



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 8

When and how is power visible in politics?

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question?" the podcast series that explores the challenges democracy is facing around the world. I'm Shalini Randeria, the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and Rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

[00:00:30] I'm joined today by Steven Lukes. He recently retired as Professor of Politics and Sociology at NYU and has previously held professorships at the London School of Economics, the European Institute in Florence, and he also taught at Balliol College, Oxford, where I was his student. Perhaps his most influential book remains, "Power: A Radical View" written nearly 50 years ago. So naturally, we are here to talk about power. Thank you so much for joining me here today, Steven.

[00:01:00]

SL: Very glad to be here.

SR: Everyone has an idea of what power does or who holds power, but defining power is much trickier. What is the nature of the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed in a liberal democracy? What is the nature of political representation and the place of minorities? What does it mean for citizens to give consent to their rulers?

[00:01:30] Your highly influential idea of three-dimensional power emerged out of an engagement with these kinds of questions. I would like to talk to you about how you would characterize the nature of power today. What are the three dimensions of power? And why is the third

dimension different from the forms of power that we are accustomed to recognizing so easily in our daily lives?

SL: I said there were three dimensions of power because there had been a debate which had begun with this idea that power consisted in winning, it just is a matter of who prevails. And you can observe that by observing people in conflict and see who wins, and then you can count the number of wins. But then a second step in that argument occurred when people said, "Well, wait a minute, it's not a question of who wins only, it's a question of who decides what gets decided." So this is a question about who controls the agenda of politics, and that already opens up a whole lot of questions. The media, how issues get put into the forefront, and others get sidelined or ignored.

[00:02:30] That question then led me to what I called the third dimension, which is a whole set of further questions. The key idea, I guess, is that you can't assume that people either know what's going on or consent to what's going on.

So, this question of the control of the agenda opens up the whole issue of how people's ideas, their preferences, their desires are formed. How people become not just aware of what's going on but come to see what they care about. And, actually, the key step I think I made was or one of them was that the earlier ways of talking implied that you had to look at what people were upset about, look at their grievances, which you could observe. And this was unsatisfactory to me, it seemed to me that if you could bring about a world or shape politics or use your power such that people don't have the grievances that they might otherwise have, not

express their grievances, but even be unable to see what's going on in ways that eliminate even the possibility of grievance and protest.

[00:03:30] And, of course, if we now look at the present world, this whole issue of what you call populism and the way in which people are voting against their own interests, what does that mean? How is it that people can pursue or endorse policies which plainly are doing them in and doing them harm? All those questions it seemed to me were opened up by what I call the third dimension.

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SR: This a big challenge, of course, for the realization of individual freedom, but it's even more of a problem for democracy as a political system. Because for a long time, we had told ourselves that in democracies, power belongs to the people, but if the gunning of the third-dimensional power consistent distorting the very picture of reality, then it really poses a very serious threat to the realization of the rights of citizens to exercise democratic power in the service of their own interests.

Right-wing populist politics has come to the fore in many parts of the world. And, of course, such politics has used misdirected sentiment against variously perceived internal and external enemies. And it's very interesting that you have continued to defend the usefulness of two notions, the notion of real interest and of false consciousness in understanding power, and you point to, here, the power to mislead. So, can you talk about why you think these ideas of real interest and false

consciousness are still useful in trying to understand a phenomenon like Brexit or Trumpism?

[00:05:15]

SL: Well, I'm glad you focus on that because actually that's the language that I use in the book and I have had more trouble with that than anything else because it sounds— Doesn't it? —it sounds patronizing. It sounds as though you know what people's real interests are and they don't. And so, it sounds as though you're being condescending, it sounds as though you're saying when people express their views or vote in certain ways, that they don't really understand what their real interests are, and you know better.

[00:06:00] Now, I usually answer this objection by saying, are you really saying that this doesn't happen? I mean, what I'm trying to hang on to, as you rightly put it, is the idea that this is a phenomenon, but it poses huge difficulties to actually both to identify and to justify, you know, the claim that there is a part to mislead, that people are being misled.

