

Four Levels of Power: A Conception to Enable Liberation*

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MANY public leaders and activists—politicians, advocates, social movement leaders, and even ordinary citizens—seek to alter patterns of asymmetric power in order to achieve liberation from domination. How should such people think about the operations of power? This article sketches a mental map to guide decisions about where to allocate energy and resources in order to achieve liberation. In the field, so to speak, such decisions depend on judgement and context. Thus, a prudential article of this sort cannot provide right or wrong answers in concrete situations. To be successful, such a conceptual framework must help actors engaged in projects of liberation direct their attention to avenues of constructive action.

In contrast to enabling liberation, many scholars of power have sought to understand how power produces *domination*. Marx and Gramsci focused on the domination of workers by capitalists, feminists seek to understand the domination of women by men, James Scott explained the domination and resistance of Southeast Asian peasants, John Gaventa explored the domination of workers and their families in Appalachia, and Foucault explained the domination of regicides, prisoners, and the insane (among others). The conceptual framework that is most used to understand power and domination is perhaps the three faces of power lens developed by Stephen Lukes¹ and John Gaventa.² In the 2005 second edition of his book, Lukes writes:

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¹Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

²John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 23–33. See also <<http://powercube.net/>>.

PRV [*Power: A Radical View*, 1974 first edition] offers a very partial and one-sided account of the topic [of power]. For one thing, it focuses entirely on the exercise of power and, for another, it deals only with asymmetric power—the power of some over others—and, moreover, with only a sub-type of this, namely, the securing of compliance to domination.³

While understanding domination may be an important part of enabling liberation, my emphasis on the latter generates a different understanding of power. In particular, I argue that there are four important levels at which to understand power and alter the terms of its exercise.

1. *Everyday power*. The first level of *everyday power* consists of commonplace interactions in which particular agents face challenges to their interests. Is a fast-food worker able to secure a decent wage? Is a pregnant woman able to terminate her pregnancy? Is a fetus able to avoid termination? Is a small dry-cleaning business able to avoid over-burdensome environmental regulation and taxation?
2. *Covering laws and policies*. The second level of *policy power* consists of the general laws and policies (from governments and other organizations) that make it more or less difficult for individuals to advance their interests. These include, for example, minimum wage regulations, laws restricting abortion or its funding, environmental regulations, tax policies, and domestic-partner policies of companies.
3. *Structural power*. The third level of *structural power* consists of rules of engagement—the parameters and terrain—that govern contests between groups and organizations that advocate for individuals at the first level and seek to shape the covering laws and policies constituting the second level of power. How difficult is it to form a labor union? What are the regulations and sanctions governing protest and civil disobedience? What limits do small businesses and their industry associations face in contributing to political campaigns?
4. *Ethical power*. The fourth level of *ethical power* consists of the content and distribution of ideals, values, public narratives, and norms in society. Ethical power shapes activity at the first three levels. Does the balance of public opinion favor protecting the economically vulnerable or market-based remuneration? Do we live, as Michael Sandel argues,⁴ in a market society? Are unions viewed as an important counterweight to business power or as protectors of aristocratic labor? Is it desirable for women to be economic participants or leaders at home? Is government believed to be generally competent to protect public interests?

³Stephen Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edn (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), p. 64.

⁴Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

The next section sketches the scope of this analysis in juxtaposition to other theoretical work on power. My analysis is not a rebuttal, or even an alternative, but rather a complement with different aims and scope. Sections II through V articulate each of the four levels of power conceptually. The final section reflects upon how this perspective on power can help agents navigate questions of power by offering several speculative propositions about how social movement organizations should act in light of this conception.

I. POWER ANALYSIS: EXPLAINING DOMINATION VERSUS ENABLING LIBERATION THROUGH ORGANIZATION

This article employs the following definition of power:

A is powerful to the extent that A can advance his interests even when doing so sets back the interests of other agents (B₁, B₂, B₃).

The notion of power here is more actor-centered than Robert Dahl's classic—and remarkably crisp—definition: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”⁵ I am less concerned about whether a particular agent (B) is dominated than whether agents (A) (the protagonists, if you like) can protect and advance *their* interests. Whereas many analysts of power have been principally concerned with the Bs of the world,⁶ this article takes A's point of view. On this definition, then, we are more concerned with what scholars have called “power-to” than “power-over” and still less “power-with.”⁷

In a situation where a bank (A) is interested in maintaining profits from loans that it has made, the important question for A is whether A takes a “haircut,” and less whether maintaining that profit comes from collecting payments from mortgage-holders (B₁) or getting a government bailout financed by taxpayers (B₂). Conversely, suppose A is an urban community organization defending low-income homeowners in danger of foreclosure. A is powerful to the extent that it can keep those homeowners in their houses. Whether A does so by persuading philanthropists (B₁) to pay off the loans, preventing banks (B₂) from collecting, or securing taxpayer (B₃) financing for government purchases of those loans is instrumental to A's central purpose. Leaders such as those described in the introduction are primarily interested in building and exercising power to protect low-wage workers, immigrants, the environment, and so on. In doing so, they can expect many kinds of resistance. But the appropriate measure of their power is their capacity to protect their constituents' interests, not to bend the will of others.

⁵Robert A. Dahl, “The concept of power,” *Behavioral Science*, 2 (1957), 201–15.

⁶I count among these Dahl, Lukes, Scott, Marx, Gramsci, and Foucault.

⁷For an excellent discussion of relational power, see Bernard Loomer, “Two conceptions of power,” *Process Studies*, 6 (1976), 5–32.

Many classic social-theoretic treatments of power are highly general and so develop notions of power that can be used to understand its operations across many contexts: from faculty meetings to revolutions. This analysis is confined to the narrower contextual range of modern polyarchies in which (1) social actors can form groups and contestatory organizations; (2) there is a polyarchic political process for making, implementing, and changing policies; and (3) there is a diversity of ideas and beliefs in society made possible by relatively open spaces of expression and media.⁸ The rise of exclusionary populism notwithstanding, I believe that much of the world in the 21st century satisfies these conditions—especially economically developed societies with stable democratic institutions. But this analysis is probably not helpful in understanding the possibilities for using power to liberate James Scott’s peasants, Uighurs in authoritarian China, or downtrodden people in chaotic and conflict-ridden weak states.

I focus on modern polyarchies because the dynamics of political power there depend upon interactions between individuals, organizations, and policy-making institutions that are distinctively different from the power dynamics in authoritarian and weak-state societies. Specifically, the hallmark of polyarchy is that the power of individuals to protect and advance their interests depends upon the strength of the social and political organizations—for example, unions, religious organizations, social clubs, identity groups, and issue organizations—and upon the integrity of the political institutions that translate the views and demands in society into laws and public policies.

