

Empowerment

A Primer

Aaron Schutz

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2 Continuums of power

Even...seasoned activists often see power as sinister and unchanging. Such a one-dimensional perspective can paralyze effective analysis and action. In reality, power is both dynamic and multidimensional, changing according to context, circumstances, and interest.

—VeneKlasen and Miller¹

At the core of *em-power-ment* is “power,” and the aim of this book is to explore the kinds of power that different approaches to empowerment provide. But power, itself, is what Steven Lukes calls an impossible-to-firmly describe, “essentially contested” concept.² Scholars and practitioners and ordinary people define it in an astonishingly wide range of ways. At the same time, as the epigraph notes, there can be a tendency to deny this diversity; even “seasoned activists” tend to frame power as unchanging and “one-dimensional.” As with my treatment of empowerment itself, then, instead of attempting to arrive at a single definition, I look to a series of *continuums* of power. These continuums allow us to compare the kinds of power gained in each model of empowerment. If we can understand what kinds of power different approaches foster, we can choose more pragmatically what form of empowerment may be most relevant for a particular context.

After looking across wide-ranging debates about power, I made two decisions:

First, I committed to relative simplicity and clarity over nuance and complexity. Out of the extraordinary diversity of descriptions of power, I have drawn together what seem to constitute a collection of “good enough” conceptions. They capture a spectrum of understandings adequate to illuminate diversity while retaining sufficient simplicity to inform very specific kinds of action.

Second, because this is a book meant to inform concrete action, I privileged conceptions of power developed to inform practice. These understandings were constructed by practitioner/scholars or activist/scholars and not what one might consider “pure” academics. In essence I looked to thinkers whose core identities are those of *actors* rather than as *analysts*. In contrast with most academics, practitioner/scholars develop tools for actually doing things in the world, and then test and modify these tools in action amidst efforts to make change. The conceptions of power drawn upon here, then, are used to actually inform concrete interventions in the world.

It is important to stress that what I provide in this book are a series of abstractions—conceptual *models* of empowerment and of power—that always fail to describe the complex richness of reality. As Donella Meadows notes, “everything we think about the world is a model.” While these models may “have strong congruence with the world,” they always “fall far short of representing the world fully.”³ Another way to say this is that “the map is not the territory,” and different maps (topographical, abstract subway, street level) illuminate some aspects of the world while obscuring others. If we take our models too seriously, if we forget that the world is ineffably complex and unpredictable, we will inevitably be led into error. Abstractions cannot tell one what to do in some actual context. But they do provide guides, rules of thumb, for making decisions and for thinking through the conundrums that we face.

The field of international development has done some of the most important work both thinking through models of power and applying these ideas to actual contexts. Increasingly, aid providers discovered that top-down projects that tried to tell local people what to do were often ineffective. Instead, they came to understand that only local people knew the actual terrain. So aid agencies and others have increasingly become convinced that for aid to work, local people need to be empowered, one way or another, to make decisions about how aid will be used.⁴

Originally a relatively radical concept in development, ideas of empowerment have followed the same paths as in other fields. Established aid agencies, international NGOs, and aid giving and receiving nations don’t really want to rock the boat. Few aid providers want their resources used to overthrow regimes, for example. Like everywhere else, the status quo operates in tension with an openness to empowerment.

Despite this reality, some of those focused on exploring different conceptions of empowerment in development have attempted to

maintain a grasp on more radical visions even as they usually assist with less contentious forms of local action. They have sought to retain a sense of the wide range of possible understandings of empowerment and to engage local people in these ideas, even if the realities of a particular context may mean that more radical action is not a real option at the moment. And they have developed workshops to teach people about these understandings of power so that actors gain understandings of what they are (and are not) attempting to accomplish at any time. In fact, a key goal of these power workshops is to push local actors to think more complexly about power, to at least open the possibility that they may pursue more fundamental forms of change, so that they might contest more deeply what they perceive as oppressive aspects of their status quo. In a sense, local partners are “empowered” with rich *understandings* of power, giving them tools to choose the kinds of empowerment most relevant to their current situation.

