

Rich man, poor man, middleman, thing: Distributing power

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journals.sagepub.com/home/coa**Ellen Hertz** 

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Abstract

The author reviews the fine ethnographic analyses in this special issue and argues that they become more coherent if power is understood as a sociotechnological network. This further implies that anthropologists' conclusions about how power is exercised must be modest, both historically situated and politically targeted, if the discipline wishes to contribute meaningfully to holding the powerful to account.

Keywords

Afterwords, actor-network-theory, power, studying up, responsibility

What a pleasure to read the collection of articles that Matthew Archer and Daniel Souleles have brought together for this special issue on power and the powerful. Building on dense and complex ethnographic material, the authors question and test anthropological models for understanding power, paying special attention to what those who presumably 'have' some have to say about how they exercise it. They emphasize the piecemeal, incomplete and contextual nature of power as seen from an emic point of view, suggesting that power is 'ubiquitous but not intractable' (Archer and Souleles, this volume).

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The results of this exercise are surprising and instructive, for rather than bringing us closer to generalizations about power as lived experience, they shunt us down multiple other pathways, cluttered with other actors, organizations, issues, places and objects. It seems that if one takes emic discourses seriously, as these articles rightly do, one runs the risk of losing sight of power altogether. Indeed, the people studied in these articles seem to suffer from some of the same blindness as the anthropological analyses Archer and Souleles wish to critique and enrich: they tend to leave “power” as a looming force in the background’ (Archer and Souleles, this volume). Or do they?

In this short reflection, I take power’s apparent centrifugal force as my starting point for bringing these articles together in a way that respects the complexities on which they so expertly shed light. I will begin with an ethnographic vignette of my own. As I was writing this article, my husband retired from his job as city councillor for the city of Lausanne, Switzerland. I say he retired, making him the active subject of the verb, but the passive voice would perhaps be more appropriate here. Yes, after fifteen years in elected office, and having reached the age (65) at which most employees are required by Swiss law to retire, it was he who decided not to run again, though he could have. However, once this decision was taken, once his successor was elected, once the peaceful transition of power was made official through formalities and informalities, he (was) very quickly moved from the position of decision-er to that of decision-ee, as things began to happen *to* him and not because of him. Thus, from one day to the next, he literally ‘left office’, the site of fifteen years of 70-hour work weeks. Naturally, in so doing he also lost access to all that went with the office: his secretary, his email account, his official computer, his official telephone, the fleet of cars used by the city government, the keys and entry codes for the various production facilities that had been under his responsibility as director of the city’s utilities sector, etc., etc.

His experience perfectly illustrates what sociologist of science John Law has analysed in an ‘ethnographic dream’ entitled ‘The manager and his powers’ (Law, 1996). In this fable about organizations, science and power, a cruel ‘deconstructive fairy’ visits a powerful scientist, Andrew, in his office, and begins progressively stripping him of all of the accoutrements of his position. She starts, of course, with his computer, and with it, his spreadsheets. Now the ‘all-powerful manager cannot calculate any more’ (Law, 1996). He can still write, but more slowly, and he lacks sources, data, documents on which to base his conclusions. Then the cruel fairy takes away his archives, and without them he cannot access what he has done in the past, nor remember what he plans for the future. Without email, he cannot communicate with his friends and enemies around the globe. Gone are his phone, his pocket calculator, his secretary, his financial director, his morning coffee, his view over the city. Indeed:

the greatest power in the cathedral of science [...] the fearsome Director [...] is nothing by himself. ... [H]e’s a naked ape – with all the powers of a naked ape! Yes! He can beat his chest. He can shout. He can hit us too, if he’s big and strong.