The three-level analysis of Stephen Lukes and John Gaventa remains very powerful for understanding the dynamics of compliance and domination in this and other contexts. Without rehearsing the power debates in American political science in the mid-20th century,⁹ this perspective illuminates important ways in which domination occurs even in the absence of visible conflict. It deepens our understanding of how power works by directing our attention to dynamics that we tend to ignore. It is natural, and not just for pluralists and behavioralists, but also for barefoot social observers such as activists, journalists, and policy makers, to look for explicit conflict—the first dimension of power—to understand who has power and who lacks it. The three-level view elegantly conveys why this impulse is deeply mistaken. Bachrach, Lukes, and then Gaventa told us that we should be paying less attention to overt conflict, and more to understanding non-decisions, ideas, preferences, and real interests. This makes good sense, and so many of us continue to follow their advice.

⁸Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

⁹See Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956); Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, “Two faces of power,” *American Political Science Review*, 56 (1962), 947–5; Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 1st and 2nd edns; Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*.

In important and influential work, Gaventa and his colleagues at the Institute for Development Studies have expanded upon the three-dimensional notion of power conceptually and practically over the past two decades. Conceptually, Gaventa has developed the “power cube,” which adds two additional dimensions to the three-level view: a geographic scale of local–national–global and a venue dimension of closed–invited–claimed.¹⁰ The power cube has been used very fruitfully by many analysts of power to understand and develop strategies for many problems all over the world, including the political participation of indigenous women in Guatemala, AIDS/HIV prevention efforts in India, and health and anti-poverty efforts in Malawi.¹¹

The four-level conception of power developed here is not intended to displace these other conceptions. Instead, the view that I develop focuses on the strength and role of organizations—advocacy and social movement organizations—and upon laws and public policies in creating, or failing to create, conditions under which individuals can advance their interests. The power-cube—and the three-level analysis of power that preceded it—is a more general lens for power analysis, but I hope that the four-level conception offered below is especially useful in “polyarchal” contexts where many outcomes are determined by the success and failure of popular, political organizations and the laws and public policies that they champion.

II. A FOUR-LEVEL CONCEPTION OF POWER

The project of enabling liberation in contrast to explaining domination—of making change rather than explaining stability—requires a different kind of power analysis. Such an account puts a premium on contingency, strategic agency, and dynamic change over time. In particular, it must direct analysts’ and actors’ attention to the junctures at which they might cause different outcomes to occur. At what points can they make choices that advance their interests? Second, such a power analysis should help guide investments of energy across time and across different strategic possibilities. Through the three-dimensional lens, for example, should a subordinate actor spend energy and capital winning an overt conflict, trying to put an issue on the political agenda, or waging a cultural battle to crack through the ruling hegemonic ideas? Finally, over time, how do such choices affect an actor’s power? What causes the power of groups and organizations to ebb and flow dynamically and diachronically?

The following four-level analysis of power attempts to provide such an analysis. Table 1 offers illustrations of how power works at each of these levels

¹⁰Gaventa, “Finding the spaces for change.”

¹¹V. Miller, L. VeneKlasen, M. Reilly, and C. Clark, *Making Change Happen 3: Power. Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace* (Washington, DC: Just Associates, 2006); Shereen Essof, Lisa VeneKlasen, Alia Khan, and Adelaide Mazwarira, “*Making Change Happen 4: Power. Power-Movements-Change: Malawi*” (Washington, DC: Just Associates, 2013); Maro Pantazidou, “What next for power analysis? A review of recent experience with the Powercube and related frameworks,” IDS Working Papers 2012, no. 400 (2012), 1–46.

Table 1. *Four Levels of Power with Illustrations*

		Level		
Issue	1. Everyday Power	2. Covering Policies and Laws	3. Structural Power	4. Ethical Power
	commonplace interactions that advance individuals' interests or set them back	laws and policies that protect classes of people	laws, policies, practices, and institutions that regulate opportunities and resources of political and social movement organizations	ideology, values and public narratives
Low-income housing	pro-bono lawyer prevents a specific foreclosure or eviction	law expands availability of mortgages; stronger tenant protection laws	regulations provide public information or administrative standing (e.g. CRA and HMDA)	cultural and social entitlement to housing, homeownership as cultural birthright
Health care	advocacy or litigation to press insurance company on an individual claim	Affordable Care Act expansion of health insurance coverage	over time, many Americans benefit from ACA and form a supportive constituency	broadly shared notion that health care is a human right and to deny health care is barbaric
Deregulation	regulator does not enforce environmental or labor regulation	laws and policies reduce protections for environment or workplace safety	law imposes cost-benefit filter on all proposed regulation	diffusion of widespread belief that government is generally wasteful, ineffective, and corrupt
Anti-corruption in India (MKSS)	protest results in dismissal of a corrupt official and restitution for his/her victims	establish tough sanctions for corrupt officials	MKSS wins the legislative "right to information"	social expectation changes from bribes as normal—everyone does it—to immoral and unacceptable

Table 1. (Continued)

		Level		
		2. Covering Policies and Laws		
Issue	1. Everyday Power	3. Structural Power	4. Ethical Power	
Marriage equality	an administrative clerk engages in civil disobedience by issuing marriage licenses	state or federal law creates marriage equality	sexual orientation becomes a “suspect category” in jurisprudence	ethical and cultural shift to support for equal treatment and non-discrimination against LGBT people
Pro-life	protesters shut down a clinic that performs abortions	law reduces funding for abortion services	reduce funding for and restrict sex education	“culture of life”: belief that life begins at conception spreads widely

in different policy domains. Collective action and campaigning can occur at each of the levels. In the case of low-income housing, for example, an advocate might invest resources in defending a person under threat of eviction (level 1); passing stronger tenants' rights laws (level 2); institutionalizing funding and roles for tenant advocates in local government (level 3); changing social attitudes to favor a right to housing or housing as a basic human entitlement (level 4).

III. FIRST-ORDER POWER: INDIVIDUALS

The central challenges of liberation revolve around individuals: does an individual have the capacity to advance her interests in her interactions with other individuals, but especially with organizations and institutions? Consider a quotidian example: how much is an individual paid by her employer? An individual is more powerful with respect to this issue to the extent that she has the capability to extract greater remuneration from her employer. It is natural to say that Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle Corporation, is more powerful than a newly hired software engineer, and that a tenured professor at Harvard University is more powerful than an adjunct lecturer, with regard to compensation.

The fundamental challenge of power and powerlessness arises at points of interaction between individuals and organizations. Is an immigrant able to work and remain in a country? Or is she jailed, beaten, or deported by a government or gangs? Can a person buy a home or a farm and remain in it in hard times? Is a consumer able to protect himself from unsafe products and obtain redress from a manufacturer whose products have injured him? Must a loan holder suffer high taxes or usurious interest rates? Is a parent able to secure a safe educational environment and good teachers for her children? Can a person carry a firearm to defend himself?

