

Three Faces of Power

by Kenneth E. Boulding

Citation: Kenneth E. Boulding, *Three Faces of Power*, (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1989).

This book summary written by: Conflict Research Consortium Staff.

In his first four chapters Boulding describes the nature of power as a social structure. He describes the objects and pathologies of power. Boulding begins with the simple definition of power as the ability to get what one wants. From there he breaks the notion of power down into three general categories, based on the consequences of the exercise of power. Destructive power is the power to destroy. Threats are a typical exercise of destructive power, and the military is an example of an institution organized around destructive power. Productive power is the power to make and create. Exchange and trade are typical productive behaviors, and economics is an organized form of productive power. Integrative power is the power to create relationships and bring people together. Relationships of love and respect rest on integrative power, and social groups use integrative power to gain members and maintain their loyalty. Boulding cautions that each type of power has positive and negative uses. For instance, destructive power is used positively when a doctor destroys a tumor. He also observes that while one type of power may predominate in some behaviors or organizations, generally there are elements of each type present.

Boulding addresses the distribution of power by examining the social structures of power. He argues that power in groups tends to be hierarchical. Due to human limitations on the ability to communicate, decision-making roles develop. Instructions flow down the hierarchy, while information flows up. Within a hierarchical structure, power is limited by available knowledge. Boulding also argues that "hierarchical power cannot survive unless it can be legitimated. Authority in some sense is always granted from below." [p. 44] Examples of structures of power include the institution of property, and the nation-state. Power structures generally rest on a complex mix of the three types of power. Boulding says that the role of integrative power in maintaining structures is both the most important, and the least recognized or understood.

Boulding considers three classes of objects of power: material objects, non-human animals and other living creatures, and persons. The exercise of power over humans is greatly complicated by persons' independent wills. Generally the choice of which type of power to use will depend in part on the nature of the object. You cannot bribe a tree to fall; only destructive power will do. Occasionally power will be exercised for its own sake, without any object. Sometimes the object of an exercise of one type of power is to increase other one's ability to exercise other types of power.

The old saying that "power corrupts" recognizes the potential for some exercises of power to become pathological. Boulding notes however that it is not merely power which may be corrupting, but also influence, and even powerlessness. Boulding argues that the primary source of pathology is an unrealistic image of one's power, and suggests possible causes of such unrealistic images. Each type of power has its own pathological forms. An example of pathology is the use of national power simply to maintain a state's position in the international "pecking order." Civil wars have a high potential to become pathological. Pathological concentrations of power can develop when power attracts more power, or when "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Conflicts, which are always at root about distributions of power, can become pathological when third-parties who do not bear the costs of the conflict benefit from it.

Personal Power

The next four chapters examine the destructive, economic and integrative types of personal power. Personal power refers to the power wielded by an individual. Generally destructive power is the easiest form of power for an individual to use. Because it is the easiest to use, people often exercise destructive power to counter their feelings of powerlessness. Defensive power can be used in self-defense, or it can be used to threaten others.

Defensive power plays a role in maintaining an integrated society. The threat of social exclusion helps keep people obedient to social norms. Personal destructive power plays a large role in certain political systems, such as dictatorships. Just as tyrants rule by physical threat, some religious leaders may control their adherents by the use of spiritual threats. The greatest exercise of personal destructive power is when one person has the power to declare war. One of the dangers of destructive power is that when individuals (or organizations) have specialized in destructive power, they often feel compelled to use that power, lest it erode from disuse. People will create opportunities, or "pick a fight," in order to use their destructive abilities.

Personal economic power is most easily measured by the amount of money an individual controls, although there are factors which complicate this measurement. One is the difficulty in distinguishing clearly between the economic power of an individual and a household. Another is the distinction between income, wealth, and consumption. One element of economic power which cannot be easily measured by money is the value of a person's physical and mental abilities. Personal economic power will depend in part upon the inheritance practices in the larger society, and partly upon an individual's skill and luck in increasing their original stake. There seems to be a limit to the ability of economic power to improve an individual's quality of life, that is, there seems to be a point at which further riches will not substantially improve an individual's life.

Boulding says that integrative power is both the most difficult to define and yet potentially the most significant form of power. For example, both destructive and economic power must be legitimate to be fully effective, and legitimacy is an aspect of integrative power. Jesus, Muhammad and the Buddha are exemplars of integrative power; none of the three had great destructive or economic power. The most basic form of integrative power is love, in the widest sense. And love is most powerful when it is reciprocated. Boulding sees respect as another example of integrative power at work. Respect is then closely related to legitimacy. The creation and maintenance of individuals' identities depends on the integrative system in a society. Individuals gain their particular identities by gaining the respect and acknowledgment of others. Personal integrative power relies on the complex social network of integrative power, which in turn depends on a network of communication and learning. The degree of integrative power possible is higher in societies in which learning is open-ended. Boulding discusses the paradoxical integrative power of the weak. An individual's weakness and neediness creates a demand on the stronger to help and support the weak. Having a network of friends tends to both increase personal integrative power, and to lead to further friendships, and so further gains in integrative power.

