

HEINRICH POPITZ

**PHENOMENA
OF
POWER**

**Authority, Domination,
and Violence**

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PHENOMENA OF POWER

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HEINRICH POPITZ

Translated by Gianfranco Poggi

Edited by Andreas Götlich and Jochen Dreher

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Having long achieved high praise within the German-speaking academic community, Heinrich Popitz has still yet to grow in popularity among the English-speaking audience. In the following, we would therefore like to introduce this thinker and his body of work, thus placing his particular perspective on the problem of power, the topic of the present book, within the pertinent theoretical debate. After a brief biographical sketch, we provide an overview of his work, followed by an outline of his theory of power (this paragraph is virtually an abstract of this volume). Finally, we will consider influences on Popitz's conception as well as counterpositions with regard to the classical and current discourse on power. The introduction generally intends to give the reader, who may be coming across Heinrich Popitz's name for the first time, some information about the life and work of the German sociologist—information that may prove helpful for understanding and assessing the lines of thought presented in his theory of power. We hope that the publication of the present translation will be followed by others, thereby making increasingly accessible more work by this highly original thinker to the international scientific community.

THE LIFE OF HEINRICH POPITZ—A GENERATION AT THE MARGIN

Heinrich Popitz was born in Berlin, Germany, on May 14, 1925, in the period between the two world wars. At a conference of the German Sociological Association in 1998, he described himself as belonging to a “generation at the margin,”¹ which witnessed the era of National Socialism “with some consciousness.” Like many members of this generation, he later dedicated himself to the question of how the catastrophes of the Second World War and the Holocaust were able to occur and, as a consequence, recognized his task as a sociologist in discovering hidden social structures.

The young Heinrich grew up in a bourgeois home, yet already as a child he showed interest in his working-class neighborhood, where he sought “adventures.” His father, Johannes, was perhaps the most influential fiscal policy maker in the Weimar Republic and was one of the German conservatives at that time who at first collaborated with the National Socialists, while becoming increasingly critical of their regime over the course of time. As a consequence, he joined the resistance movement behind Graf Stauffenberg, and after the failed assassination of Hitler in 1944 he was arrested, sentenced to death, and ultimately executed in early 1945.

At the time of his father's death Heinrich Popitz was only nineteen years old; his mother had already passed away several years before. After the war he studied philosophy, history, and economics in Heidelberg and Göttingen, and in 1949 he finished a philosophical dissertation in Basel, Switzerland, his doctoral adviser being the famous philosopher Karl Jaspers.² Although not academically trained as a sociologist, Popitz was offered a job as a social researcher in Dortmund in 1951, a professional experience that presented the opportunity to receive a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to conduct a large-scale research project on industrial workers' perceptions of society. Popitz in retrospect said that he and his colleagues in the project were, in a sense, learning sociology by doing. They were so successful that the publications that

arose from their work turned out to be groundbreaking in the advancement of qualitative social research in Germany and reached a status that may be compared to that of Florian Znaniecki's and William I. Thomas's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*.³

The aforementioned publications also reveal a feature that was to become typical for Heinrich Popitz's scientific approach in general: the empirical examination of the Marxian theory of alienation under historically new circumstances is motivated by a methodical skepticism toward ideology in general, deeply felt by a man who had personally experienced the devastation that ideologies can produce. For Popitz, the defeat of the Nazi regime represented a radical caesura. If Germany wanted to advance as a society, restorative tendencies had to be opposed, even in sociological thought. He therefore opted for a paradigm shift away from a sociology that is akin to idealistic historiography, toward an empirical and pragmatic science of reality.⁴

In 1957, Popitz finished a sociological habilitation thesis in Freiburg, Germany, supervised by Arnold Bergsträsser. After a five-year stay in Basel, where he attained his first professorship, he returned to Freiburg in 1964, where he became the first ordinary professor at the newly founded Institute for Sociology. There he spent the rest of his academic career until his retirement in 1992, with only a short interruption in 1970–71, when he held the Theodor Heuss Chair at the New School for Social Research in New York. Heinrich Popitz died in 2002; his scientific estate has been a part of the Social Science Archive Konstanz since 2005.

