

The Techniques of Power

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Abstract: Societies typically contain various “top down” power structures—for example, those of class, race, gender, religion. These structures typically work in the interests of those who have the power, and against those of the people who do not, generating a contradiction/conflict between the two groups. The power structures are quite distinct (though they often interact and reinforce each other). However, many of the same techniques are used to maintain these structures. These involve the law, violence, ideology, indoctrination. In this essay we will discuss these common techniques.

1. The Subject of our Discussion

This paper is about power of a certain kind and the techniques used to enforce it.¹

Power is the ability to do things; and power over other people is the ability to get them to do things. That is, power, in this sense, is the ability of a person or group of people to have control, authority, or influence over the behavior of others.

Power can be of various kinds. For a start, it can be personal or institutional—where by an institution we mean some kind of entrenched social configuration. Power can be top-down or bottom-up. In a bottom-up power structure, those who are subject to power have an active say in what happens. They can agree with the decision made, or at least agree to accept it. Failing this, they will just have to take whatever consequences follow. But in all cases, they have at least had the opportunity to be part of the discussion which determined the decisions and policies. In a top-down power structure, decisions are taken and policies are made and implemented by a certain group in society. Those subject to the power are consulted in no significant sense, but the consequences of the decisions, policies, and practices are imposed on them, whether they like it or not.²

The subject of our discussion is top-down institutional power relations—henceforth--*power structures*. We will call the group of people who wield the power the *powerful* and those who are merely subject to it the *powerless*.

2. Power Structures

¹ It is the text of a talk given at the first international conference on contradiction studies, *Exploring Contradictions Beyond Contradiction*, University of Bremen, February 2025.

² For further discussion, see Priest (2022), ch. 8.

Power structures are of many kinds. Four in particular will concern us in what follows:

- Economic (class)
- Political (state)
- Racial
- Patriarchal

These are certainly not the only kinds. There are others, such as religious. What we will have to say applies to these too. However, we will leave the reader to ponder the application of what we have to say to these.

Despite various reductionist strategies, the power structures in question are autonomous, and function independently of each other—as can be seen by noting that each power structure can exist with variants of the other kinds. So, capitalism has flourished under both fascist and “liberal democratic” states; patriarchy has existed in both capitalist and feudal societies; and racism is ubiquitous.

Notwithstanding, the power structures very often—in fact normally—interact. Members of the powerful of one structure are often members of the powerful of another. And it is very common for one power structure to be used to enforce not just itself but another as well. Merely think of the importance of racism in the economy of the antebellum US; or the way that capitalism uses the state structure of “liberal democracies”.

Moreover, each power structure works primarily for the benefit of the powerful--perhaps not universally, but certainly typically. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines oppression as follows: *to oppress people means to prevent them from having the same opportunities, freedom, and benefits as others*. Thus, a power structure is used to oppress the powerless. Racial power is used to privilege the dominant race; gender power is used to privilege the dominant gender; and so on. Hence, the power structure produces a conflict of interests between the powerful and the powerless. One may call this a contradiction, in one of the many senses of this term.

3. Where We are Going

There is much more to be said about all of this, and here we can discuss only one small part of it. Though power structures are distinct, there are various strategies/techniques common to them all, which are used to generate, maintain, and enhance them. These are well known to those with a knowledge of past and present history. So, in a sense, there is nothing new here. What may be new is seeing how exactly the same mechanisms function across different power structures.

One might categorize the techniques in different ways, but the following categories will serve our purposes here:

- Violent
- Legal
- Ideological
- Psychological (phenomenological)

The categories are neither exclusive not exhaustive. But they will serve to structure what follows. In this, we will illustrate with examples how the four strategies are deployed in our four power structures.³ Each example could be its own topic. Clearly, that is not appropriate here. We will just say enough to make the point.