So, I have no doubt if we just talk about the specific things you were talking about, Brexit, the Trump voters, of course, people have real grievances, which they experience and feel very profoundly in both those cases. But also, as you have just suggested, I mean, there's no doubt that people have been misled and have indeed engaged themselves in the process of being misled. I mean, this is very important to see that those who are subject to this kind of power are also complicit in it. I mean, they also are taking part in the business of supporting what is

actually doing within. So, it's all of that tangle of issues which I'm trying to hang on to.

SR: Two other theorists who didn't figure largely, I think, in the first edition, but you do talk about them in the second edition are Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. So, I think it might be useful to think through some of the concepts, which both of them have used to understand the workings of power. So, for Gramsci, let's think about the idea of both ideology and hegemony to understand power in its most significant form.

[00:07:30]

SL: Well, Gramsci is actually there right at the beginning of the first book quite centrally and is one of the reasons why a lot of people thought that I was some sort of Marxist. I've never called myself a Marxist, nor did Marx, by the way. But the point about Gramsci is, in this respect, he was a good Marxist in the tradition. He thought that there was a kind of ruling ideology, which people were being led to believe and which worked against their interests. And had Germany consisted partly, albeit this complicated idea, but basically, that the idea of any society, the idea is of the ruling class. So, it's this idea of the injection of ruling ideas. Now, that, of course, is far too sweeping and I'm very concerned that the study of power should be empirical. And that it's not just a question of theorizing in the abstract. So, I wanted to make Gramsci's idea of this Marxist component to try to make it empirical and researchable.

[00:08:30] Foucault in relation to what I've written, people have said, "Well, he's supplied us with a fourth dimension of power." Let's just say, it's not just a question of forming or helping to shape people's beliefs, and their wants, and their preferences, and their desires, Foucault goes much further. I mean, he wanted to say that the very person, the very subject, individuals are constituted by power, that who we are is shaped by the powerful. But he also wanted to say that it wasn't a particular group of people or powerful elites or a powerful body of, you know, ruling class or anything like that, it was power as he put it everywhere. Now, it seems to me, when you start saying that power is everywhere, you've really lost the plot because if power is everywhere, how are we going to study it? Power has to make any kind of sense, has to be attributable to some kind of agency in my view.

[00:09:30] So, the two things I saw wrong with the rhetorical Foucault let's say, that he wanted to say that power totally constitutes who we are, shapes us in total ways, and also that it's everywhere and therefore, can't be located. So, for this reason, I'm distancing myself from Foucault as I still do except to say, just to be fair to Foucault that in his later writings, he moved away from all of this and was very interested in how people, subjects as he put it, can shape themselves. So he was interested in the other side of the story and rather abandoned this overdramatic view.

SR: If I turn now to your early work on Durkheim, I came across a quotation, which I want to read to you and then ask you to comment. You quote Durkheim when you say, "*The particular advantage of democracy is that thanks to the communication established between government and*

citizens, the latter are in a position to judge the way in which the former fulfills its role and knowing the facts more fully are able to give or withhold their confidence." So, key assumption of democratic politics has been that of a well-informed citizen as somebody who is able to not only give consent, but to also withhold it, to protest, to monitor, to use their knowledge about the world, to make rational political decisions. Now, what has the social media, the digital revolution, what has it really done to bring down the barriers to information and communication in a manner which could actually be detrimental to democracies?

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SL: I mean, that idea that you quote from Durkheim, this idea of the well-informed citizen being in some way in control of the political world, we're moving away from that plainly in all kinds of ways. In the third edition, I've got a discussion of, I think a rather wonderful, interesting book by Shoshana Zuboff called "Surveillance Capitalism," where she's very concerned about the way in which the corporations are extracting information from us and manipulating us as consumers. And it's an enormous book, her book, but it really just focuses on that. Whereas you're rightly raising the whole political question of what impact it's had on us, on people around the world, especially I'm thinking in the world in which we live. In other words, I think in the more developed countries, more modernized countries, this is just everywhere and especially among young people.