Why root this analysis from the bottom up, at the atomic level of particular individuals, rather than with a larger-scale analysis of power involving larger aggregates such as corporations, armies, or governments? It is also natural to say that one corporation is more powerful than another when it can dominate the other in a marketplace, or that one army proves itself more powerful than another when it prevails in a battle. But very different dynamics govern those sorts of organization-on-organization power. This article aims to develop a concept of power for liberation, not power on its own. I understand the subject of liberation to be individuals. But the role of organizations is nevertheless essential. Many organizations (anti-tax organizations and social justice groups alike) seek to liberate and empower individuals. Many individuals experience powerlessness in the face of interactions with large organizations such as hospitals, regulatory agencies, police forces, courts, and companies whose policies and decisions seem arbitrary and harmful.

IV. SECOND-ORDER POWER: COVERING POLICIES AND LAWS

The second level of power is constituted by laws and policies that directly shape the capacity of agents to advance their interests at the first level of individual-to-organization interaction. While the first level of power is “retail” in nature—addressing dynamic interactions between one individual and one organization at a time, the second level of power is “wholesale,” affecting classes of individuals: for example, foster children, women seeking reproductive health services, underwater homeowners, and those who possess firearms.

Such clashes between individuals and organizations involve many second-order laws, policies, and rules. In the case of the immigrant who wishes to remain in a country, second-order rules of engagement include regional policies around movement and migration (for example, changes to mobility among European Union citizens versus immigration rules in North America), the harshness or permissiveness of rules governing immigration and deportation, policies and practices regarding enforcement of those laws, availability and quality of legal counsel for immigrant defendants, and the financing and staffing of state apparatuses to police immigration. Ranchers in the American West have fought against laws such as tax schedules and limitations on land use imposed by environmental and conservation regulations.

Political organizations, advocacy groups, and community organizations press for changes at this second level of power. Issue-based campaigns seek laws and policies that are favorable to their constituents by, for example, granting rights, privileges, and resources (for example, requiring or limiting background checks as a condition of gun purchases) or by biasing governmental action (for example, by expanding or constraining police powers). Politicians gain support by promising to change such laws and policies (for example, by prohibiting health insurers from scrutinizing pre-existing conditions). For a political organization, changing covering laws and policies is the most direct and often most efficient way to benefit the individuals who form their constituencies.

Through the lens of power outlined above, we understand these efforts to change laws and policies as a special kind of instrumental exercise of power. On this understanding, organizations seek change at this second level in order to alter outcomes and the balance of power at the first level of everyday lived experience. Suppose an organization aims to protect indebted homeowners who are in danger of foreclosure. It might pursue this goal by defending one homeowner at a time, by trying to negotiate better deals, find additional financing, and so on. Activity at this retail level of advocacy is on the first level of power. Calculating strategically, that organization may decide that it can protect more homeowners by shifting its resources from that kind of retail advocacy to a more wholesale approach by seeking laws or policies to protect a larger class: for example, all homeowners in a city, state, or the country. Such a law might allocate public funds to support borrowers, require banks to adopt more exacting foreclosure procedures, or compel creditors to renegotiate mortgage terms with borrowers.

Advocates can put too much faith in the efficacy of covering laws and policies. Success at level 2 does not guarantee success at level 1. Regulators may be too lax or short-handed to enforce regulations and so regulated entities may evade compliance.

V. THIRD-ORDER POWER: STRUCTURE OF DECISION-MAKING ARENAS

The third level of “structural power” is constituted by rules, resources, and practices that regulate the ways in which forces are massed and decisions are made. For example, who has the right to vote? Is it easy, difficult, or illegal to protest or form a political association such as a union, party, or interest group? Are the resources for advancing political views and programs broadly or narrowly distributed? Victories and losses over third-order power are two steps removed from conferring particular benefits or protections (or costs) upon particular individuals—but they are often decisive in determining which social and political forces prevail in battles over covering laws and policies.

A. DEEP VERSUS DEvised STRUCTURES

In considering structural power, it is helpful to differentiate between deep and devised structures. Deep structures are unchangeable in the short and medium term because they constitute a political or economic regime. Deep structures don’t change unless the whole regime changes. Devised structures, by contrast, are rules of the political, cultural, or economic game that are constructed through political artifice and thus more subject to agency. Scholars have no fundamental reason to distinguish between deep and devised structures because both are important for understanding the operations of power (and especially domination). For political and social actors, however, deep structures are largely of academic and theoretical interest because they are, by stipulation, not malleable and therefore not helpful in achieving liberation. This article therefore focuses on devised varieties of structural power rather than the deep kind.

By contrast, mid-20th-century social theorists spent much of their energy exploring deep structural power. In their work on the politics of regulation, George Stigler and then James Q. Wilson argued that regulated entities such as large manufacturing companies enjoyed an advantage over consumers and taxpayers in political contests for weaker (or stronger) regulation and more (or less) public subsidy.¹² The advantage, they argued, stems from the structural fact that regulated companies are few in number and have much to gain or lose from regulation, compared to consumers and taxpayers who are numerous and who

¹²George J. Stigler, “The theory of economic regulation,” *Bell Journal of Economics and Management Science*, 2 (1971), 3–21; James Q. Wilson, “The politics of regulation,” James Q. Wilson (ed.), *Political Economy: Readings in the Politics and Economics of American Public Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 357–94.

gain or lose only a little from any particular regulation. Companies therefore organize themselves more easily because they have concentrated interests whereas taxpayers and consumers have diffuse interests.

Writing about the struggle between labor and capital in the Marxist tradition, Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenenthal argued that capitalists enjoy a structural advantage over labor in many political contests.¹³ While capitalists face a collective action problem of working together to establish conditions that are favorable to business success—generating profit—workers face two collective action problems. They first have to agree on how to prioritize among many different interests such as “job satisfaction, health, leisure time, and continuity of employment,”¹⁴ and then they have to overcome the second collective action dilemma of working together to advance those interests. Because it is easier to solve one collective action problem rather than two, capitalists enjoy a structural political advantage over labor. In a similar vein, Charles Lindblom argued that capitalists enjoy a structural advantage over all other interests in capitalist democratic societies, because investment decisions operate as a “punishing recoil mechanism” against policies that disfavor capital.¹⁵

In this article, I turn away from these kinds of deep structural power to examine devised structures that shape the exercise of power, but have been created by deliberate action. For example, increasing enfranchisement of Americans over the past two hundred years—to all men, to women, to African-Americans—are deliberate measures that shape the playing field, introducing new actors and interests into the electoral arena. Political struggles over the rules of voting and apportioning those votes—poll taxes, voter identification requirements, automatic voter registration, voting eligibility for those who have committed felonies or for immigrants, absentee voting and vote-by-mail provisions, redistricting procedures—all affect the contours of the effective franchise. Fights about these provisions are exercises of power at the third level; they are fights about the rules of the game.