Although Heinrich Popitz did not found a particular school of thought as, for example, Niklas Luhmann did, he still exerts a lasting influence on German postwar sociology. On the one hand, he was an inspiring teacher. Among the generation of German sociology professors who are now in their sixties or seventies, many attended Popitz's seminars in Freiburg and still praise his abilities in introducing students to sociological thinking.⁵ On the other hand, his rare as well as short, yet all the more elaborated, publications soon became part of the national sociological literary canon. Some of them today still are considered standard literature for students of sociology in Germany—*Phenomena of Power* arguably being the most important of them.

THE WORK OF HEINRICH POPITZ—TOWARD A GENERAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

As he was a part of the first generation of German postwar sociologists, Heinrich Popitz's thinking was embedded in the phase of a new orientation and formation of German sociology after the Second World War. This stage was characterized by a paradigm change from an idealistic to an empirically and pragmatically oriented sociology. As mentioned previously, Popitz belongs to a generation of sociologists who, due to their experiences with German National Socialism, oppose the need for orientation based on any given ideology and strive for an intellectual new beginning.⁶ These social scientists are guided by the idea of establishing a cognitive paradigm shift toward the empirical analysis of social facts, an idea that becomes apparent in all of their biographical documents. What they have in common is "their orientation toward the fact" through empirical research based on the conviction that focusing on the concrete, observable social reality is the ineluctable precondition of every form of sociology.⁷ Heinrich Popitz as well is generally skeptical of speculative theoretical constructs developed from the perspective of a philosophy of history. In opposition to this orientation, he promotes research based on the methodically controlled experience of reality, as presented in some of the classical studies in industrial sociology, made popular in *Das Gesellschaftsbild des Arbeiters* and in *Technik und Industriearbeit*,⁸ which are among the pioneering qualitative-interpretive investigations in Germany. In this research project, conducted in Germany's Ruhr region coal-mining district, Popitz and colleagues developed innovative forms of data collection through phenomenologically guided observations and interviews interpreted through hermeneutic methods, with the aim of investigating the idealist-Marxist idea of self-alienation in relation to techniques and industrial work.

Starting from Max Weber's methodological individualism, Popitz generally advocates an empirically oriented theory formation in his work that focuses on the relationship between the individual and society. The analysis of complex social entities must be related to concrete

and observable actions of individuals, which is what sociology seeks to explain. In sum, Popitz's major intention is to develop a sociology directed toward empirical reality and grounded in anthropology and theory of action. It is specifically the influence of cultural anthropology (Bronisław Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and the like) and philosophical anthropology (Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen) that strongly determines Popitz's research program, which can be labeled "anthropological sociology."⁹ His central concern is to develop a general sociological theory that characterizes the cross-cultural fundamental structures of human sociation and that conceives the human as social being.¹⁰ In this sense, his leading question is how human sociability can be deduced from the anthropological nature of human action, parting from the idea that the human being, when acting, cocreates society, so to speak.¹¹ From anthropological findings, Popitz develops the four essential phenomena of human sociation—norms, power, techniques, and creativity—that represent the four major theoretical pillars of his work.¹² No human sociation is conceivable without norm and power structures, technical artifacts, and creativity (as manifested in exploring, creating, establishing meaning, and playing). The four major themes of Popitz's thinking thus refer to core areas of the social as such. With reference to them, Popitz basically assumes that there is a relative reduction of the instincts of the human being, the faculty of speech, the boundlessness of human imagination, and human body intelligence, that is, the variability and the morphological potential of the sensomotoric.

It is significant that Popitz's theory not only concentrates on the topic of establishing social order, that is, on the normative construction of society and the constitution of power structures with respect to the first two pillars of his work. His theoretical framework also includes sociological aspects of the human potential for technical and technological developments as well as creative action. On the one hand, he describes culture-boundedness and relativity of social norms as "social plasticity" of human beings, referring to their formability and their potential to react to different conceptions of order. On the other hand, he speaks of "social productivity" in describing the power to create as well as

the imagination with which humans are able to construct their organization of life. Humans are able to interpret biological conditions, reshape them, and stylize themselves through their behavior.¹³ This means that the human condition includes the capacity to flexibly confront normative requirements. Popitz's late theory of creativity concentrates on the analysis of the individual and social productivity of human beings and on their potential to transcend themselves, which can be understood as the counterpoint to the theories of power and norms; the theory of creativity does reflect upon phenomena beyond the realm of constraint.¹⁴ His position strongly underlines the power of subjectivation of the individual with the potential to confront established objectified social orders and the potential to discover and create new solutions in human action.