Scholar/practitioners of power

I look primarily here to two key writers on the relationship between power and international development: John Gaventa and Jo Rowlands, both currently holding positions at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University.

Gaventa’s work draws from a wide range of work in academia about power.⁵ In fact, he completed his dissertation under the guidance of the most celebrated contemporary theorist of power, Stephen Lukes, in the 1980s. Gaventa was not originally a professor, however. Instead, he worked for 20 years at the Highlander Center, one of the most important centers of activist thinking and training in the U.S. Under the leadership of Myles Horton, Highlander worked with unions in the 1930s, with the civil rights movement in the 1960s (the citizenship schools were developed there), and with environmental justice groups in Appalachia, among many, many other social movements and social action groups.⁶ In the 1990s, Gaventa moved to IDS where he continues to work with a wide range of other key scholars on relationships between power and international development.

His colleague at IDS, Rowlands, developed a more explicitly feminist perspective on power in her work with women in Honduras.

Informed by Rowlands and Gaventa’s work, among others, different groups at IDS and elsewhere have continued to conduct trainings and direct projects on empowerment and power around the world.⁷

Rowlands's and Gaventa's conceptions, then, have provided a practical base for understanding how concepts of power can actually be used to affect and inform action in the real world.

While Gaventa and Rowlands provide the core conceptions of power that inform this book, I also look to other key scholar/practitioners to round out these theories. I especially draw from Starhawk's feminist conceptions of collaboration or *power with* as well as the *power within* every individual, Alinsky's efforts to gain *power over* through community organizing, and Gene Sharp's work advising and informing nonviolent resistance efforts to change public policy and even overthrow dictatorships around the world using *power with*. Finally, I look to the extensive debate about power that has taken place in more rarified realms of academic feminism over the last few decades,⁸ often referring readers to Amy Allen's useful overviews.⁹ This feminist work on power, which also informs Gaventa and Rowlands, often draws deeply from complex post-structuralist conceptions of *invisible* power that explores, in part, the way power forms us into particular kinds of selves, transforming not just what we do but "who" we are, especially influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault.¹⁰

Continuums of power: *Types, Spaces, Forms, and Sources*

What follows integrates these different conceptions into a series of continuums. While Gaventa and Rowlands's work provides the foundation, I have also adapted aspects of the other visions, arriving at four key continuums of power¹¹:

- 1 *Types* (moving from individual, to collaborative, to hierarchical)
- 2 *Spaces* (moving from open, to invited, to closed)
- 3 *Forms* (which capture the structures and social processes through which power operates)
- 4 *Sources* (zero-sum/win-lose vs. generative/win-win power)

While one could, of course, land anywhere on these continuums, for clarity of analysis, following Gaventa, I focus on three points on each line (only two in the last continuum).

It is important to note that different points on the continuums may be experienced as more empowering to some and less, or even disempowering to others. Perhaps the best example is the comparison between Alinsky's focus on gaining *zero-sum power over* through community organizing and Sharp's focus on producing *generative power*

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with through civil resistance. Following Alinsky's approach, local communities fight to get into *closed* spaces ruled by the powerful so that they can grasp their own portion of the *power over* generated there. But Sharp sees Alinsky's search for *power over* as simply replicating existing forms of domination. Sharp's argument fits with that of many feminist scholars, who reject *power over* because of the ways it recreates the patriarchal forms of empowerment they are trying to overcome. In contrast with Alinsky, Sharp and many feminists support efforts to create *generative* power through collaborative projects of *power with* in conflicts with the powerful. What seems empowering to Alinsky, then, is potentially disempowering and even destructive to Sharp and many feminists.¹²

