

Bringing Violence into the Power Cube

Jenny Pearce

Gloria Vela and I used the power cube in workshops we conducted in Colombia in 2005, as part of an evaluation of the participation of civil society organisations in that country which we conducted on behalf of the Dutch co-financing agencies¹

We used the power cube to encourage civil society organisations to reflect on the different kinds of spaces in which they were trying to achieve a range of goals and objectives. Despite its long history of violence and armed conflict, Colombia has a most extraordinary range of organisations trying in the most adverse circumstances to influence the local and national state or society as a whole. In 1991, there was a new constitution in the country which reflected an effort to bring some of the armed groups into the political mainstream. It established new possibilities for participation in one of the most progressive constitutions in Latin America. However, what happens in theory and what happens in practice are often different things in Colombia. The constitution established an important political reference point, but did not necessarily translate this into a real shift in the character of politics and participation. Many Colombian civil society organisations, despite their doubts and critical analysis, tried over the years to make these participatory spaces meaningful. In this context, the power cube offered a really useful tool. It helped us to work through with these organisations how power in the new participatory spaces really functioned and to decide whether spaces were meaningful or not. The key ideas behind the power cube are immediately recognisable to activists and advocates who are creatively trying to use whatever opportunities are available to challenge and influence decision making. It helps them to analyse why they face the obstacles they do, to penetrate the less obvious ways in which power works in order to defend the status quo rather than really open up to its challengers. The power cube also enabled us to map the extraordinary diversity of strategies which civil society organisations used in order to get round these obstacles and to accomplish their goals. While the power cube cleverly offers a device for analysis, it also offers a way of thinking through positive repertoires for addressing the different ways power manifests itself in order to achieve these goals. The power cube should not be used just to make visible the varied ways in which dominating power in its varied guises hinders change agents, but also to map the intricate and multiple ways change agents circumvent this form of power.

However, there was a dimension missing to the power cube, which is particularly relevant to the case of Colombia, but to many other contexts also. This dimension is violence. The question raised for me about the relationship of violence to the power cube, is also about the relationship of violence to power. Is violence just another form of power? Does it operate in the same way to exclude, marginalise, oppress and subjugate? In these workshops in Colombia, it became clear to me that it did not. Although it was counter intuitive, as many see power and violence as the same thing, I realised that it was important to understand that they operated differently.

¹ The project was undertaken by Learning by Design, Institute of Development Studies and Department of Peace Studies in 2005.

In Colombia, most spaces of participation are affected by the visible and invisible effects of violence, just as power has its visible and hidden dimensions. Fear is something internalised in a way which sometimes leads people to accept dominating power as a means of protection against arbitrary violence. This happens increasingly in Colombia, where paramilitary groups have come to control neighbourhoods and villages. Dominating power is at one end of a spectrum of which violence is the other. However, they are not equivalent. Dominating power still accepts that the Other is an interlocutor, whose right to physical existence is not in question. Violence on the other hand, questions that very right, so much so that it creates boundaries to social action which are often understood but not articulated, but which ultimately close down space. Violence is often used by those seeking dominating power, but who are unable to achieve it through a process of legitimation. Dominating power, on the other hand, descends into violence when it is used over time to erode the sense of self of the Other, reducing them to trembles and stutters as physical manifestations of their subjugation. In that case, dominating power has ceased to employ even a minimum recognition of the dignity of the Other.

The reason why these distinctions matter, is that if we are trying to imagine a different kind of power, power as capacity to act, for instance, we begin to see how much such a form of power is the opposite of violence, not on a continuum with it. In other words, a different understanding of power, enables participation of all, encompasses disagreement and conflict and builds spaces where these can be dealt with non violently. Dominating power, on the other hand, given that it can foster violence amongst those who seek it or can descend into violence, coexists with violence and enables it to reproduce and transmit across the generations. If we wish to diminish the role of violence, we need also to transform the exercise of power. Many of the civil society organisations in Colombia participate in the most violent contexts, demonstrating that violence does not preclude social action. However, by putting violence into the power cube, we were able to discuss how far they were reflecting on their own understanding of power in order not just to challenge the power holders of the status quo but also the use of violence in society. And by talking about violence we were able to discuss the embedding of violence not just in the state and non state armed actors, but in the multiple socialisation spaces of the home, the school and the community, and its reproduction through space as well as time, with significant gender dimensions. Men, unlike women, are often affirmed in their sense of masculinity by their use of dominating power and/or violence. The Power Cube is thus a way of reaching a range of sensitive issues with civil society actors of all kinds.