The powers of the body. To extract compliance. Important of course. Sometimes personal violence works well enough. But it isn't, shall we say, very reliable... (Law, 1996)

In the fable, the mean fairy gives Andrew back his materials, his space, his subordinates, his perks, but we have learned our lesson: Andrew's power 'resides elsewhere. It is always deferred. It is always a product. It is always an effect' (Law, 1996). In the terms of actor-network theory, it is *distributed* – it resides in and moves through other people, organizational arrangements, technologies and things.¹ Power, in sum, is nothing but a material-semantic network – but that is potentially everything.

With this as our analytic lens, the explications and justifications of the derivative traders, consultants, engineers, organizers, government employees and managers to whom we are introduced in the articles in this special issue – the obfuscation, the minor mode, the nostalgia and the reifications – become instantly more legible. These powerful actors are gesturing towards their networks, and to the constraints and affordances that these networks impose and provide. They experience daily the fact that their actions are better characterized as reactions, that they have no power over power, that power is duplicitous, fragile, fleeting, that it is a process not an essence. If they don't say so in these terms, well, that's normal – it's not in their job description. That would be our task as anthropologists.

Take, for example, the seemingly contradictory activities of the traders and financial analysts described by Souleles. What better way to signal the limits of one's power than to throw oneself into the hands of fate? Yes, these powerful actors of the most powerful institution of contemporary capitalism – financial markets – are smart, technologically sophisticated and hooked up to the world through organisations and algorithms of incredible complexity. But they cannot entirely predict the effects of these networks, of this network of networks, and so they also gamble, furtively, afraid to admit to the limits of their control. Playing with chance in this setting seems to provide them with a means simultaneously to experience and to deny the externality of the forces that move them. In this light, their only real power is the power to keep the cat in the bag, to prevent the anthropologist from reporting on what he has learned.

With Archer and Elliott's analysis of the 'global value chain' for environmentally certified tea production, we have another example of the networked and self-blinding character of contemporary capitalism. Made to appear orderly through the metaphor of the 'chain', what we have here is in fact a heterogeneous assemblage of Kenyan tea-growers and the transnational corporations that sell their products, but also much, much more: standards, checklists, projects, consultancies, local non-governmental organizations, government agencies and 'the market' – another network that produces prices that produce effects. Looking outside this assemblage, one cannot help but notice what the emic representations of these powerful actors obscure and even actively exclude: the law, and its power to

enforce. Indeed, if the actors of this network experience a certain lack of power, it is by design, for this sustainability ‘governance regime’ is entirely voluntary, based on what sociologist Tim Bartley (2018) calls ‘rules without rights’. Thus, the courts, lawyers, dockets and bailiffs one might expect to encounter in a system set up to establish and enforce norms of environmental sustainability and respect for human rights are replaced by prices, shareholders, rating agencies and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Other networks, other forces.

With Prentice’s analysis of the material environments and professional motivations of managers in South Korean conglomerates, we are introduced to another highly heteroclit network, connecting steel to kinship, private museums to ‘systematization’. Indeed, it is difficult to say if there is one network or two competing networks of power at play here, the first based on the aura of industrial dynastic families – materialized in top-floor offices and classical music concerts – the second based on an ethos of managerial rationalization – materialized in the less glossy, more serious form of projects, software and databases. Prentice’s analysis hints at the dynamic, evolutive nature of this ‘system’ as it transitions toward ‘systematization’, and suggests that many of the key elements of these networks lie out of sight, contained in narratives about historical ancestors on the one hand, and pressures from government regulators and international markets on the other. What is clear is that the path to power is uncertain, and constrained by competing codes of taste, trust and expertise.

The road to success – power, prestige and employability – is equally precarious for Field’s Texan oil and gas experts. These professionals possess fragmented but significant conceptual mastery over one of the most important nodes of industrial capitalism in the world today. But this mastery is marketable as a function of market prices, and they have little power over these fluctuations. The material and symbolic expressions of their lifestyles, of their trim, fit bodies and well-ironed shirts, can tide them over for a while, keeping up the appearances that make up social life. However, without personal fortunes (hence their fascination with ‘billionaires’), they are vulnerable. The extraordinary materiality of the drills, rigs, pipelines, refineries, storage facilities, docks and boats that would seem to underpin the solidity of the wealth and power of this network turns out to guarantee nothing, for its value is a function of other values: concern over global warming, for example, or the ideology of risk and entrepreneurship to which they are so attached. Though it will hardly cheer them up, they should perhaps be reminded of a central insight of *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘All that is solid melts into air ...’

