

Handout on academic debates about the 'levels' of power in a globalized world

While in 1961 Robert Dahl asked 'Who Governs?' in relationship to New Haven, some forty years later Held and McGrew (2003b: 8), asked a similar set of questions: 'who rules, in whose interests, by what mechanisms and for what purposes?' Though the inquiry is similar, the level at which it is addressed is entirely different. Dahl's work sought to analyze how power and participation interacted at the local (city) level, reflecting a predominant focus of 'community power' studies at the time. Held and McGrew, on the other hand, ask their questions in relationship to global governance in an age of globalization. Globalization, they argue is taken to express the expanding scale on which power is organized and exercised. In this respect, Held and McGrew say that 'at the core of the globalist account lies a concern with power: its instrumentalities, configuration, distribution and impacts... it involves a reordering of power relations between and across the world's major regions such that key sites of power and those who are subject to them are literally oceans apart' (2003a: 8).

At the heart of their question, as well as those posed by others in an increasingly growing literature on power and globalisation is this: where does power reside? For Held and McGrew as well as others, the study of power can no longer be focused only on a particular place: 'the exclusive link between territory and political power has been broken. The contemporary era has witnessed layers of governance spreading within and across boundaries.' (2003a:11). Theirs is part of a growing literature global governance warns us of the dangers of focusing only on the 'local', or the 'national' in a globalising world. Governance has become 'multi-layered', ranging from the subnational, to the national to the supranational (Keohane and Nye 2000), encompassing a range of sites from the very local, to the regional, to the global.

To Robert Dahl's question of 'Who governs?' in New Haven, the globalist response might be, 'don't just look in New Haven', a retort which raises serious methodological challenges for how and where power is to be found. Yet, to some extent the debate on the levels and sites of power is not new. For many years, those concerned with power have argued about where it is located. Feminist scholars have challenged the focus by political science on the search for power in the public sphere, arguing for the primacy of the relations of power at the intimate or household sphere as well (e.g. Kabeer 2001).¹ For those who focus on public spaces for participation, there are some that argue that participatory practice must begin locally, as it is in the arenas of everyday life in which people are able to resist power and to construct their own voice. Others argue for the importance of the nation state, and how it mediates power, suggesting that the possibilities of local spaces often depend on the extent to which power is legitimated nationally, but shared with the locality. Others, such as Beck (2005:81), challenge this view, arguing that 'there is a new dialectic of global and local issues that do not fit into the scheme of national politics. As these kinds of global problems increasingly impact on people's everyday lives and yet are dealt with either inadequately or not at all at the national level, the crisis of legitimation in nation-state politics deepens.'

¹ In this paper, the 'power cube' focuses primarily on power in the 'public sphere', while recognizing that this approach fails to capture the full range of power relations.

As the globalisation debate challenges our understanding of where power resides, it also challenges traditional assumptions of how and where citizens mobilise to hold states and non-state actors to account (Tarrow 2005; Della Porta and Tarrow 2005). For scholars and activists concerned with change, this reconfiguration of political power also has enormous consequences. On the one hand, the globalisation of power has created a vast array of political opportunities at the international level in which civil society actors seeking change may engage, demanding greater transparency and accountability, participation in policy formulation and monitoring, or formal mechanisms for redress (Scholte, 2002), or increasingly at the regional level, such as the African Union or NEPAD. A number of writers have outlined the growing influence of transnational civil society in these spaces (Florini 2000; Edwards and Gaventa 2002; Batliwala and Brown 2005). Others, such as Lipschutz, argue that the engagement of civil society in such arenas risks re-enforcing dominant power, as to be effective civil society must become a part of the project of governmentality in the neo-liberal order (see this volume and 2004). Others, however, challenge us to go further, arguing that not only are the sites of power multi-layered, but they are also inter-related. The study of power is not only about who participates or who does not at one decision making level, but how power or its absence at one level shapes mobilisation and action in another, linked together by highly interconnected networks and rapid diffusion of information and knowledge (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005).

Text adapted from Gaventa, John (2007) '**Levels, Spaces and Forms of Power: Analysing opportunities for change**' in *Power in World Politics*, Routledge.

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