The different continuums are difficult to collapse together and challenging to easily compare with each other because they can make fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of the social world. For example, the *Types* continuum conceptualizes human beings as if they were independent individuals making decisions about how they will act in the world. Within this understanding, an identifiable and separate "I" can decide to use *power over* to control the actions of others. Individual persons are the agents in this continuum. In contrast, the concept of *invisible* power captures the ways people are deeply imbedded in a socio-historical cultural context. Within the *invisible* approach to understanding human agency, groups of people act in particular ways because their cultural practices lead them to. Empowerment in the realm of *invisible* power requires a critique of the cultural forces that form people into recognizable human actors. This involves an interrogation of the social practices that make us "who" we and others are, a "suspicion" that the ideas and ways of acting that we have formerly taken as obviously true may actually be oppressive in some way.¹³ If I change your culture, I change "who" you are and how you think. In other words, under the *Types* continuum the world is made up of individual actors, while, on the *Forms* continuum, *invisible* understandings of power make it difficult to speak of independent action separate from the cultural practices that individuals are made up of. Much ink has been spilled trying to reconcile these different understandings of human agency—e.g., are agents independent actors or culturally driven "dupes"? However, it seems likely that the tension between these conceptions represent fundamentally undecidable paradoxes of human agency. Again, this is why power is an "essentially contested" concept. Different ways of making sense of agency seem to describe different aspects that remain central in our understandings of what it means to be an actor in the

world. It is important to understand, then, that I use these multiple conceptions at the same time without trying to resolve all the tensions between them.¹⁴

Note that I occasionally speak in a general sense of the “powerful” and the (relatively) “powerless,” using these terms as shorthand to describe those who hold more or less hierarchical control over the conditions of their lives—reflecting their levels of resources, their influence over institutional hierarchies, etc.

I have placed the terms relating to continuums of power into italics to set them off from the rest of the text.

Types of Power

The *Types* continuum, taken from writers like Rowlands and Starhawk, is implicit in much writing on empowerment.¹⁵

Types range from:

- *Power to do* or *power to*: the capacity of *individuals* to act and affect the world. This is the most common understanding of power in education, for example.
- *Power with*: the capacity of collaborative groups to affect the world. In this type, people work “with” others as relative equals to make change. Along with those noted earlier, Dewey’s and Arendt’s writings are central to this conception. *Power with* is also central for most feminist visions of power.¹⁶
- *Power over*: the capacity of individuals and groups and institutions to coerce or force others to do their bidding.

In some sense, all of these, but especially *power to* and *power with*, are grounded in *power within* which “has to do with a persons’ sense of self-worth and self-knowledge...the capacity to imagine and have hope...[affirming] the common human search for dignity and fulfillment.”¹⁷ *Power within* runs underneath the entire continuum.

This continuum is one of the simplest and perhaps most problematic. As I noted, it treats individuals, at least provisionally, as if they were relatively free, autonomous agents. Today, nearly all scholars of power accept that people are socially constructed, made up of the cultural practices given to us by our experiences in families, communities, institutions, and society. The *Types* continuum is palatable, then, only when one pairs it with the *Forms* continuum, discussed later, which acknowledges this social construction (Figure 2.1).

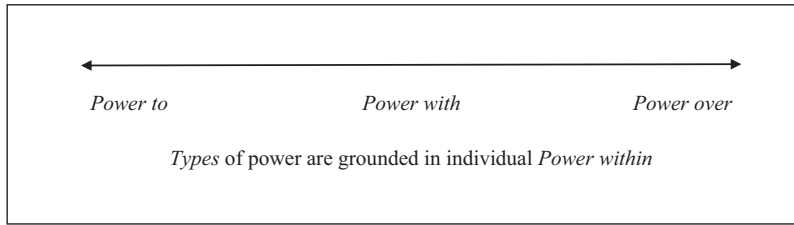


Figure 2.1 The continuum of *Types* of power.