Randle’s account of the nostalgic imaginaries of Southern California’s water engineers provides another fascinating problematization of the tension between the material and the semantic aspects of the complex socio-technological networks in which they work. The language of ‘groundbreaking’ seems appropriate in this context: in their eyes, previous projects literally and figuratively broke ground, creating immense though largely invisible infrastructures that were the source of admiration and envy. Though current projects for water purification and recycling

are also large and expensive, they lack a clear-cut and unproblematic relation to the materiality of water supply. Rather, they are caught up in socio-semantic technologies of regulation, budgetary constraints and environmental activism that produce feelings of lack of recognition and of status for these engineers. They long for the good old days of unchallenged materiality, unable to see that sense-making has been 'in the pipeline' all along.

With Samanani's contribution, we move from what Prentice (this issue) labels anthropology's 'axiomatic' distrust of power and the powerful to more recent concerns with 'empowerment', suggesting that the concept of power is loaded with contradictory assumptions. Clearly, the semantic and ethical registers of the networks designed to empower others differ considerably (but interestingly, not entirely) from those designed to access and maintain power for the powerful. Even more clear is how they differ in their materiality: the activist networks Samanani studies are located in churches, schools and living rooms; they are funded by dues and gifts; their instruments are clipboards, posters and petitions; and, most of all, they are powered by bodies – the physical co-presence of bodies, testifying, questioning, 'leading' and 'organizing'. Finally, these networks also distinguish themselves from the networks previously examined by their level of self-awareness: the people Samanani has met are self-conscious, capable of thematizing how power works within and through them. Hence their notion of 'relational power', the emphasis on process as much as results, and the insistence that meaning-making is a collective, not an individual project.

In all of these rich and varied analyses, networks of power, or rather, the power that is networks, are constructed, literally and figuratively – of this we can be certain. However, constructing these networks is a time-consuming, conditioned, historically situated process. They are enshrined in laws, rules and regulations, they are physically located in buildings, machines and operating manuals, they are justified by beliefs, arguments, emotions. They can be changed, but not from scratch, only slowly, expensively, through struggle, study and credit. Indeed – and perhaps this is good news of a sort – they are always already changing, through the inflexions and effects of millions of actants, human and non-human. Just as power must be understood as endogenous to the situations it affects, so change must be considered as inherent in the workings of these networks, with intentional change being only the most visible, articulated and apparently malleable of its forms.

So where does this leave the 'whole point of it all': the responsibility, the accountability, the thirst for social justice that is the driving force behind the critical socio-anthropological study of power? Are we to conclude that human actors have created Frankensteinian monsters in the form of networks that are largely out of our control? A look at the contemporary world – at global warming, at the massive extinction of plant and animal species, at the obscene levels of inequality, dispossession and suffering that we humans seem to inflict on each other – would suggest that this is a hypothesis worth keeping in mind. It is not,

however, the moral of the story that John Law wishes to tell us, nor is it my conclusion.

Under the heading ‘In which we see him jump from one place to another’, Law (1996) spells out how he thinks responsibility can and should work in the networked world. In his words: ‘It has to do with pluralism. And to do with non-coherence.’ Andrew the Director is multiple, linked to a multiplicity of ‘cities’ (in Boltanski and Thévenot’s, 2006 [1991] terms). He is an accountant who must calculate, for he is aware that money does not grow on trees. But he is also a scientist who knows that science cannot be performed on the kitchen counter: it takes time, investment, commitment, and when it works, it is beautiful. Finally, he is a manager, responsible for real people with families, projects, loyalties and expectations. These competing logics cannot be amalgamated into one, as the artifices of quantified SWOT analyses² would have us believe. There is no ‘weighted average’ that can help him make sense of these conflicting worlds and their values, only the exercise of judgement, with all of its incoherences and nasty compromises, its winners and losers. That is what exercising responsibility within the limits of the networks that are power is all about.