More recently, the Supreme Court decisions of *Buckley v. Valeo*, *Citizens United* and other legal decisions that increase the flow of private money into politics strengthen the power of some interests (those that can draw upon that private money) at the expense of others. Earlier in the 20th century, the Wagner Act and related legislation facilitated the formation of labor unions and created a regime of collective bargaining that fundamentally altered the relationships between worker and employer in the USA. It was an exercise of power at level 3 that had lasting effects on many level 1 and level 2 workplace decisions.¹⁶

¹³Claus Offe and Helmut Wiesenenthal, “Two logics of collective action,” *Political Power and Social Theory*, 1 (1980), 67–115.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵Charles Lindblom, “The market as prison,” *Journal of Politics*, 44 (1982), 324–36.

¹⁶See Mark Barenberg, “Political economy of the Wagner Act: power, symbol, and workplace cooperation,” *Harvard Law Review*, 106 (1993), 1379–496.

More systematically, devised structural power can affect the capacity of groups to utilize five distinct kinds of resources and opportunities: (1) money, (2) members, (3) knowledge, (4) leverage, and (5) allies.

B. MONEY

Money is a fungible resource that individuals and organizations alike can utilize to advance their interests. Structures of institutions, laws, and customs mediate between money and power. These structures govern how individuals and organizations accumulate financial resources and the manner in which those financial resources can be deployed in political arenas such as elections and lobbying.

For example, laws governing the tax status of non-profit organizations in the USA—so-called 501c(3) and 501c(4) organizations—increase the flows of funds available to organizations that advance purposes such as charity, religion, education, literacy, science, sport, and social welfare in two ways. Such organizations are exempt from paying certain kinds of taxes. Furthermore, individuals who make gifts to 501c(3) organizations may deduct those gifts from their taxable income. These two categories of tax benefit constitute a fiscal terrain that encourages the formation and flourishing of an enormous “third sector” of society that includes many universities and hospitals, as well as many social service providers, interest groups, and political organizations. The Foundation Center estimates that there are currently over 1.5 million non-profit organizations in the USA.¹⁷

Provisions that regulate political financing constitute another important instance of how devised structures regulate power contests in the USA. These rules govern many aspects of campaign finance—how much individuals may contribute to candidates’ organizations and advocacy groups, whether corporations may spend money on campaigns, financing from public coffers, and reporting and disclosure requirements—and they seldom operate symmetrically. Increasing the amount that individuals can contribute to political campaigns (the US limit was \$2700 per individual to a federal candidate in the 2015–16 election year) benefits candidates who garner proportionately more contributions from individuals who “max out,” compared to candidates whose funding comes more from small contributions. Rules requiring disclosure of campaign-funding sources disadvantage those whose supporters would rather remain hidden from public scrutiny.

Laws and policies regulating dues, fees, and other payments to labor unions form another arena of “structural power.” Union members pay dues to support

¹⁷See <<http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/faqs/html/howmany.html>>. For recent critiques of how philanthropy harms democracy, see Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Knopf, 2018); and Rob Reich, *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

staffing and activities of their organizations. In workplaces that are covered by collective bargaining agreements, labor unions have also been able to collect “agency fees”—almost always somewhat less than the full costs of union dues—from individuals who are not union members in order to cover the costs associated with negotiating with employers. The justification for these “agency fees” is that collective bargains benefit all employees at a workplace whether they are union members or not, and so they should all have to pay the costs of producing those bargains. That settled “structure” for organizing flows of funds from non-member workers to unions was overturned for public sector employees in 2018 by the 5–4 decision of the US Supreme Court in *Janus v. AFSME*.¹⁸ The Court had previously held in *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education* (1977) that it was possible to distinguish between the services that unions provide in collective bargaining and negotiation on one hand, and the political, expressive, and lobbying activities of unions on the other. Agency fees can be charged for collective bargaining, but not for politics and lobbying.

The *Janus* Court overturned *Abood* by ruling that government employers cannot require employees to pay agency fees to unions because doing so violates those employees’ First Amendment rights to speech and association. To require agency fees from individuals, the majority ruled, is to compel them to support the speech of unions on a wide range of public positions. It is not possible to make the distinction and apportion charges, the majority argued, between collective bargaining and other employment-related services on the one hand, and politics and speech on the other. Whatever its legal merits, the Court’s decision in *Janus* is a potent exercise of devised structural power that dramatically decreases the financial resources, and therefore the organizational strength, of public sector unions in the USA.

C. MEMBERS

A second important kind of structural power regulates how groups recruit and retain members and supporters. Though it is tempting to think that groups’ memberships depend mainly upon the energies of their staffs, the cleverness of their organizing strategies, and the attractiveness of their missions, membership also depends upon structural factors.

Compared to many societies around the globe, the mature democracies of North America and Western Europe are blessed with a high level of formal (legal) and substantial freedom of association. That freedom protects both civic entrepreneurs who want to form different kinds of organizations and individuals who want to join those organizations. In many other societies, laws prohibit and sanction those who form or join organizations with political, civic, labor, or religious agendas that threaten those who hold political, economic, or social power.

¹⁸No. 16-1466. 585 U.S. ____, 138 S. Ct. 2448 (2018), June 27, 2018.

Even in the context of full freedom of association, however, background structures can make it more or less challenging to sustain membership. In the USA, struggles over these structures have been most visible in labor politics. Laws and regulations have made it easier or more difficult at different times for employers to sanction employees who support or join unions. Such structures also regulate the ways in which communications advocating or opposing unions at workplaces. Laws and regulations also govern the rules of union formation in workplace elections. One important recent power struggle over the structures of labor membership occurred in 2009 over the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). EFCA would have allowed unions to be certified by a process in which organizers collected a majority of signatures from employees at a workplace and would have increased penalties for employers who punish workers for supporting unions. Predictably, labor advocates favored EFCA and many employers and their associations opposed it. Congress did not pass it.

Public support can also strongly facilitate membership. Some organizations form alliances that can subsidize membership. In one particularly interesting example, Teach for America has over its decade-plus history received substantial funding from Congress as well as state and local governments. Its members work in schools across the country, and so public funding is meant to pay for their training and the work that they do. However, Teach for America also has a particular civic perspective and mission that public funds have helped to advance.

D. KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

Knowledge and expertise constitute a third kind of structural power: the capacity of organizations to produce and use information and data in sophisticated and strategic ways, to challenge knowledge claims, and to put forth alternative claims about the state of the world. Knowledge and expertise almost always require resources in the form of specialists like scientists, engineers, and policy experts. But organizational access to knowledge and expertise also often depends upon structures of law, policy, and custom that regulate access to data and information, allocation of authority to make knowledge claims and determinations, and the recognition and legitimacy of expertise.

Over the last fifty years, organizations have waged many struggles to pass laws and policies to make more public information that would have been closely, and asymmetrically, held by specific kinds of organizations.¹⁹ “Freedom of information” laws create a presumption that citizens should have access to information held by government organizations. When implemented, these laws structurally facilitate

¹⁹See, for example, Archon Fung, Mark Graham, and David Weil, *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alasdair Roberts, *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Archon Fung, “Infotopia: unleashing the democratic power of transparency,” *Politics and Society*, 41 (2013), 183–212.

the efforts of investigative journalists and watchdog organizations to increase the public accountability of governments.

Laws, regulations, and sometimes public pressure can compel private sector actors—corporations—to make information public. Sometimes, that information can alter the balance of power and change outcomes between companies and advocates who challenge them. For example, the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975 compelled banks to disclose data regarding their home loans. Those data enabled community organizations and scholars to press a particular knowledge claim in public: that banks were discriminating against minority and low-income people by “redlining.”

Another example comes from the arena of pollution prevention. In the 1980s, Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency created the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI).²⁰ The TRI is a database that makes public the environmental releases and transfers of toxic substances from tens of thousands of facilities across the USA, helping environmental advocates, journalists, and industry analysts understand which companies and facilities are the worst polluters.

In areas like environment and health, the interplay of science, politics, and power highlights the importance of structures that confer recognition and legitimacy by developing and anointing—or challenging—particular individuals and organizations as holding dispositive knowledge and expertise. In his study *Impure Science*, Stephen Epstein documents the success of AIDS/HIV activists in overcoming, at least in part, what they viewed as an overly conservative and cumbersome drug approval process based on overly conservative scientific expertise. Remarkably, some activists in this movement acquired a level of mastery of basic and applied medical science sufficient to contribute to development of new therapies.²¹ The book and later movie, *A Civil Action*, documents and dramatizes the efforts of community members in Woburn, Massachusetts and university-based public health researchers to show, against the determination of state environmental authorities, that pollution from a local chemical company caused childhood leukemia there.²²

Looking forward, it is likely that political and commercial organizations will increasingly rely upon “big data” to conduct outreach, publicity, mobilization, and organizing efforts. Even more than in the past, the ability to organize citizens into groups and movements may well come to depend upon access to information about individuals and the expertise to make sense of that information. These data come largely from our digital footprints—what we buy, what we say on social media, to whom we say it, what we read and watch. With important exceptions, such as health and children’s educational records, access to these data is

²⁰Mary Graham, *Democracy by Disclosure: The Rise of Technopopulism* (Washington, DC: Governance Institute/Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

²¹Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: Aids, Activism, and the Politics of Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

²²Phil Brown, “Popular epidemiology and toxic waste contamination: lay and professional ways of knowing,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 33 (1992), 267–81.

determined by the rules of the marketplace.²³ If access to these data depends upon ability to pay, organizations with greater financial resources will also thereby command greater knowledge and expertise about the very citizens that compose a democratic society, and greater capacity to coalesce those citizens into politically significant groups.

E. LEVERAGE

A group has leverage to the extent that it can convert resources into desired outcomes. In particular, leverage increases when individuals and groups gain roles that enable them to influence, perhaps even jointly determine, decisions from which they were previously excluded. For example, parents at a school have more leverage over its administration when they have a seat, and even more so a vote, on the body that selects that school's principal or district's superintendent. Parents have many other ways to attempt to influence these appointments. Their "repertoire" of methods might include suggesting candidates, writing letters, speaking up at meetings, organizing petitions, and staging protests. But, other factors equal, having a formal role increases that influence.

Drawing again from American labor history, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which created a legal right of recognized labor unions to bargain collectively with employers over wages and working conditions, marks a major gain in leverage for labor unions. It increased the formal and actual influence of employees over workplace decisions and consequently reduced the scope of "management prerogative" by compelling employers in organized workplaces to formally negotiate with a single designated representative.

Since the 1970s, some law makers, regulators, and community organizations have pressed financial institutions to make greater efforts to meet the needs of low-income residents and, in particular, to avoid engaging in "redlining" and other forms of discrimination. The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) of 1977—amended many times since its initial passage—increases the leverage of community organizations over lending decisions and bank policies in two different ways. First, the CRA establishes a formal mechanism for regulators to assess and rate the fair lending performance of particular banks. Community organizations often participate in this process by offering testimony about the positive and negative experiences of their members and constituents, as well as more general views about banks' behaviors and policies. Second, informally, but partially as a consequence of this formal mechanism, banks now often engage in discussions and negotiations with community organizations, so that they can address their concerns and thus avoid escalation to an official regulatory level.

²³See Sasha Issenberg, *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* (New York: Broadway Books, 2013); and Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018).

F. ALLIES

A fifth kind of structural power stems from the alliances that organizations and groups forge. Many alliances—such as the partnerships or coalitions that come together to mount a campaign out of a common interest or agenda—should not be considered “structural” because they do not alter the terrain on which advocacy and interest groups compete. Other alliances, however, have a more enduring character and exert profound effects on the character of political contests.

Some structural alliances arise from the design of public policies. The Social Security Act of 1935 turned out to be an exercise of power at levels 2 and 3 simultaneously. At level 2, the Act constitutes a covering law that provides income benefits for the elderly. Rather than just providing benefits to needy elderly people, everyone who works pays social security taxes to finance the system, and everyone who pays these taxes is eligible to receive social security income after they reach retirement age. Operating at the third level of power, these contributory and universal features of US social security created a durable political constituency of hundreds of millions of beneficiaries to defend the program.²⁴ An alternative policy design would have targeted support to poor elderly people. While such a policy would have arguably been more efficient because it would have channeled resources to those most in need, it would not have produced the broad constituency of beneficiaries that now supports social security.

In a candid and penetrating analysis, Republican Representative Michelle Bachmann objected to the Affordable Care Act health reform legislation because of the powerful constituency it would create. She likened “Obamacare” to cocaine: “I think the reason is because President Obama can’t wait to get Americans addicted to the crack cocaine of dependency on more government health care,” she said. “Because, once they enroll millions of more individual Americans it will be virtually impossible for us to pull these benefits back from people.”²⁵

Other kinds of structural alliances are reinforced by mutually beneficial exchanges between different kinds of political actors and groups. Patron–client relationships are the most basic form of such exchange. Politicians (patrons) use their political power to secure benefits—such as jobs or beneficial legislation—for particular groups (clients) in exchange for their votes. The relationship between the Christian Coalition and the Republican Party since the 1980s—or between labor unions and the Democratic Party since World War II—exhibit more complicated and durable relationships in which each side makes significant and sometimes uncomfortable demands of the other.