Two words on terminology:

1. Violence as a category in the present context means actual or threatened direct violence: physical or psychological. There are indirect forms of violence such as structural and symbolic violence; these are considered here under the other categories--noting that the violence occurring of this kind is of a more indirect form.
2. The word 'ideology' can be used in many ways. Here we use it in Marx' sense. An ideology in this sense is, first, a system of beliefs, or concepts and practices which inform them. Secondly, the beliefs are not true, or if they are literally true, they do not tell the whole truth, and so imply what is not true. Thirdly, these things are not only not true: they are deceptive. They cover up the way that things really are. For example, in the case of economic ideology, they hide the way that the economic system actually functions.

4. Economic

Let us start with economic power structures (though capitalism, in particular, will loom large in the discussion).

Violent. Violence is often used to enforce economic power. For example, many techniques are used in capitalism to break strikes, and one of these is certainly violence. For example, in 1892, there was a strike by steel workers in Holmstead, PA. The owner (Henry Frick) sent in a security force from Pinkertons, and the state then sent in the Pennsylvania State Militia. Several strikers were killed and many more injured.⁴ During the forced agricultural collectivization of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, the peasants had their grain seized, were deported to state farms or sent to gulags.⁵ Between 1830 and 1850, the US Government forcibly deported about 100,000 Native

³ The examples could be multiplied almost endlessly (unfortunately). Readers can surely think of many others.

⁴ Bemis (1894).

⁵ Dolot (1987).

Americans from their land east of the Mississippi River to reservations in Oklahoma, so that the land could be used for settlement and agriculture by the colonialists.⁶

Legal. Turning to legal techniques: under capitalism, as hardly needs documenting there, is a whole raft of laws that enforce property relations, in particular ownership of the means of production.⁷ At many times and places there are also a good number of anti-union laws. For example, in the UK the Trade Union Act of 2016⁸ made it more difficult for firefighters to strike by imposing higher thresholds for ballots, and enforced longer notice periods and new rules on picketing. And the Strikes Act of 2023⁹ gave employers in certain sectors the power to require employees to work during strikes. Then of course slavery in the US, essential to the antebellum agricultural regime was enforced by a whole bank of laws.¹⁰

Ideological. Violence and law are a way of controlling people's bodies. However, often it is easier to control people's minds. This is the function of ideology. Capitalism has an enormous ideological apparatus aimed at covering over its exploitative nature which harms the economically powerless. This gets them to believe that capitalism is:

- natural (people are naturally creatures that just look after their own interest)
- fair (the exchange of payment for a fair day's work)
- good for all (Smith's invisible hand of the market).

The ideology is imposed on people's thinking by advertising, the press and other mass media, statements made by politicians and "captains of industry", and so on.¹¹

Psychological. Ideological techniques of course affect the way that people think. That is, they have psychological effects. But there are other psychological mechanisms used by a power structure. One is to persuade sections of the powerless that it is in their individual interest to work against the general interests of the powerless. Thus, for example, union leaders and politicians from socialist parties are coopted simply to be a part of the way that capitalism works, and so to preserve it, rather than fight against it.¹² Or again, phenomenologically the world

⁶ National Parks Service (US) (nd).

⁷ Rubin and Klumpp (2012).

⁸ UK Government (2016).

⁹ UK Government (2023).

¹⁰ Encyclopedia Britannica1 (nd).

¹¹ See Priest (2022), ch. 11, and Priest (2024).

¹² As explained by Berkman (2003), ch. 10, and Rocker (1989), p. 83 ff, commenting on the socialist politics of the 1930s.

appears very different to the powerful and the powerless. In particular, the way that the powerful see the powerless and the way that the powerless see themselves are radically different. The powerless see their oppression; the powerful do not see it. But often the powerful are able to get the powerless to “internalize” the view of the powerful, and so see themselves as the powerful see them (as well). As Freire puts it:¹³

The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized.

Self-depreciation is another characterization of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often are they... [told so] that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. ‘The peasant feels inferior to the boss because the boss seems to be the only one who knows things and is able to run things.’

5. Political

Let us now turn to the topic of political power structures, and again run through our four categories.