Boulding concludes this section with a discussion of the dynamics of the three types of personal power over the course of an individual's life.

Organizational Power

The next set of chapters examines destructive, economic and integrative power in organizations. Destructive power plays two main roles in society. Destruction may be the first stage in a productive process, such as clearing land for farming. Or destructive power may be used to make and carry out threats. The military is a prime example of an organization of destructive power for this second role. Boulding notes that while destructive power is needed to make threats, threats are most effective when they are made in an integrative

context which legitimates the demand for submission. Integrative power also plays a crucial role in maintaining the sense of community and commitment needed to mobilize armies and motivate soldiers.

Boulding questions the view that destructive power can be used defensively, as deterrence, to maintain peace. He argues that such strategies have resulted in an escalating spiral of threats and counter-threats. As with personal destructive power, the existence of organized destructive power encourages its use. Creating and maintaining organizations of destruction has a high cultural and economic cost. Drawing on historical cases, Boulding argues many nations have had periods of cultural and economic development after being defeated in war, thus questioning the benefit of maintaining a strong military for defense. While military organizations point out their beneficial economic side-effects, such as employment or technical developments, Boulding points out that economic benefits would almost certainly be greater had the resources devoted to the military been directed directly toward economic development. Boulding also suggests that, very often, "an increase in military power diminishes the personal power of private citizens." [p. 154]

Economic power is a factor in all organizations, because all organizations need resources to exist. Governments, for example, consume labor and generate revenues by taxation. However economic power is central to business and corporate organizations, which use this power to generate profits. Boulding reviews, in general terms, several economic theories of the origins of profit, and the relation between profits, interest, and unemployment. He concludes that "economic power in organizations is strangely fragile, unpredictable, and to a surprising extent in the control of quite unconscious processes in society, over which no single person or group has any real control or power." [p. 163] There are a few general guidelines for increasing an organization's economic power. Companies can sell more stock. They can save. They can grow and innovate. Business monopolies increase economic power, but can be difficult to maintain. Boulding also considers the economic power of the household organization, and of the family.

Since all organizations have some economic component, Boulding describes integrative organizations as those whose primary purpose is not the pursuit of profit. "A major source of the integrative power of a community or organization is the degree to which the personal identity of the members involved is bound up with their perception of the identity of the community or organization as a whole." [p. 173] Integrative power generally plays a large role in maintaining religious organizations, for example. When coupled with the diversity of human organizations, strong identification with groups can lead to conflicts. Sometimes threat power is used to enforce identification with the group. These threats can range from police action, to divine retribution, and it is this combination of integrative and threat power which accounts for the enduring influence of nations and religions. In participatory political systems, however, promises tend to be more effective than threats alone. Boulding also argues that integrative power, in the form of an expanded sense of community, is the key to creating and expanding peace.

The dynamics of power over the life of an organization are complex and variable. Boulding offers some general observations on the shifts in power in nation states, business organizations, integrative organizations, political parties and social groups.

Power in Evolution

The final chapters discuss the role of power in biological evolution and in social evolution. Boulding concludes this work with a discussion of how a better understanding of power can help shape a better future. Boulding identifies three types of evolution: physical and chemical, biological, and social. He notes that power in broadest sense is simply the potential for change. In this sense, power is clearly involved in all three types of evolution. The development of life was also a great increase in power, since living organisms are able to change in response to their environment, and even to change their environment.

Boulding argues that much of biological evolution is cooperative, in the sense that species are mutually dependent. Even predator and prey species are mutually dependent for their survival. And while biological evolution involves destruction, the use of threats in biological evolution is virtually nonexistent. Boulding identifies cooperation as an unconscious form of integrative power. In social cooperation the use of integrative power becomes conscious.

Boulding goes on to consider the role of power in past human social evolution. He argues that "the increase in the productive and integrative powers of the human race have been much more significant than the increase in its destructive powers, at least up to the present century." [p. 226] Threats played very little role in humanity's early development. Threats played a larger role after the development of agriculture. Organized warfare came into existence relatively recently, with the rise of civilization. And Boulding argues that, despite historians' fascination with war and strife, "at least 90 percent of human activity even in the age of civilization was peaceful--plowing, sowing, and reaping, cooking, weaving, and building, making pottery and tools, eating, feasting, singing, worshiping, dancing, having and raising children, and so on." [p. 223]

Given this analysis of past human development, Boulding asks what present uses of power would allow humanity to avoid nuclear annihilation or environmental disaster, and lead to a better future. Although the problem is a complex one, Boulding identifies some of the factors which must be considered in forming an answer. Key to finding a better future, he concludes, is a better understanding of the types, uses and dynamics of power.