²⁴John Ikenberry and Theda Skocpol, “Expanding social benefits: the role of social security,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 102 (1987), 389–416.

²⁵Interview with WND news, <<http://www.wnd.com/2013/09/bachmann-obama-peddling-crack-cocaine-of-dependency/>>.

Some powerful structural alliances have been called “iron triangles” because they connect legislators, bureaucrats, and interest groups: each side uses its distinctive power and authority to benefit the others in a mutually reinforcing way, often at great cost to those who are outside the triangle of relationships. In American politics, many have understood what Dwight D. Eisenhower called the “Military Industrial Complex” as an iron triangle consisting of hawkish legislators, the defense department and armed forces, and armaments companies. Legislators press for higher military budgets (desired by defense contractors) and interventionist foreign policy (sometimes desired by armed forces); arms producers support the political campaigns of the legislators; and defense agencies channel lucrative contracts to arms producers.

VI. ETHICAL POWER: IDEOLOGY, VALUES, AND PUBLIC NARRATIVES

Karl Marx wrote in the *German Ideology* that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”²⁶ But, as Gramsci argued, this is not strictly so. Sometimes, countervailing ideas, values, and narratives alter configurations of power and support new laws and policies that benefit previously subjugated or disadvantaged people. The fourth level of power consists of ideologies, values, and narratives that affect individuals’ ability to advance their interests. This fourth level of power is critically important to the exercise of power at the other levels. While those who seek social change cannot ignore this level of power, the dynamics of broad changes in ideology, social values, and political culture often elude manipulation.

In a democratic society, the various ideologies, values, and opinions held by citizens form the basis on which they judge and support politicians, officials, interest groups, popular organizations, corporations, and laws and policies that affect their lives. Politicians and social organizations gain strength from successfully appealing to individuals’ ideologies and values. These values are perhaps the most important mainspring of legal and policy change; such changes occur when movements successfully point out that laws and practices are inconsistent with deeply and broadly shared values, as they did in the struggles for labor in the 1930s, for civil rights in the 1960s, and for marriage equality for gay and lesbian people in the 2000s. Similarly, the Reagan and Thatcher revolutions were, in part, narrative revolutions that precipitated declining public confidence in governmental institutions by pressing the public narrative that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”²⁷

²⁶Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, “The German ideology,” *Collected Works*, vol. 5 (1845–7), trans. Clemens Dutt, W. Lough, and C. P. MacGill (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 59.

²⁷Ronald Reagan, “First inaugural address,” United States Capitol, Washington, DC, Jan. 20, 1981.

Ideologies and public opinions are powerful, but not all-powerful. In his award-winning book *Affluence and Influence*,²⁸ Martin Gilens points out that when the policy views of wealthy sectors in American society (say, the top 10 per cent) differ from others (the bottom 10 per cent, or even the bottom 80 per cent), it is likely that government policy will conform to the views of the top 10 per cent. Victory at the fourth level of power in no way guarantees successful outcomes at the other three levels.

VII. MAKING POWER VISIBLE

Theorists of power in the 20th century devoted much of their energy to exposing—or unmasking—the operations of power that would have been obscure or mystifying absent their theories. For example, Bachrach and Baratz highlighted the second, agenda-setting, face of power; Gaventa and Lukes the third face of power; Foucault articulated how a kind of totalizing power can emerge from the construction of bodies and minds, as well as through institutions; and Bourdieu explored the accumulation and operations of cultural capital. “Unmasking” power can be as important to public leaders as it is to social theorists. Indeed, the very first step in any effort to assert power or challenge domination is often to challenge a condition, decision, practice, policy, norm, or idea that was previously taken for granted.

In the four-level conception developed here, it is natural to think that power is visible at the top levels of everyday politics and covering policies, but hidden at the deeper levels of structure and ideologies. But this is not so. The operations of power can be hidden and uncontested or, on the other hand, visible and contested, at any of the four levels of powers described above.²⁹ So, in this conception, “hidden” power is not a separate category. Visibility—or lack of it—is characteristic of each of the four levels of power.

A. EVERYDAY LIFE

As second-wave feminists, students of welfare bureaucracies, and those who have studied rural peasant life have shown, some of the most significant forms of domination occur at the level of micro-decisions in households, workplaces, and interactions between clients and state agencies. Much of that domination unfolds in ways that are hidden from and therefore uncontested by those who are dominated. These everyday examples are ubiquitous. A woman takes for

²⁸Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

²⁹Gaventa, “Finding the spaces for change,” and those working in the Lukes/Gaventa tradition differentiate between “hidden” (agenda-setting) and “invisible” (culture and ideology) power. My discussion has the more modest aim of distinguishing between exercises of power that are visible and so available for contestation versus unrecognized exercises of power that are therefore unquestioned and uncontested. Power might escape recognition, in Gaventa’s terms, because it is hidden or because it is invisible.

granted a household division of labor in which she both works in the labor market and takes on a disproportionate share of child rearing and domestic responsibilities. A worker simply accepts low wages and long hours that violate the law, because he is unaware of the regulations and everyone else does so too. A parent simply accepts the authority of a school official who haphazardly assigns his child to a low-performing special needs class out of behavioral rather than educational concerns.

Though this level of everyday oppression flies under the radar of many advocacy groups, making everyday domination visible and contesting it has always been an important part of social movement activity. For example, Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Flaster document the development and spread of the term “male chauvinist” in the 1960s and 1970s as a discursive device to make the hidden power of domestic micro-decisions and intimate interactions between men and women visible and to challenge the power that is often exercised through those decisions.³⁰

Another example of challenging hidden power at the everyday level comes from an idiosyncratic micro-organizing effort called the Right Question Institute (RQI).³¹ Led by Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein, RQI seeks to change dynamics at the first level of power: interactions between individuals—usually highly socially and economically disadvantaged individuals—and street-level bureaucrats in schools, social service agencies, and community health centers. Clients of such public and social services often accept the determinations of local officials unquestioningly in the face of hidden and uncontested asymmetries of power. In response, RQI trains disadvantaged individuals to ask the “right questions”—questions that enable them to unmask the dynamics of micro-power, assert their interests, and ultimately exercise greater everyday power to advance their interests. In the community health-care context, for example, RQI trains low-income individuals to ask questions about providers’ decisions about diagnoses, referrals, treatments, and medication. They teach people how to ask questions about the reasons for the decisions and what patients can do to manage their own health care. Santana and Rothstein argue that training people to ask the “right questions” can enable individuals to better advance their interests in encounters with street-level bureaucrats.