Violent. States often use violence to enforce their power. For example, in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 in Manchester, a state cavalry charged into a large crowd of peaceful protesters who had gathered to demand parliamentary reform and the extension of voting rights. Many people were killed, and hundreds more injured.¹⁴ In the 1930s, the Soviet Union used show trials, executions, and gulags to get rid of people whom it took to be political threats.¹⁵ In the 20th Century, the governments of many Latin American countries, backed by the CIA, used death squads to suppress dissent.¹⁶ And at the present moment, illegal settlers in the West Bank often use violence against Palestinians to further Zionist ends.¹⁷

¹³ Freire (1970), pp. 22, 37. The quoted words at the end are those of a peasant in an interview with Freire.

¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica² (nd).

¹⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica³ (nd).

¹⁶ Green (2015).

¹⁷ Amnesty International (2024a).

Legal: Laws are often used to make dissent harder. For example, Russia has a whole bank of laws outlawing certain kinds of protest--currently being deployed in the context of the Ukraine war.¹⁸ Many other countries have laws which make it hard to criticize the government. These are often used, in particular, against the press.¹⁹ And in many countries an official secrets act is used simply to stop people knowing what their government is doing so that it cannot be criticized,²⁰ as was exposed in the US “Pentagon Papers Case” in the early 1970s, concerning Daniel Ellsberg,²¹ and we have recently seen again with respect to Julian Assange.²²

Ideological. Various ideologies are used to prevent the criticism of governments. Perhaps the major one of these is nationalism (and its attendant patriotism). This is used to stifle criticism of a government even when it does something morally wrong. And criticism of a government largely stops if a government declares war—even an unjust war.²³ A particular virulent form of this in the US is “American Exceptionalism”, the view the U.S. is unique and morally superior to other countries for historical, ideological, or religious reasons.²⁴ This is used to give its government the moral high ground in whatever it does internationally, however illegal and vicious.

Psychological. Finally, it is common for a government to manipulate people’s psychology, to keep its actions from criticism. One psychological technique is distraction. For example, sensitive political announcements are often deliberately made when other matters dominate the press.²⁵ However, a much more major psychological tool is fear. Thus, for example, in the cold war the US used the “red scare” and McCarthyism to destroy critics from the left of its political spectrum.²⁶ As Chomsky puts it, replying to a question on the arms race:²⁷

Remember that any state, *any state*, has a primary enemy: its own population. If politics begins to break out inside your own country, and the population starts

¹⁸ Amnesty International (2025).

¹⁹ Amnesty International (2024b).

²⁰ Hooper (1987).

²¹ Encyclopedia Britannica⁵ (nd).

²² Stone (2012).

²³ See the discussion of these matters in Rucker (1998).

²⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica⁴ (nd).

²⁵ Djourelova and Durante (2021)

²⁶ UVA Miller Center (2024).

²⁷ Mitchell and Schoeffel (2002), p.70; his italics

getting active, all kinds of horrible things can happen—so you have to keep the population quiescent and obedient and passive. And international conflict is one of the best ways of doing it: if there's a big enemy around, people will abandon their rights, because you've got to survive. So the arms race is functional in that respect—it creates global tension and a mood of fear.

6. Racial

Let us turn now to race. It is not difficult to see how racism—both past and present—deploys the same techniques as those we have already illustrated.

Violent. Over three centuries, the Transatlantic slave trade saw over 12 million African people forced into slavery. Countless millions were abused and killed because of this.²⁸ Black people have frequently been subjected to violence since slavery was abolished, e.g., lynchings and the Tulsa Massacre of 1921. This took place after the arrest of a black man, Dick Rowland, for an alleged assault of a white woman. Many black men came out to protect Rowland from a possible lynching. This created tension among the white population which resulted in the shooting and killing of black people, the burning of their houses, looting, etc. The police of Tulsa did not try to stop the violence.²⁹ Police brutality in the U.S. has been long affiliated with racism. Unfortunately, since the undeserved death of George Floyd in 2020, and many others, the death of black men and women at the hands of police (black and white) continues at a much higher proportion than that of white people.³⁰

There are many other instances of violence due to racism that one could include here, such as the apartheid system in South Africa (which included the massacres at Sharpsville in 1960 and Soweto in 1976)³¹ the holocaust in Germany,³² the scars of colonialism--whether in African countries, South American, North American, or Australia.