Spaces of Power

The *Spaces* continuum, adapted from Gaventa, ranges from

- *Open*: everyone can enter and participate; to
- *Invited*: where the “powerful” (those with “power over”) *allow* people to come into spaces they control; to
- *Closed*: realms that ordinary people are excluded from, where the powerful make decisions. These are the “smoke filled rooms” where politicians, donors, leaders of powerful groups, and the like negotiate terms with each other.

Gaventa uses the term *claimed/created* instead of “open.” For the purposes of this text, however, it is more useful to see *claiming* and *creating* as activities that can take place at any point on this continuum, in any of the spaces. Similar to *power within* on the *Types* continuum, *created/claimed* runs beneath the entire continuum. The relatively powerless, for example, often create their own *claimed, closed* spaces where they can develop their own “hidden transcripts of resistance.”¹⁸ They emerge from these spaces into *open* and *invited* realms that are largely under the control of the powerful and must use the strategies they have developed in *closed* spaces to claim some power in the public even if they cannot fully take them over.

As we will see, many different approaches to empowerment involve *claiming* aspects of spaces—not only closed, but also open and invited. For example, *open* spaces are often places where the realities of power are hidden and where one can feel like one is speaking into a void (as if you were shouting into a crowd) or where one’s words will

Forms of Power

For our purposes, the *Forms* continuum is forked instead of moving in a straight line.

The starting point is:

- 1 *Visible*: the *formal* rules that actors are supposed to follow (in the political realm, for example). For example, in most civics classes, students learn about rules of US government like voting and the separation of powers. The *visible* rules can be misleading, however, because the powerful may not actually follow them or may deploy them in counter-intuitive ways.
- 2 Then actors can gain power in two directions, often both at the same time:
 - a *Hidden*: how structures and institutions, and those who control those institutions affect the world through processes not visible to most people. “Capitalism” is a kind of hidden structure, for example. While structures always have some independent existence, they are also usually responsive to actions of the powerful. The powerful who hold some level of control over institutions usually operate in *closed* spaces where *hidden* processes are deployed in negotiations. Ordinary people who don’t understand these processes can’t participate effectively *even if they break into and claim* parts of these *closed* spaces. You cannot turn on a car unless you know that a particular key controls it. You can watch power operating right in front of you but not understand how to intervene in it. It has only partially been revealed to you. Visible rules may mostly be illusions that obscure how hidden power really operates.
 - b *Invisible*: moving along the other vector, captures what, for simplicity, I term *cultural* power. As Gaventa notes, the relative invisibility of cultural practices means that “significant problems and issues are kept from the decision-making table.”²⁰ Our culture constructs our very identities and tells us “who” we are, what is possible and impossible, what is good and bad, and the like. “Invisible” power can be “the most insidious point on this continuum” because, as Gaventa writes, it determines what issues emerge as important and defines what is “normal, acceptable, and safe.”²¹ Many feminist scholars look to Foucault, often mediated by Judith Butler and others, for strategies to transform patriarchy that has

been internalized as a result of these forces in the identities and positions of women.²²

Gaventa placed these three points on a straight line like the others. But in this case *hidden* and *invisible* power seem fundamentally different from each other. Gaventa argues one can rearrange the relationships between power in different ways depending on one's purposes, and I have done that here. Thus, *Forms* are laid out on a forked continuum where one could easily gain (or lose) both *hidden* and *invisible* power at the same time.

Note again that simply revealing *hidden* power is often insufficient to allow people to intervene in it. It is possible to perceive the operation of *hidden* power (powerful people in corporations affecting political decisions, for example) and still not understand *how* this power works. Similarly, you can break into one of the *closed* spaces of the powerful and still find oneself relatively powerless because while you may be able to see power operating, you may not really understand *how* it operates. You may not, for example, understand the strategies that the powerful use to negotiate with each other. Unless you learn these mechanisms yourself, you may find yourself unable to participate as equals. That is why, as we will see, one of the aims of Alinsky-based community organizing is to teach people how the existing *hidden* power process really works.