Based on these ideas, Popitz's theoretical project aims at establishing a "general sociological theory" related to the area of tension between norm-boundedness and freedom of action as a result of human beings' biological constitution. They are compelled to reshape their surrounding world through action to be able to satisfy their fundamental necessities in life. Their biological condition does not dictate how they ought to shape their surrounding world, because they are relieved of their instincts and left to care for themselves; without instinctively knowing how to act or knowing the boundaries within which they can act, they react to themselves by acting. In other words, his general sociological theory based on the four pillars of norms, power, techniques, and creativity not only explains the construction of social order—by establishing norms and power hierarchies—and the completion of the human world through technical achievements, but also describes the resistance against and transformation of the social order through creative action.

PHENOMENA OF POWER—THE BOOK

The considerations thus far point out that for Popitz power is a highly significant object of study. In more than three decades of teaching sociology, he regularly gave lectures on power. These lectures provided him

with the opportunity to repeatedly think about the topic, gradually improving and refining his own understanding of it. The present book is the outcome of these ongoing reflections. It represents the peak of Popitz's considerations of power, as it builds upon former publications that are covered in this edition: *Prozesse der Machtbildung* (*Processes of Power Formation*) from 1968 and the first edition of *Phänomene der Macht* (*Phenomena of Power*) from 1986.¹⁵ Popitz includes the various essays from these earlier publications and adds further chapters for the second edition of *Phänomene der Macht*, published in German in 1992, which is the basis for the translation you now hold in your hands.

The genesis of *Phenomena of Power* within a context of teaching throws light onto some of its stylistic characteristics. First, it is written in a lucid yet nonetheless sophisticated style that avoids sociological jargon wherever possible. Apart from the personal "habitus" of the author,¹⁶ this can be explained by didactical necessities, since Popitz had to make his reflections accessible to young students who were to become sociologists in the first place. Second, it is free from wordy discussions of what other thinkers have written about power; it leads the reader directly in medias res, to the analysis of the phenomenon itself. This corresponds to a writer who has repeatedly discussed the state of the art and thus gained the sovereignty to leave such discussions largely behind and instead rely on his own reflections. Third, despite its genesis, it is a book with a clear-cut structure in which the sections build upon one another, lending the book a high degree of consistency. It is rather likely that this feature as well is a result of Popitz's long-standing exercise in imparting his theory to an audience of students.

In terms of content, the book is divided into two main parts, the first dealing with forms of the enforcement of power and the second with forms of its stabilization. They are preceded by a chapter that provides a general conceptual framework for the subsequent analyses. Already here Popitz presents his fundamental thesis: power is rooted in the human condition and is therefore part of all social relations. For him, the notion of a power-free society is indeed a utopia in the literal sense, that is, a place that does not and will never exist. Regardless of whether one prefers to call this standpoint pessimistic or rather realistic, it is important to point out that in the case of Popitz it is not connected with an

attitude of fatalism. Power can be limited by counterpower; total power is fragile and likely to implode over the course of time. Thus, the thesis of the omnipresence of power can definitely be combined with a critical perspective on concrete power manifestations and the prospect that they may change.

To overcome the trivial lament over the depravity of power and its immoral repercussions, however, presupposes what Popitz once called "the leap from bad universality to the most detailed, pedantic analysis."¹⁷ His conceptual instrument for this purpose is the differentiation of forms of power. It allows him to conceive of societal changes not vaguely as an increase or decrease in power, but rather as a shift between its various appearances. A historical perspective complements the anthropological one.