B. POLICIES

Fights over laws and policies in social policy, economic development, the environment, immigration, and countless other issues are ubiquitous in legislatures, in advocacy campaigns, and even on the streets. But just as everyday decisions can be hidden or visible, so too can the consideration of different policies that provide benefits, impose burdens, and regulate behavior.

³⁰Jane Mansbridge and Katherine Flaster, “The cultural politics of everyday discourse: the case of male chauvinist,” *Critical Sociology*, 33 (2007), 627–60.

³¹See < <http://rightquestion.org>>.

Suzanne Mettler, in her excellent book *The Submerged State*, shows how many policies are simply experienced as reality, but not widely recognized as actions of government at all.³² Many Americans do not recognize that public programs such as student loans, public health insurance, and tax-relieved retirement savings are the product of government action and instead attribute them to private sector actors such as banks. Other public programs such as job-training programs and other social services are financed by government, but delivered by non-profit or public sector actors. The governmental role in many of these programs is also invisible to much of the public.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Mettler reports that

A 2008 poll of 1,400 Americans by the Cornell Survey Research Institute found that when people were asked whether they had “ever used a government social program,” 57 percent said they had not. Respondents were then asked whether they had availed themselves of any of 21 different federal policies, including Social Security, unemployment insurance, the home-mortgage-interest deduction and student loans. It turned out that 94 percent of those who had denied using programs had benefited from at least one; the average respondent had used four.³³

Since these exercises of government power create benefits for the recipients of public programs, one political consequence of this invisibility is that these programs fail to generate the supportive constituencies—allies in the structural power discussion above—of more visible programs such as social security.

C. STRUCTURES

The rules of the game and other practices and norms that constitute the structures on which political actors and organizations contest for power are often taken for granted and thus shielded from efforts to manipulate them. Often, however, political actors aim to change structures in order to gain advantage. Structural power can thus be either invisible (uncontested) or highly visible and subject to explicit contention.

For a relatively brief period after the civil rights era (circa 1970s) until the turn of the century (circa 2000), the universal adult franchise in the USA, though incomplete to be sure, was taken for granted and thus a largely invisible part of the rules of the game on which electoral contests occurred. But before, in the early part of the 20th century, political incumbents disenfranchised many blacks by imposing obstacles to voter registration, poll taxes, literacy tests, property-ownership requirements, and other measures. Civil rights activists contested these structures and eventually won a major victory in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the early decades of the 21st century, the character of the franchise has

³²Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³³Suzanne Mettler, “Our hidden government benefits,” *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 2011, p. A31.

become increasingly contested as evidenced by support for, and opposition to, voter identification requirements and efforts to make voter registration easier or more burdensome. Also in the electoral domain, the rules governing the flow of private money into the electoral arena have become a highly visible object of political contestation. Legislatures and courts continue to struggle with how much money individuals and organizations can contribute, to what kinds of political actors (for example, candidates, parties, electoral advocacy organizations), and the extent to which contributions can themselves be hidden or, on the other hand, publicly disclosed.

It may be that structural power is more difficult to recognize and behold as a potential object of change compared to everyday politics or covering policies. At the first level of power, everyday politics, everyone experiences similar conflicts and disagreements at work, in family life, and in social life. Disputes about covering laws and policies—who favors and opposes, whether the law is likely to pass, and who wins and loses if it does pass—these are some of the central topics of political journalism. These are the issues that those who follow politics and current events track and discuss.

But contests over structural power do not easily conform to our political narratives. Furthermore, structural power is often less salient to political analysts and observers because its effects are indirect and almost always less immediate than those of covering policies. In recent years, the role of money and politics—structural issues, to be sure—have received substantial public attention because of Supreme Court decisions such as *Citizens United v. FEC* and the efforts of many contending advocacy organizations.³⁴ But campaign finance is the exception that proves the rule. Many other critically important instances of structural power receive much less attention: redistricting rules in the electoral arena and rules governing the formation and maintenance of worker organizations in the labor domain.

Structural power may be harder to see because understanding and exercising structural power fall into the domain of certain kinds of professionals such as lawyers, political strategists, policy designers, and scholars. Architecting structures of power often requires a command of many disciplines. Structural power often alters individual and organizational incentives; think of Michelle Bachmann's intuition that Affordable Health Care benefits will become the policy analog of crack cocaine. Understanding such long-run political consequences often requires understanding the arcane capabilities and limits of administrative agencies. Indeed, many exercises of structural power involve the creation of brand-new administrative agencies, such as the National Labor Relations Board, the Environmental Protection Agency, and, more recently, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

³⁴*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

Finally, structural power almost always operates indirectly through complex and speculative causal chains. In 2015, for example, the City Council of Seattle created provisions that allow Uber and Lyft drivers to form labor unions and collectively bargain over wages and working conditions.³⁵ In 2018, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that this ordinance violated the Sherman Antitrust Act and so it was struck down.³⁶ Even if it had withstood legal challenge, unionization advocates might never have gained enough support to actually form a union. If they did form a union, they may not have been able to bargain effectively. The effects of unionizing and bargaining may end up harming those outside of the union who seek to become drivers. And so on.

Many political advocates and community organizing groups struggle against binding resource constraints that limit the number and kind of staff that they can hire and so the expertise that they can draw upon. In light of these limits, it is understandable that many would spend their marginal dollar on another organizer rather than on a lawyer or professor who can help them understand and strategize about structural power. Furthermore, success at the level of structural power requires all of the capabilities required to prevail at the (second) level of winning covering policies *and in addition it requires* the capabilities necessary to analyze and strategize about the (third) level of structural power.

D. VALUES, IDEOLOGIES, AND NARRATIVES

Beliefs, values, and ideologies—constituting the fourth level of power—can be invisible or they can be objects of explicit contestation. Indeed, many socio-political movements aim to change social and material conditions by “changing consciousness.” Those who seek to change social consciousness at this fourth level of power must overcome two challenges. First, status quo beliefs and ideologies are often widely taken for granted and regarded as natural or immutable. Changing social consciousness requires, first, that these beliefs and values be brought to light as one possibility among many others—just the one that *this* society happens to have chosen for now rather than part of a natural, inevitable order. Second, altering power at this fourth level then requires significant portions of the society to shift their views toward a new set of beliefs or values that they come to regard as more just, desirable, appropriate, or even natural. For example, second-wave feminists sought, first, to make visible and then, second, to overturn commonplace notions that women should play subordinate roles in family and work life. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) groups have sought first to disentrench the notion that homosexuality is unnatural and wrong and then to establish in its place beliefs and norms that people of all sexual orientations are owed equal rights, that such

³⁵Tribune Wire Reports, “Seattle becomes first U.S. city to let Uber, Lyft drivers unionize,” *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 14, 2015, Business Section, <<http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-seattle-uber-lyft-drivers-union-20151214-story.html>>.