The point that Law wishes to make is not that these acts of arbitrage are in any way admirable, nor that power responsibly exercised is a solution to the world’s multiple injustices. His point is more modest but also more realistic: one cannot exercise power responsibly if one reduces its complexity, if being a ‘good guy’ comes at the cost of discounting the competing pulls and pushes of the many networks within which one navigates.

The networks examined in this special issue make this abundantly clear. Souleles’s derivatives traders cannot act ‘responsibly’ to reduce inequality and simultaneously hope to keep their jobs: there is no path for this action within that network. However, his study has provided them with a means to exercise a limited, reflexive form of responsibility by allowing him to publish his results, or by admitting publicly that gambling is as important to their work as the complex of algorithms and technologies that they help to fetishize. This would do little to upend ‘the system’, but it would provide a hint of transparency and honesty to elite justifications of its workings. The ‘butterfly effect’³ is a network of networks.

Similarly, Archer and Elliott’s sustainability consultants cannot single-handedly transform the private governance system that employs them into a system based in hard law, with rules, regulations and sanctions capable of counteracting ‘the market’. However, they can acknowledge what they have excluded from their network and admit to their reasons for working hard to do so: private governance serves the interest of transnational corporations far more clearly than do state-based rules and regulations (Hertz, 2020).

It would take some work, but Prentice’s corporate managers, Field’s fossil fuel consultants and Randle’s water engineers could also find avenues for acting responsibly within the limits of their networks, for arbitrating between competing systems of constraints, advantages and rationales. Rather than simply suffer the effects of fragile power, they could reflect on them. As for Samanani’s organizers,

they are already reflecting, for they already know that their fragility is their force, and that in their networks, there's no such thing as stability.

Finally, we anthropologists can also ask ourselves how to act responsibly, how to spread our butterfly wings and where to fly. This implies taking the time and making the effort to situate our discipline correctly within its networks, and to do so with modesty. In this regard, the entire debate about whether and how anthropology should 'burn' strikes me as a misreading of our position in the greater scheme of things. Anthropology is a marginal discipline within the academy, and nearly non-existent for the wider public – we occupy weak nodes in the power grid! Of course, this does not absolve us from critically challenging the significant disparities in power and status that structure us from within. But we should accurately assess the effects of these internal debates, and, even more importantly, we should be making allies outside the discipline. To do this, we need to put more effort into making our results accessible to others by ridding ourselves of the accoutrements of distinction, by challenging the ranking of institutions of higher learning at every chance we get, and by minimizing in-group jargon, self-referentiality and sophistry. By including wider publics within our networks, and by doing the hard work of communicating the results of our analyses to others than ourselves, we are using the affordances of our profession responsibly. That is what this special issue sets out to do, and I hope it has a safe flight.


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Notes

1. Surprisingly, we can find echoes of this argument in an article by Laura Nader intended as a complement to 'Up the anthropologist' (1974 [1969]). In 'The vertical slice' (1980), much less frequently cited, Nader reminds us that her point was never to study the 'ups' as cultural units in and of themselves. Rather, she insists, the 'ups' should be situated 'vertically' and held to account to the extent that their decisions affect others within their networks.
2. SWOT: a 'strategic planning technique used to help a person or organization identify *strengths*, *weaknesses*, *opportunities*, and *threats* related to business competition or project planning' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SWOT_analysis, accessed 30 June 2021).

3. The 'butterfly effect' is a concept invented by chaos theory to illustrate the interdependences of cause and effect in complex systems. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect (accessed 30 June 2021).

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