Legal: It is important to emphasize that apartheid and slavery were able to persist because there were laws that upheld these institutions. It took three centuries for slavery to be abolished (something we need to consider—these revolutionary practices take time). The falling of apartheid rule in 1994 came about because of national unrest and international pressure. And while no longer an apartheid state, South Africa continues to have social problems entrenched in racism: police violence, gangs, inequality, etc. In the United States, another form of racism

²⁸ Equal Justice Initiative (nd).

²⁹ Human Rights Watch (nd).

³⁰ Washington Post (2024).

³¹ African Activist Archive (1982).

³² Wiener Holocaust Library (nd).

shrouded in law that still persists in some places is delivered by zoning laws which determine who can buy land/property, where, and who can't. While zoning laws in most states have been overturned, buying land/property for black people continue to have their legal and financial challenges.³³ A couple more legal examples: In Australia, Aboriginal people did not have a legal right to vote until 1962.³⁴ In the West Bank of Palestine, Military Law is imposed on Palestinians but not Israelis.³⁵

Ideological: Ideologies that support forms of racism, such as white supremacy, often have epistemological sources deriving from false beliefs, such as social Darwinism. Other ideologies appeal to religious myths, such as the myth of Ham. This is the story of the son of Ham, Canaan, being cursed by the patriarch Noah. (Many have held that Canaan was black, though there is no textual support for this.) Two more examples: Nazi ideology held Jews to be racially inferior to Aryans.³⁶ After the Meiji restoration (1868) till the end of World War II, Japanese ideology held that the Japanese were racially superior to other Asian races, particularly the Chinese. This legitimized Japanese expansionism.³⁷

Psychological: As has been noted above, ideological techniques affect the way that people think. And fear is often associated with certain ideologies that produce fear of the “other”. See for example the Willie Horton case in the 1988 US election.³⁸ Similarly, it is currently being used by Trump and his administration to make people in the U.S. fear the (predominantly non-white) immigrants and asylum seekers coming through Mexico as ‘criminals and rapists’.³⁹ Ideologies which foster denigrating racial stereotypes and create harmful assumptions, seep through advertising, television programs, and other forms of media and entertainment—not to mention social media.

Finally, the teaching of history concerning topics such as slavery in the US and the genocide of native populations in the US and Australia, has often whitewashed these events, keeping people ignorant of them. As Charles Mills puts it: ⁴⁰

³³ Massey, Rugh, Steil, and Albright (2016).

³⁴ National Museum of Australia (nd).

³⁵ Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association (2017).

³⁶ Holocaust Encyclopedia (nd).

³⁷ Weiner (1995).

³⁸ Saul (2018).

³⁹ Politico (2024).

⁴⁰ Mills (2007), p. 35.

White ignorance has been able to flourish all these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for “racial” reasons have needed not to know.

7. Patriarchal

The last structure to address is patriarchy. Patriarchy is entrenched throughout many of the social and institutional structures of our world, and has been for centuries. As a result, (over) half of the population has been deemed inferior, based on its gender. Patriarchy as a power structure has not only affected heterosexual women, but also homosexuals, lesbians, non-binary, queer, transgender and intersex people. The techniques should now be familiar:

Violent: In the United States alone, domestic violence affects 10 million people a year. ‘One in four women and one in nine men are victims of domestic violence.’⁴¹ Reports of the sexual violence on girls and women in war shows appallingly high statistics. Rape in war has now become a deliberate tactic. According to a UN report, during the 1994 Rwandan genocide between 250,000 – 500,000 girls and women were raped. Many thousands of girls and women have been victims of rape during war and conflict in Sierra Leone, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo--not to mention Ukraine and Gaza today. These numbers are often inaccurate and don’t express the true extent of violence, since reporting does not always take place.⁴² There are many other forms of violence against women such as child marriage, honor killings, and female genital mutilation.

