screening (Amoore, 2006). The politics, and indeed spaces, of enforcement that I wish to focus on are far less conspicuous however. At the risk of misunderstanding, they entail the co-option of citizens, but not in the sense mentioned earlier of tapping existing political dispositions. Rather, it involves the formal conscription of professionals, administrators and staff by the state at everyday frontline spaces to act as border guards in all but name. It is an unwanted form of authority that quietly goes under the radar, but which can lead to the detention and removal of migrants, as well as exclusion from the public realm. Hannah Arendt (1951) had a name for those caught up in this type of exclusion: political destitution.

The UK is at the forefront of this practice of compulsory border control which enrols staff at hospitals and medical practices, job centres and public registrar offices, universities and colleges, accommodation and letting agencies, as well as banks, to perform immigration checks on all those who cross their path. Following on from the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, when migrants seek medical treatment, search for a job, get married, rent a room privately or open a bank account, they leave themselves vulnerable to detention and removal. Doctors and health professionals, lecturers and teachers, landlords and estate

agents, public officials and private bank staff collectively have been co-opted into applying checks on proof of identity and lawful status, with various penalties and sanctions imposed for those who do not comply.

This, it should be emphasized, is less the state exercising authority over its borders 'from above' and more a demonstration of its controlling presence in the everyday spaces that make up the public realm. Exclusion from public life is not restricted to those held in detention or confinement but encompasses the denial of access to legal and social rights to those who have already gained entry, which, in the case of the 'Windrush' generation goes back decades. As others have pointed out, such measures are not so much directed at curtailing migration as redefining the status of people already present (Coleman, 2012). Migrant workers in the developed North today find themselves having to negotiate an ambiguous status that often leaves them included for the purpose of skilled or unskilled work yet excluded from welfare and other social rights. Differentially excluded is the status given to those who end up neither fully admitted in terms of rights and legal protections, nor fully proscribed from setting foot in a given territory (Mezzarda and Neilson, 2013).

There is an altogether prosaic feel about the way that states quietly manipulate the rights of migrant workers such that their status post-entry only later appears explicable through their pre-entry lives. Joe Painter (2006) first pinpointed the mundane practices, both within and outside the institutions of the state, by which governments and their administrations instantiate their control and reach. The bureaucratic procedures of administration, registration and documentation that permeate the daily life of migrants, whilst not labelled as micro-targeting, must arguably be experienced as such by those detained, denied legal protections, or held in limbo over their right to permanent settlement. That individuals and groups within the UK's migrant population have been targeted by a hostile politics of enforcement is nonetheless beyond doubt, as is the ability of governments to routinely draw them within reach of their authority and control.

This should matter to more than just migrants caught up in the webs of enforcement, not least because a far reaching system of authority and manipulation that barely shows its hand until you brush up against it has something insidious about it. That up to now only certain individuals and groups have been subject to its reach should alert us to the real and important changes under way – gradual, uneven, diffuse – that have potentially wider significance. As with the 'power to' influence and shape political behaviour, the 'power to' take back control of 'our borders' just as easily turns into the 'power over' others. When such wily instrumental means can be leveraged topologically to enable powerful actors to make their presence felt at one remove, to reach into the everyday life of distant others, perhaps more of us should be exercised, provoked even, by the possibility. At the very least, a grasp of the more unassuming means by which we are progressively put in place is but a first step on the road to empowerment.

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