³⁶*Chamber of Commerce of U.S. v. City of Seattle* 890 F.3d 769 (9th Cir. 2018).

relationships are as valuable and loving as heterosexual ones, and that sexual orientation is not subject to individual choice at all. Conservative activists and politicians in the USA have sought to replace the belief, once widely held, that government is reasonably effective and acts generally to advance the good of society with the belief that government is largely wasteful, ineffective, even plunderous.³⁷

Table 2 summarizes the discussion of this section with illustrations of hidden (uncontested) and visible (contested) power at all four levels.

VIII. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE FOUR LEVELS

The purpose of distinguishing between these four levels of power is to provide a framework that can help guide those who aim to make social change. In particular, many social movement organizations and advocacy groups focus the lion's share of their energy on the second level of power. They wage campaigns to increase the minimum wage, protect the environment, divest from fossil fuels, or enhance police accountability. Even as they win some of these campaigns and lose others, many feel that progress is halting at best and that yesterday's victories will have to be fought anew tomorrow.

The preponderance of their political activity occurs on the second level of power because social movement organizations and other advocacy organizations have developed capacities and expertise to conduct issue campaigns focused on securing covering laws and policies. The conceptual rubric of four levels of power developed above is intended to be an aid to strategic reflection. Perhaps political organizations—out of habit and the capacities they have developed—focus a bit too much on winning covering laws and policies and too little on everyday, structural, and ethical power. If so, the hard work lies in devising substantive arrangements that would be desirable at the third and fourth levels, and to develop strategies that would bring them about. That is not the sort of work that can be done in an article.

As an additional prompt to strategic reflection, I conclude with several propositions—tentative and speculatively offered rather than confidently asserted—about the four levels and the connections between them:

1. *Progress should be measured primarily by level 1 accomplishments.* Social progress must ultimately be reckoned individually—hence at level 1. Are more children educated? Are workers paid a living wage? Do people have access to good health care and other social protections? Laws, policies, and institutional arrangements at levels 2 and 3 are largely instrumental to these individual, level 1, outcomes.

³⁷Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

Table 2. *Examples of Quiescence and Contestation at Four Levels of Power*

Level of power	Invisible/Uncontested	Visible/Contested
1. Everyday life	Disadvantaged individual unquestioningly accepts unfavorable determinations of school, bank, social service agency, or tax authority officials	Disadvantaged individual challenges that authority by asking for justifications and reasons; may come to regard authority as mistaken, unjustified, or illegitimate
2. Covering policies and laws	Individuals fail to recognize public health insurance, tax credits such as mortgage interest deduction, or job-training programs as public policies at all (Mettler, <i>The Submerged State</i>)	Individuals and organizations recognize and take sides on contested public policies such as bank regulation or the progressiveness or regressiveness of tax schedules
3. Structures	Widely accepted belief and practice that residents who are not citizens should not vote in federal and most state and local elections.	Instead of relying on formal citizenship status to determine the electorate, localities include all residents on the principle that those who are affected by local policies should have a say in determining them
4. Beliefs, values, and ideologies	Pre-1960s social norms and beliefs about role of women at work in the household	1960s women's movement "consciousness raising" among women and then more broadly

2. *Level 2 wins do not guarantee level 1 success.* Campaigners and advocates often reckon success through victories and losses in the policy arena (for example, have they won a living wage or environmental protection?). That is a mistaken metric, especially in an era when governments often lack the capacity or the will to enforce their own laws. There are plenty of places around the world where the labor laws are good, but workers are treated poorly; where environmental or consumer regulations are routinely violated; where human rights exist de jure, but not de facto. Even where level 2 victories are in place, advocates should continue to work at level 1 to ensure that those victories reach their intended beneficiaries. Gaps between level 1 and level 2 often stem from failures of implementation or enforcement.
3. *In recent years, organizations on the American right have invested more deliberate attention in level 3 than those on the left.* Since the 1980s, there has been a series of dramatic level 3 changes in areas such as redistricting, financing of politics, voter identification, and labor union regulation and formation. With the exception of information and transparency measures, most of these seem to favor, and be favored by, more conservative political actors in the American political ecology.³⁸
Part of the explanation may lie in the philosophy of philanthropic funders. Sally Covington has argued that mainstream and liberal foundations' "commitments are short-term and project-driven, often looking for measurable outcomes," such as improving educational outcomes, housing the homeless, and so on, "rather than such vaguely definable goals as pushing public opinion."³⁹ By contrast, she examined the largest conservative philanthropists who, she wrote, have funded "an extraordinary effort to reshape politics and public policy priorities at the national, state, and local level" that operated explicitly at levels 3 and 4.
4. *Organizations on the left would be more successful if they invested more energy at level 3.* American political history in the 20th century shows how the shape of the organizational playing field matters immensely. Perhaps the most compelling extended example comes from the rise of organized labor—both cause and consequence of level 3 structural changes such as the National Labor Relations Act—in the mid-20th century. Of course, increased attention to change at level 3 does not guarantee victory. But inattention ensures defeat.
5. *Many important social changes have been made possible by shifts at level 4, but level 4 dynamics are less well understood than changes at the other three levels.* Public opinion and political ideology have been crucial to the success

³⁸See, for example, Alex Hertel-Fernandez, *State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States and the Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁹Sally Covington, *Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations* (Washington, DC: National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1997).

of many movements from civil rights, to gender equality, to gay marriage and treatment of immigrants. The methods and dynamics of ideological and opinion formation, however, seem to be unclear and changing quickly. Through much of the 20th century, mass media and propaganda seemed to be key methods for shaping ideology and social values. More recently, perhaps with the proliferation of new media technologies, more decentralized and peer-to-peer story-telling, or at least peer-to-peer diffusion of stories and frames, seems to be more significant.

6. *The most stable and powerful changes come from alignment at all four levels of power.* There is no Archimedean level of power from which to make stable and lasting change. Victory or domination at one level can be limited or overturned by dynamics at the other levels. Level 1 victories lack scale. Victories at level 2 can be undermined by implementation failures (level 1) or remain vulnerable in treacherous political contexts (level 3). Level 3 victories in no way guarantee successful passage (level 2) or implementation (level 1) of substantive covering laws and policies. And even when a majority shares a common set of policy preferences, values, or political ideology (level 4), that majority can be stymied by a well-resourced or structurally advantaged minority (level 3).