Revisiting the Power Debate – perceptions of racial politics in America

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ABSTRACT:
Power is a fascinating concept because it demands for an articulation between the theoretical and conceptual map of the structure of institutions, political and social actors, and its correspondent effects in concrete reality along with the actual perceptions that people in their everyday life have. In this essay I will look at how the debate on power has evolved, more precisely, in the North American context. This essay is three fold: first, I want to account for the emergence of the power debate with C. Wright Mills and his concept of a 'power elite' as well as the 'community power' debate that followed him in its three accounts - the pluralist with Dahl, the second face of power with Bachrach and Baratz and the third face of power with Lukes and Gaventa. Second, I will turn to the debate that shaped the 1970s, with

I. Framing Discussions

C. Wright Mills in *The Power Elite* (1956) starts with the assumption that there is an elite who rules things, i.e., a group of people who tend to be the higher members of the several orders (military, economic and political) and who despite the different interests they may punctually have, are tied by a stronger bond of honor and an 'elite' culture that makes them overcome obstacles and strive for a common path that in turn will directly affect not only the future of the country but ultimately of the world. He further argues that if we want to understand the power elite of today we need to understand the interrelation between these several spheres of power, the traffic of people within the three orders as well as its development in time. But who is the elite and what makes 'them' the elite? How can we point it out? Mills answers: '[The] elite... are the ones who determine their duty, as well as the duties of those beneath them. They are not merely following orders: they give the orders. They are not merely 'bureaucrats'; they command bureaucracies. They may try to disguise these facts from others and from themselves by appeals to traditions of which they imagine themselves the instruments, but there are many traditions, and they must choose which ones they will serve. They face decisions for which there simply are no traditions.' (Mills, 1956, p. 286) Despite this, Mills cannot really point out who 'they' are. He says: '[so] far as explicit organization... the power elite... is more likely to use existing institutions, working within and between them, than to set up explicit organizations whose membership is strictly limited to its own members.' However, Mills argues as well that there are exceptions, namely, that the elite sometimes creates institutions through which it legitimizes and reinforces its position - for Mills, the power elite creates the space where crucial decision making happens behind closed doors, by experts, in whom the public should trust, but without requiring further justification.[1] Nevertheless, the elite *per se* remains to be defined - how are its actors defined? How are its actions accountable for? Assuming that its actions are accountable only indirectly (ultimately through an analysis of the effects of the decision making process which was made by a minority) democracy seems an ideal far from being reached, since accountability and participation are compromised. How do we articulate the concept of a 'power elite' with the concept of a mass society and the particular claim that the United States of America is a pluralist and liberal country?

Robert Dahl in *Who Governs?* (1961) argues against Wright Mills' model, on the ground that Mills' theory is quasi-essentialist, leading to an '[...] infinite regress

of explanations.' (Dahl, 1958, p. 463) Instead, Dahl proposes a model of pluralism in which power is conceived to take place in the visible realm of politics, through elections or public debate and 'bargaining', instead of behind closed doors. For him, decision-making arenas are theoretically open to any organized group. Dahl says that in the U.S.A. '[the] political system does not constitute a homogenous class with well-defined class interests. In New Haven... the political system is easily penetrated by anyone whose interests and concerns attract him to the distinctive political culture of the stratum... the independence, penetrability, and heterogeneity of the various segments of the political stratum all but guarantee that anyone dissatisfied will find a spokesman...' (Dahl, 1961, pp. 91-3) Because Dahl attributes an openness and transparency to the decision-making process, it is possible to study leaders not as 'elites', but as representative of a constituency. For Dahl, as well as for Polsby what defines the political game is exactly this capability of participation and contestation.

With the assumption of visibility of the political arena where processes of decision making happen, Dahl recovers the ideal of a democratic society where individuals can enter, participate and engage in contestation and negotiation. For Dahl, the groups that participate and shape the most crucial political decisions are characterized by 'cross-cutting cleavages', i.e., they do not reflect nor are based upon a class division. In this sense, there is a clear conflict between on the one hand, the concept of ruling elite, which represents the corporate interests and capitalism and on the other hand, democracy. Dahl says: 'In a full fledged democracy operating strictly according to majority rule, the majority would constitute a controlling group...' (Dahl, 1958, p.464) However, this is hardly the case. To a possible objection, Dahl argues that the existence of interests does not by itself confirm the existence of a ruling elite.