Legal: In many countries of the world only men were allowed to vote until relatively recently. As part of the suffragette movement, women in the US pressured the government to allow women to vote; the law was passed in 1920. In Switzerland, women attained the right to vote in the 1970s; in Kuwait it wasn’t until 2005. In some countries laws exist which restrict the rights of women to hold property, their movements, education, dress, etc. In September, 2024, women in Afghanistan been forbidden to speak in public.⁴³ Indeed, in Afghanistan women are now legally prevented from having a public life (a job, education, etc).⁴⁴

A gender pay gap still exists in the workforce of the US—even despite a law against pay discrimination. In some places, women continue to get paid less than men for the same work. According to a report by the AAUW, ‘women working full time in the U.S. are still paid just 84

⁴¹ Huecker, King, Jordan, and Smock (2023).

⁴² UN Women (nd).

⁴³ BBC (2024).

⁴⁴ UN Women (2024).

cents to every dollar earned by men—and the consequences of this gap affect women throughout their lives.⁴⁵ So the enforcement of law is itself a problem.

Ideological: The pernicious effects of ideology described above concerning the other power structures work in the same way for gender/patriarchy. Traditional views that women are more emotional and less rational beings than men persist.⁴⁶ While the situation has improved (in some places), nevertheless, among many people such ideologies still function. Religion continues to be a heavy obstacle for the emancipation of women. Many Christians believe, as the Bible says, that women should be subordinate to men. In the Catholic Church women still cannot be ordained as priests, and continue to fulfill a subservient role.⁴⁷ In Buddhist Sanghas women have traditionally been placed in roles subordinate to men.⁴⁸ Many other religions also inhibit and oppress women.

Religious beliefs blended with cultural beliefs, also tend to restrict the agency of women. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States (largely supported by Christian Evangelicals), which has limited the right to reproductive freedom, is just one example.⁴⁹

Psychological: One of the main negative psychological effects men have on women is through gaslighting.⁵⁰ Of course, it doesn't just happen to women by men. Women can also gaslight men and other women. But it is always an expression of a power imbalance. Another major psychological technique, used to intimidate and disempower women, is sexual harassment.⁵¹

It is also the case that women may internalize their own oppression by either accepting or resigning themselves to such oppression or perpetuating gender stereotypes that are not liberating.⁵² An example includes mothers who treat their children differently, enforcing traditional gender roles, thus socializing their daughters into “female roles”. Even worse, women themselves are heavily involved in the initiation and performance of female genital mutilation.⁵³

⁴⁵ AAUW (2025).

⁴⁶ See Lloyd (1993).

⁴⁷ Mattson (2018).

⁴⁸ Pattanaik (2022).

⁴⁹ Guardian (2022).

⁵⁰ March, Cameron, Dinić, Wagstaff, Grabovac, and Jonason (2025).

⁵¹ Crosthwaite and Priest (1996).

⁵² Constantinescu (2021)

⁵³ Gruenbaum, Earp, and Shweder (2022).

Commenting on the psychological oppression of women, Mary Wollstonecraft noted: ⁵⁴

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for by power tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a plaything. The sensualist indeed has been the most dangerous of tyrants, and women have been duped by their lovers, as princes by their ministers, whilst dreaming that they reigned over them...

8. Conclusion

We have now made our point (we hope). The power structures we have been concerned with (and others), though different, use much the same techniques to enable and perpetuate themselves. And so, what?

As hardly needs to be said, oppression and its concomitant suffering are a bad thing, and should be eliminated. What this means is that one should oppose top-down power structures and work to get rid of them. To act against something, one really needs to know how it works, how it functions. Hopefully what we have said enhances our understanding of how such power structures work. One lesson one might learn is this: The mechanisms to enforce power which we have discussed, though they may interact with each other, are, in principle, independent. Hence, attacking—and even eliminating—one, but leaving the others in place, can have only limited effect. All the tools of oppression need to be addressed.

More than this, however, since the different structures use similar techniques, this means that a strategy that has effect against one power structure (or at least one similar to it) should be effective against another—not necessarily to the same degree, or with precisely the same consequences, but effective none the less. This means that groups acting against one oppressive power structure may learn from successful strategies of groups acting against others. Indeed, since the power structures are often used in mutual support, the groups may profitably act in coordinated ways. We have a significant lesson in solidarity.

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⁵⁴ Wollstonecraft (1998), p. 255

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