SR: But what do these spaces of social media do? Do they open up new spaces for deliberation or must stay in the way in which these algorithms are shaped, etc., reinforce only citizens' worst prejudices?

[00:12:30]

SL: The answer to that question and, of course, they do both. I mean, it's clearly a very major, positive side to it all in the sense that so much more information is now available, and people can acquire it in all kinds of different ways, from all different kinds of places. And it's a sort of realization of the dream that Condorcet in the enlightenment had, that information would be sort of available to everybody. He thought that printing did this, and that people will become more and more rational and informed as this happened. But, of course, there is the very, very important dark side. And politically, it has had two further effects that I didn't really explore earlier in the earlier work on pioneer editions because it's not just a question of shaping preferences and inducing, bringing about consent where that consent is in some way, to use words you used, distorted. This isn't always even intentional. In fact, it very often isn't.

[00:13:30] I think one mistake that was present there right at the very beginning of the power debate was to think that power always has to be sort of deliberate, and manipulative, and people trying to prevail over other people. It's not like that. I think power is often exercised or in place in a very routine and unconsidered way. Now, as far as the digital media go and the whole world of social media and the communication system that we're now all involved in, this has further effects than what I

mentioned up to now, namely the shaping of beliefs and preferences, how people see their world. It's not just factual information that's an issue here, it's understanding not just the world but yourself and your place in it. And what's also very important here is the power of distraction. The power of people just getting endlessly distracted from what they would otherwise care about by all that's possible now.

[00:14:30] There's also, of course, this question of information overload, but that's been discussed a lot. And then also, I mean, I wonder to what extent people are actually increasingly becoming in some way disabled or incapacitated by all this endless flow of information and pressure, and also getting people in most vulnerable points of their lives. There's a great deal of that goes on politically. For example, the whole sort of Cambridge Analytica and which continues by the way, and which existed all across the world, that was manipulative. That use of the media to influence how people, not just how they vote, but who the leaders are going to be, how they're going to identify themselves politically, all of that has been enabled by this digital revolution.

SR: Right. So, one of the things you point out in your critique of Zuboff's "Age of Surveillance Capitalism" is that it too narrowly focused on us as consumers, right? Citizen consumers, and as you say, those who can then get distracted and have their attention monetized in a sense by corporations. But what if we were then to shift our attention to the question of the corporations as a major locus of power and the relationship between corporations and the state?

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SL: Well, indeed, I mean, just about the Zuboff, it's an enormous book, but it's a long-extended lament for the disappearance of the sovereign consumer, but I don't think the consumer was ever sovereign, but that's what it's all about. And it's very compelling, but yes, I think that one has to see not just that all of this can be politically used in very effective ways across the world. Though it's very interesting just to make a very particular point about America, where I live right now, some very interesting things are happening in which corporations are responding to things that are happening on the ground about discrimination against minorities, where this affects consumers who exercised about certain policies. And then corporations, I see increasingly responding to that and posing a challenge to governments. So that can also happen.

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SR: Right. So, this is about thinking of what kinds of countervailing forces can be mobilized collectively from below. That would be a good example. The Black Lives Matter or Fridays For Future, the kinds of movements which have the power to mobilize for certain common ends. So, if you think of power in terms of sort of two fundamental variations, the power to and power over, your book is more occupied with the latter, right? Power over.

SL: Yeah, it is. It's really the power of domination. Power as domination. Yes.

[00:17:30]

SR: Domination. But what if we now think about with you power to? In a sense of a positive vision of politics, especially in liberal democratic societies, if we take seriously the possibility of individuals collectively in civic association, in civil society, exercising power in order to bring about transformational change. And this is, I think, something that in the face of the current pandemic or in the face of climate change, these are the kinds of things which will need a positive exercise of power in the sense of power to.

SL: Resistance.