Opposed to Dahl's perspective we find E.E. Schattschneider (1960) and Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1963). In 'Decisions and Nondecisions: an analytical framework', Bachrach and Baratz argue that Dahl's pluralism is grounded on an analytical convergence of terms that should be distinguished, namely power, force, influence and authority.[2] What mainly distinguishes their position is that not only do they call the attention to the importance of establishing an analytical distinction between terms and accounting for their meanings, uses and transformations, as they look at the other face of power, more precisely, what they call the 'nondecision making' arena. While the pluralists took the silence or non-participation as a sort of consensus Bachrach and Baratz want to understand what are the conditions for

a particular emphasis in racial politics. By racial politics I mean that by having 'race' as matrix of analysis I will try to identify which conceptualization of power is the most capable of explaining the dynamics of the black population with the political claims of moving towards a more egalitarian society in the post Civil Rights moment era in the United States. Finally, I will argue that in order to better account for the dynamics of power that shape American political and social structures, a more promising line of approach would be to take the several models presented above and see how the several faces of power complement each other, instead of granting priority of one model over another.

(non)participation and political (in)efficacy. In this sense, Bachrach and Baratz go after the causes of this silence, arguing that the lack of participation and decision is not necessarily 'chosen' by individuals, rather, it is imposed through social and political mechanisms of exclusion that shape the 'rules of the game'. Power is not only exercised upon participants and actors; it is also exercised towards the exclusion of participants.

The advantages of Bachrach and Baratz perspective, opposed to Dahl's is that they 'put the phenomenon of power in proper perspective; [they] recognize that while decision-making frequently does involve power relationships, it very often does not.' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1963, p.641) meaning that many times '… the dominant values, the accepted rules of the game, the existing power relations among groups, and the instruments of force… effectively prevent certain grievances from developing into full-fledged issues which call for decisions, it can be said that a nondecision-making situation exists.' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1963, p.641) This is different from deciding not to act. To the obvious criticism of how can one observe something that by definition is not observable, Bachrach and Baratz, following Schattschneider, argue that we can account for the 'mobilization of bias' and how interests, voices and demands are left out of the public arena.

Stephen Lukes (1973) and John Gaventa represent another turning point in the discussion of power. Gaventa, in *Power and Powerlessness, Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (1980) takes this problematic further. His question is not 'who governs?' or 'what are the conditions of participation? but rather, 'what prevents issues from arising or interests from being recognized?' or 'under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion begin to emerge?' (Gaventa, 1980, p. 3) This question reaffirms the necessity of accounting for the causes of social inequalities and trying to find remedies for those – it has a direct repercussion in one's understanding of democratic institutions and legitimization of the existing order. In his conceptualization of power Gaventa returns to an assumption of class division as shaping the process of maintenance of both elite and non-elite. For him, and following Lukes' three dimensional approach, the first and second faces of power are not sufficient – the first, because it focus mainly on behavior, i.e., on the observable actions that occur in the visible realm of the bargaining game; the second, because it focus mainly on the coordination of political resources and mobilization of bias. If the second face of power argument is right, and assuming that there is a relation between participation and (individual or class) consciousness, it is highly unlikely for those who are denied participation to overcome their culture

of dependency and find their 'authentic' voice and determine their 'real' interests. The consensus in this case simply mirrors the dominant interests. The third face of power adds something to this; insofar it wants to account for the mechanisms that preempt any manifestation of conflict. Gaventa argues that one must account for 'indirect mechanisms of power, i.e., '[...] the means through which power influences, shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict.' (Gaventa, 1980, p.15) The question in this account becomes: what is the trigger that breaks the silence? What makes rebellion possible? To answer this question one may need to study social myths, language and symbols, and how they are shaped or manipulated in power processes. It may also include the study of the media and communication, how phenomena are socially justified, how 'values' are installed and reinforced. It is in the process of accounting for everything that surrounds and may influence the political process itself, that one may find the conditions to break from the pattern and *status quo*, and change the power relations' dynamics. In his approach, it is not only a question of studying what does not happen, but rather to identify the mechanisms that allow one to determine if the 'consensus' is a product of choice or a product of power relations. However, the third dimension of power, while having the advantage of being able to incorporate and take into account the two previous ones, confronts a serious challenge - how can one define exactly the groups who have power and those who are powerless? Doesn't this third face of power imply already a clear starting point, which in fact is the goal that we want to define and achieve? The major problem with Gaventa's account is that his approach is strongly supported by assumptions of 'interests', 'consciousness' and 'consensus', which are highly problematic to define.