The distinction between anthropologically determined forms of power, whose thorough discussion is the subject of part 1 of *Phenomena of Power*, can be read as an answer to Max Weber's observation that the concept of power is amorphous. Popitz's conception, as it were, gives shape to a presumably shapeless phenomenon—hence the talk of "forms" instead of "ideal types" of power. It starts from the various human abilities to act and arrives at four anthropological forms of power. (1) First, power of action, especially violence, which Popitz reckons among power, thereby contradicting thinkers like Hannah Arendt. (2) Whereas violence is limited to temporary situations, the second type, instrumental power, is more persistent. It includes the power of the promise as well as that of the threat, or in other words the carrot and the stick, which are sometimes categorized separately by other thinkers. (3) Authoritative power rests upon specific socio-psychological bonds between the performer and the sufferer of power, on a process of internalization on the part of the latter. Affecting the "inner" constitution of persons, it transcends the merely behavioral dimension of the first two types. (4) Finally, data constituting power, which means the ability to influence the behavior of others via the manipulation of the shared material setting. With a view on the growing significance of the electronic processing of information, some argue that this particular power form will significantly gain importance in the near future.¹⁸

Popitz's claim to have found elementary forms of power is supported by the revelation of their anthropological roots. Human individuals are exposed to potential harm and are able to inflict harm on others. They make plans, are concerned and anxious about their future, and thus can be manipulated by influencing prospects. Humans need standards and look for approval from others. They also produce a "second nature" comprising artifacts that in turn influence their behavior. The four power forms are moreover part of the basic experiences any child makes during socialization, giving further evidence of their fundamental nature.

After the rich and profound investigation of the four power forms, the reflections on processes of establishing power that are presented at the beginning of part 2 substantiate the more abstract considerations thus far in the form of detailed analyses of paradigmatic social interactions in which power emerges. Their general interest is inspired by David Hume: "how does it happen that few gain power over many? That a small advantage gained by some can be transformed into power over other human beings? That some power becomes more power and from more power arises much power?" (chapter 7, p. 131).

Popitz seeks the answer by means of fictional episodes, albeit with a realistic background.¹⁹ These episodes all represent closed social settings of a manageable size, so that he can keep *ceteris paribus* assumptions to a minimum. They have the further advantage that they allow reflections on the emergence of power from an initial state, in which everybody has equal power—a starting point that is simply impossible to find when using historical examples. The first episode, situated on a Mediterranean cruiser, shows the significance of superior capability of organization and the emergence of legitimacy from the principle of reciprocity. The second episode, situated in a war prisoners' camp, shows the productive superiority of solidarity cores and how taking over power comes along in a process of establishing echelons. The third episode, situated in an educational institution, shows the reproduction of power by means of redistribution and the significance of order in terms of a basic legitimacy. The common proposition suggested by these three episodes implies that power is always the result of human action and that established power

relations may not be reified by sociological reflection. Power in general may be the unavoidable fate of every form of sociation, yet any concrete power structure is not.

The final considerations of the chapter "Power and Domination" put the anthropological reflections within a historical framework, which Popitz understands as a further development of Weber's pertinent thoughts. Within a general historical process of the institutionalization of power, three stages are distinguished: (1) depersonalization, (2) formalization, and (3) integration into comprehensive systems of order. Popitz considered the current assertion of power in our everyday lives to be a preliminary final stage.

Looked upon as a whole, *Phenomena of Power* proves to be a book that well deserves its title. Popitz's intention is not so much to inform his readers about concrete manifestations of power in any given historical situation; examples hereof are accompaniments only given for the purpose of illustration. His concern is instead to provide a handful of key concepts of universal validity, which can be applied by the reader himself when performing case studies on social power. This reflects a general attitude of Popitz, who strived for an explanation not of any concrete society—modern, postmodern, premodern, or whatever—but of society as such. His profound training in philosophical anthropology as well as his precise observational skills enabled him to break through the empirical appearances of power and to discover its bare structure, its phenomenality. It is this achievement that gives the book its continued significance.

INFLUENCES AND COUNTERPOSITIONS—PLACING POPITZ'S STANDPOINT WITHIN THE THEORETICAL DEBATE ON POWER

When comparing Popitz's theory to other power conceptions, it is adequate to start by emphasizing that his notion of power is anthropological, as it "refers to something the human being can do—it entails the