SR: Resistance and positively towards, I hesitate to call it utopias, but at least a vision of a good life, which propels people towards this. So, would one need to expand the three dimensions to incorporate that in some way?

[00:18:30]

SL: Well, maybe it's because of my age, but I'm somewhat committed to the three dimensions. I'm still resisting the fourth dimension in the sense of power constituting people. But I mean, I still think we should think three-dimensionally. That's a bit of a trick. It's just a metaphor, but the idea is you can see further and deeper if you can see in three dimension and countering the domination of the powers that dominate us is the major question about time. And with the collapse of the union movements, certainly in America, but also in Britain, for example, and other countries, I mean, trade unions, workers organization used to be the place where the resistance and transformational activity from those

who were subordinate, from the below could take place. This has been massively weakened. And also, in general, I think what you might call the project of social democracy, which has been so powerful, still alive in Northern Europe, especially in Scandinavia, but under serious strain.

[00:19:30] Where to look for collective, because it has to be collective, it has to be collective and it has to be organized, can come from is the big question of the time. I mean, I do think that, however, the idea which you began with that we shouldn't assume the power is observable in behavior between conflicting actors, power is at its most effective when it's least visible, when it's least observable. And that poses a huge problem for social science, but also for political activity.

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SR: We've talked more about power in democracies in liberal democracies because that is what your work has been focused on. What happens to all of these ideas if we think about power in Chinese kind of model of state capitalism, where it's not very hidden, it's quite in your face, it's exercised in ways which are actually readily observable, and yet these regimes are able to secure consent of a kind, which is quite unprecedented and also using the kinds of technologies which we have just been criticizing?

SL: Well, all you're pointing to is a very important matter, which is that we should not assume that the dream of progress towards something like a liberal democracy, or you used the word utopia before that that's kind of on the agenda in history. Authoritarian regimes, which the

authoritarianism is very deeply structured and entrenched probably can survive permanently. I mean, what we did see in the 20th century was that fascism could, didn't at least. That is to say, it has to be structured perhaps in the way that the Chinese do, why not assume that it's possible to have a stable and continuing deeply in egalitarian and controlling social-political order. We should not assume that that's doomed to fail. Just one thing you said, the thing that I didn't agree with, or at least would question is when you said that the Chinese have achieved a kind of consent, securing the compliance through some sort of consent.

SR: Right.

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SL: Yes, but I do have a section in the book, in the third edition about that question. And it's not about China, it's about Czechoslovakia as it was under communism. And that is about how you can have power at work and it's visible to everybody. And everybody knows what the game is. Is this consent? I think it's willing compliance in the sense that people know what the game is and how to survive. And obviously, there is going to be a degree of what I call third dimensional power at work. But for the most part, at least in the latter days of Soviet-style communism, these were societies of non-belief. It was never possible to find, I found when I went into Eastern Europe in the '70s and '80s to find believers, everybody knew how to behave, but the operators of the mechanisms of power were pretty apparent to everybody. It was a question of survival and looking after yourself. So, that's different, but we shouldn't assume that it can't be deeply entrenched.

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SR: Thank you very much for this really wide-ranging conversation on the nature and workings of power.

SL: And thank you and thank you for asking such wonderful questions, which I expected you would do.

SR: The first thing we addressed with you is the need to study the workings of power empirically and not merely to define it conceptually and theoretically. It's not enough to look at who wins a political contestation, but to look behind it at who controls the political agenda, which immediately opens up the question of how people's ideas and desires themselves are formed and shaped. But the hidden dimension of power of this kind may eliminate entirely the possibility of protest and the real grievances that people have may therefore not be articulated at all. And yet I think what you reminded us of was the fact that those subject to power are complicit in its exercise. And this is true of us as citizen-consumers today in "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism," and that it's our attention and cognition today, which are commodities that get traded. And what is worse, we even may experience this as a form of freedom and autonomy.

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Thank you so much for listening to this episode of "Democracy in Question?"