For its part, *invisible* power often operates in extraordinarily complex and subtle ways. Cultural power is not static or uniform, with micro- and macro-conflicts constantly occurring below the level of actors' consciousness.²³ For example, different aspects of the media may be competing to tell you different "truths" about the world, and you may not even notice how they constantly alter or challenge your perspective, sometimes in almost imperceptible ways. I discuss the workings of *invisible* power in most detail in the chapter on what I call "counterscript" approaches to empowerment. Gaventa and this paper necessarily simplify this concept the most.

It is important to emphasize that *all* efforts to foster power affect the invisible spectrum of power to some extent. As Dewey emphasized more than a century ago, to learn something, anything, is to change who we are, and changes in our environment reverberate back onto our "selves" in ways that we can never fully predict or even understand.²⁴ Thus, all empowerment is always also an intervention in the selves of others, ourselves, and our social and cultural practices (Figure 2.3).

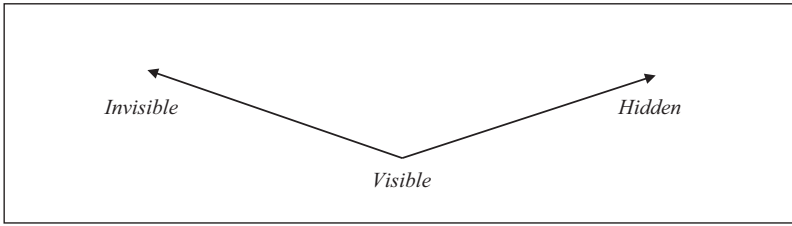


Figure 2.3 The forked continuum of *Forms* of power. The starting point, here, is in the middle.

Amounts of Power

A core question that has long reverberated through discussions of power involves the very substance of power. Is power available in some limited amount, or is it something that people can come together and create over time? Both conceptions have some truth to them.

- 1 *Zero-sum* or *limited* or *win-lose* power is conceptualized as a restricted amount of some kind of substance. If *I* get more of this power, then *you* necessarily get less. Power, in this sense, cannot be created, and therefore it is “zero-sum.” It always adds to the same amount. This conception of power is most useful when talking about distinctions between the relatively powerful and powerless. The powerful have control over resources like money or institutions that the relatively powerless may desire to wrest away from them or *claim*.
- 2 *Non-zero-sum* or *generative* or *win-win* conceptions see power as something that can be constantly created, usually by groups of people working together. Deliberative democrats and many feminist scholars have emphasized, for example, how collaboration between people can allow them to develop more resources and capacities than they could alone or by taking from each other. Feminists operating from a *generative* perspective have frequently attacked the zero-sum vision of power as fundamentally patriarchal. Gene Sharp’s vision of civil resistance envisions masses of people working together to create power that can confront the powerful and reduce popular support for them instead of trying to take their positions of power away from them as Alinsky recommends (Figure 2.4).

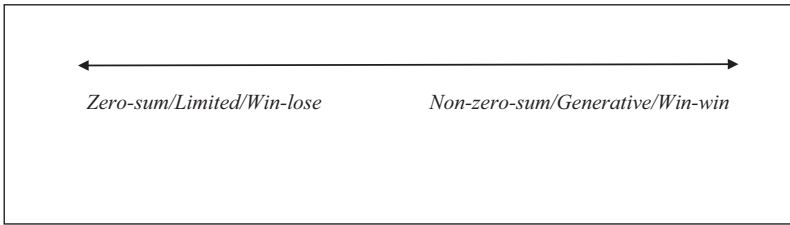


Figure 2.4 The continuum of *Amounts* of power.