Foucault is another author that gave an incredible contribution to the study of power. Foucault provides us with alternative readings and interpretation of the major concepts that shape the power discourse. To start with, one must be aware that the Foucauldian project is framed by a specific and alternative concept of history, which makes that Foucault's concept of power cannot be anchored in any kind of essentialist or metaphysical understanding of power represented by the philosophical Western tradition. Foucault wanted to understand how practice(s) and knowledge(s) are shaped by relations of power. His question, boldly put, is: how are forms of knowledge and truth produced? To ask for the production of truth is to open a gap between the articulable and the visible in the sense that it becomes a matter of descending to the level of practices, in the social field, where statements emerge and are made visible.[3] If one wants to grasp and understand how

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effects of truth are produced within discourses, this means, simply to start with, that power must be productive (instead of repressive) and disperse (instead of fixed in a figure, such as the state or the 'elite'). Let us analyze Foucault's argument. His question is not what is power but rather *how* is power exercised? "To begin the analysis with a 'how' is to introduce the suspicion that *power as such does not exist*."[4] For Foucault, any theory that attempts to legitimize power is wrong, not for the construction of the argument, but for power's non-existence. For Foucault power has nothing to do with consent or legitimacy. Power is a way of acting upon others. "What defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, *it acts upon their actions*."[5] (Human) action is by definition the exercise of power upon other(s). A conception of power as result of human action embodied in institutions is rejected. In this context, power cannot be analyzed from a strictly political perspective reflecting a foundational subject. Instead, 'one must *analyze institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa*, and that the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found *outside* the institution.'[6] What is this outside? The 'outside' is the individual, who is the locus of power, the point of intersection that cuts the social space diagonally, that puts into play different roles, spaces and discourses. The power that part of the philosophical tradition analyzed from a political point of view is extended by Foucault both in terms of kinds and of fields of application – it is not only a political phenomenon; rather, it is a phenomenon that crosses both public and private realms and that penetrates the entire social body, and which finds its space *par excellence* in the body of the individual.

The argument that power is not to be localized in the 'political sphere', but rather that it is dispersed across the totality of the social body, has great implications for any political or ethical theories as well as for a contemporary understanding of what kind of autonomy is possible today. The implications derive from three main shifts that Foucault introduces with his notion of power. *First*, he shifts from a repressive to a productive power. This means that power is not only an essential 'repressor'; it is rather a 'metamorphosical' producer. Since power is always action upon actions, it exists only in relationships – in a power relationship the 'other' must be recognized as subject who acts until the end, i.e., a subject who is free to act, react, evade, conduct, etc. This also means that power relations can only happen in a context of freedom and they can only continue insofar the subjects remain free, i.e., with a choice of action. Where there is no freedom there can

be no power. In this sense, Foucault is totally innovative in studying power as spaces of articulation and production of its necessary and possible conditions of existence and maintenance, namely, the individual and/or free subjects. This reasoning implies a shift from rigid conception of power structures to affirmation or recognition of its *mutability*.

Second, the recognition of its mutability means that power relations have organic effects, in the sense that even individualities and subjectivities are constituted within a network of power relations. This reasoning implies a shift from an essentialist conception of subject, that has governed philosophical discourse since modernity, to a new concept where subject is simultaneously an effect as well as a cause within a relational context shaped by power – in this sense *multiplicity* replaces the myth of duality or unity that has shaped traditional discourses.

Finally, these two reasons also represent a shift from a foundational approach to the recognition of interdependence of phenomena and its potential for *reversibility*. As Foucault says: 'every power relationship implies, at least in *potentia, a strategy for struggle*, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of *permanent limit, a point of possible reversal*.'[7]

Although one can immediately recognize the impact that Foucault's approach has in treating the category of power at different levels of application – individual, institutional, collective – his contribution leaves us however with major questions that remain unanswered, namely, how can one conceive the practical articulation between a disciplinary society, which individualizes its members through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and the democratic and liberal ideal of individual autonomy? If there is no 'authentic' individual and if the individual is only an effect of power, i.e., controlled, disciplined and surveilled, a being who fits the disciplinary society and who is produced by its techniques of normalization, how is struggle, resistance to be understood, and what kind of 'possible reversal' can be considered? How should we understand the relationship between the underlying assumption and promise of freedom with the specificity of modern rationality that still shapes us today as subjects?[8]

II. Power debate in context – racial politics in the United States

From what has been said so far it is clear that there is no consensus on how power should be understood. However, practice tells us that we need concepts to shape

our own thoughts and projects. Therefore, in this second moment I will turn to the debate that shaped the 1970s, with a particular emphasis in racial politics. By racial politics I mean that by having 'race' as matrix of analysis I will try to identify which conceptualization of power is the most capable of explaining the dynamics of the black population with the political claims of moving towards a more egalitarian society in the post Civil Rights moment era in the United States.