Bringing these conceptions together

Again, all of these continuums operate somewhat independently of and in tension with each other within the approaches to empowerment discussed in the chapters that follow. *Power over*, for example, can operate in *closed*, *invited*, or even *open* spaces. I have already discussed how *invisible* power is always operating along with the other conceptions. At the same time, because they are on continuums, the different forms of power often conflict with each other, sometimes in complex ways that I can't fully capture. For example, you cannot have a space that is fully *open* to all and yet also *closed* to some participants at the same time, and power dependent upon *closed* spaces for its effectiveness will operate in different ways than power operating in the *open*. The example of the Occupy Movement discussed in Chapter 4 will show how complex this can be, since much of the action took place in a space was *open* to most people but at least implicitly *closed* to particular groups. Occupy's somewhat unique form of almost complete but not total *openness* deeply affected the kinds of power that could effectively be deployed there.

Key questions for each approach to empowerment that I discuss, then, are: what kinds of power does each promote or fail to promote? How do the conceptions of power and empowerment relate to each other? How do different forms of empowerment conflict on the kinds of power they promote or reject?

Notes

- 1 Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, *A New Weave Of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation* (Oklahoma City, OK: Stylus Publishing, 2002), 39.
- 2 Steven Lukes, *Power* (New York: NYU Press, 1986), 26.

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- 3 Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), 86.
- 4 VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002). It can also be found at the Just Associates website, retrieved June 11, 2018, <https://justassociates.org/en/resources/new-weave-power-people-politics-action-guide-advocacy-and-citizen-participation>.
- 5 The most comprehensive source for Gaventa's perspective can be found on the website created by himself and some of his students, Powercube, www.powercube.net.
- 6 John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).
- 7 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; Marjoke Oosterom and Patta Scott-Villiers, "Introduction: Poverty, Power and Inequality," *IDS Bulletin* 47, no. 5 (2016); VeneKlasen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power*.
- 8 I want to acknowledge that an outside reviewer did not agree with the decision not to include a chapter on women and power, arguing that "though the author mentions the feminist tradition, and cites work by Amy Allen, there is a huge amount of recent debate on women's empowerment, and in particular women's economic empowerment, which cannot be ignored. Much of this literature makes similar arguments about the need to put 'power' back into the word 'empowerment.'" This seems accurate. However, adding an additional chapter seemed to take the book off of its more general argument about conceptions of empowerment that can be used across contexts (to the extent they remain relevant). Further, it would raise questions about looking at visions of empowerment in other identity groups, which would have taken the book even farther afield. Keeping this book relatively brief and streamlined, despite the vastness and complexity of the possible literature required many decisions like this, and indicates that this one book is not enough to understand all of empowerment.
- 9 Amy Allen, "Gender and Power," in *The SAGE handbook of power*, edited by Stewart R. Clegg and Mark Haugaard (2009), 293–310; Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender In Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Amy Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/>; Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 1973); Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1946); Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971); Starhawk, *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).
- 10 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011); see Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 11 The most basic change is the elimination of Gaventa's *Levels* continuum. Levels refer to how far a particular effort reaches into the world—moving from the local, to the national, to the global, and in-between. Because I am

- looking at general models of empowerment I am not, like the participants in a workshop informed by Gaventa's perspective, examining how far a particular effort extends into the world.
- 12 Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power"; Alinsky, *Reveille*; Sharp, *Politics of Nonviolent Action*.
 - 13 See Rita Felski, "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (2012), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431/0>.
 - 14 I explore some of the tensions in these different conceptions in Aaron Schutz, "Rethinking Domination and Resistance: Challenging Postmodernism," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 1 (2004): 15–23; and in Aaron Schutz, "Teaching Freedom: Postmodern Perspectives," *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 2 (2000): 215–251.
 - 15 Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment*, although Starhawk, *Truth or Dare*, is similar, and Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," and in other works discusses the continuum's relationship with feminist thought.
 - 16 Dewey's, e.g., *Democracy and Education*, and Arendt's writings, e.g. *Human Condition*, are central to this conception. See Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power."
 - 17 VeneKlassen and Miller, *A New Weave of Power*; see Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment*; Starhawk, *Truth or Dare*.
 - 18 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
 - 19 See Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2015) for a nice overview of public and private.
 - 20 Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change," 29.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 15.
 - 22 Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power."
 - 23 Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*.
 - 24 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*.