The discussions during the 1970s and more precisely in what regards racial politics, i.e., how the category of 'race' has been politicized and translated in actual institutional and political configurations, while not referring to power *per se*, reveal certain assumptions of how power works and what power means in concrete situations of, for instance, urban political economy. The 1970s in this sense represents a crucial point in political culture history of the United States - on the one hand, it represents the culmination of the civil rights movement agenda, in striving for political equality between blacks and whites - this apparently may seem to mean that the cycle of *status quo* and the pattern of power relations were transformed. Assuring legal political equality created the touchstone for other rights to be defined and for other discourses to take place in the public arena. On the other hand, the 1970s also exposes the general failure of the 1960s and more precisely in what regards the extension of abstract ideals committed to democratic principles of social equality and social justice to concrete practices.

Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam Jr, in 'Race, Sociopolitical Participation, and Black Empowerment' (1990) analyzed the relationship between black empowerment and black participation and its comparison with sociopolitical behavior of whites. They concluded that the fact that post-civil rights movements blacks (apparently) gained representation in local and state levels, created a space for increase of political trust, efficacy and knowledge about politics among blacks - in sum, having blacks holding positions of power at level of urban politics created a link between the interests of the 'black community' who now saw their belief in the utility of political participation reinforced, supported by the conviction that their voice would be heard and their interests represented. In this context, Bobo and Gilliam argue that empowerment increases participation, ultimately contributing to the lessening of differences between black and white socio-political behaviors. In their account, and if one sees it from Dahl's perspective, this means that the raise of minority urban government is the direct result of an improvement of bargaining power and public formulation of claims and demands of the black

community in the general political arena and that the goal of civic inclusion has been accomplished.[9]

Cathy J. Cohen and Michael Dawson, in 'Neighborhood poverty and African American Politics' (1993) are not as optimist as the previous authors. While they recognize that the increase effectiveness of black participation where blacks occupy major political roles of representation is the result of the gains of the civil rights movements,[10] in their study of the different political environments that structure the African American political choice they also advance the thesis that there is a causal relationship between the level of poverty in a neighborhood and the political participation of its residents and that there is a 'cumulative environmental effects of extremely poor neighborhoods' that must be accounted for. The black community, due to the fact that it is greatly affected by extreme and devastating poverty conditions, suffers from social isolation, which is extended to the political realm.[11] In their view, the reality of poverty does not only compromise the success or the ability of black political mobilization and participation, as it has a direct reflection on the functioning of democracy in general. If the black community is powerless, if the black community is victim of depreciating stereotypes that shaped American political culture since slavery, through Jim Crow until the 1960s, it is necessary to confront the failures of the democratic process in the United States and address racial issues as their are most sharply expressed in neighborhood, housing and employment spheres. One could ask: within this account, what would be the trigger to break the silence and expose the 'invisible' pressures at play in sustaining a model of power relations where black community, under circumstances of extreme poverty and social isolation, is kept in a position of dependency and non-participation?

Adolph Reed presents us with a discourse that is both realist and hopeful. In *Stirrings in the Jug – Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (1999) and against the previous authors, Reed argues that the problem with most scholars that analyze the rise of black officialdom in the 1970s is that they tend to assume a coherent black community agenda as well as a black elite that represents the black community or that there is an 'authentic' group interest. (Reed, 1999, p. 38) Reed sees the 'empowerment' of black people not as a direct, transparent and unproblematic result of the civil rights movement, but rather as a phenomena that happened within a context of already institutional, political and social establishments that assimilated the 'black' perspective into their own, i.e., the already established (white) elite induces black elites to convert their concerns into forms that fit

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into their priorities.[12] This attack on the essentialist conceptualization of 'black community' is further extended with Reed's rejection of claims to racial or cultural 'authenticity' as the basis for black political legitimation. Therefore, we can anticipate how Bachrach and Baratz and even Gaventa's model of power cannot really account for this dynamics, insofar there is no 'real interest' of 'authentic consciousness' that one can appeal to. For Reed, the concept of 'black community' obscures the multilayered dimensions that shape the black public; and the concept of 'authenticity' is an artifact of racial essentialism, '[a] hollow notion that can be appropriated by nearly anyone to support or oppose any position, and it can be absurd and self-defeating.' (Reed, 1999, p. 48) In this context, where culture is understood as a space of contestation and struggle, any attempts to identify genuine or real 'interests' are pointless. Given this, it follows that both Bobo and Gilliam as well as Dawson and Cohen's arguments are incomplete and ultimately wrong, because both assume a 'coherence' that is far from reality. By doing so they escape the examination of '… the autonomous political processes and structural, ideological and institutional tensions that constitute the matrix of concrete black political action.' (Reed, 1999: 46)

If Reed is right, it seems that the strategy to follow is to engage in the critical deconstruction of mechanisms of ideology at play in the shaping of power relations and structures of power, institutionally considered. This critical deconstruction starts with the rejection of hierarchies, and with the appeal of justification of positions of decision-making. One should refuse and oppose the discourse of the 'black elite' - if democracy is to have any meaning, one must start by breaking from the elite hegemony - through critique of elite's program and practical efforts to 'expand the discursive arena within the Afro-American population.'(Reed, 1999, p. 77) For Reed, practical democracy and 'politics can be created only by going to basics and building it from the bottom up, around the specific interests and concerns of specific groups of black individuals in specific places and specific social circumstances.' (Reed, 1991, p. 51) Not to distant from Foucault, Reed claims that for democracy to be successful as a project it needs to combine the political ideals with concrete programs that relate to people's lives. Local politics, as place of possible transgression of actual regime of discourses and practices, becomes a path to democracy and local politics must be the space *par excellence* capable of accounting for the autonomy of individuals and groups. So what do we get from all these approaches to power?

In the next moment I will argue that in order to better account for the dynamics

of power that shape American political and social structures, a more promising line of approach would be to take the several models presented above and see how the several faces of power complement each other, instead of granting priority of one model over another.

III. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have presented different approaches to the concept of 'power'. I looked into the first, second and third faces of power; I complemented with Foucault and I introduced Adolph Reed's arguments as critically exposing many of the theoretical faults of the first three models. It is clear to me that one cannot reduce power to the realm of observable actions that occur in the visible realm of the bargaining game; nor can politics be defined in a reductive manner, as capacity or actual bargaining in the political sphere. Politics is, as Hannah Arendt well said, 'acting in concert'; politics is a specific sphere of human action that treats the most important values of human life – freedom and equality. Therefore, politics has autonomy of its own which makes impossible to be reduced to a mere method or to a set of bargaining capacities.

On the other hand, the view presented by the second face of power seems incapable to respond to our questions regarding the type of relationship between politics, participation, interests and consciousness. Although there is a hint of intuitive truth, insofar even aggregative approaches to democracy postulate 'interests' and 'needs' to constitute and design public policies, once we turn to the theoretical level of justifying the existence, process of constitution and maintenance of these 'interests', we are left with unsolved problems and unanswered questions. There is no such thing as 'real interests' or 'authentic' preferences. If one makes a parallel between the debate on power and the debate on democratic theory/ies, one sees the great contribution brought by the deliberative paradigm. Indeed, while not contesting the fact that democracies rely on representative institutions (which are actually in crises), nor that participation should be a key element in order to promote a stronger model of democratic experiences, the paradigm of deliberative democracy showed how deliberation is fundamental to justify and legitimize the collective decision-making process. Deliberation adds three things to the political paradigm. *First*, it introduces reflection; *second*, it "… affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives." (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 3)[13] *Third*, it introduces the moral equation into politics. Many experiments

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have been done, from mini-publics (Robert Goodin) to deliberative polls (James Fishkin), trying to understand the effects of information input on individuals' policy preferences. What we have learned from these experiments is that opinions change once individuals become more informed and considered.[14] This reveals that it is misleading to think that preferences or interests are autonomously and freely chosen by individuals. They are the result of a specific economic, social and cultural context, or, as Foucault would say, the translation of their own 'historical *a priori*'. If preferences have a cause, this also means that preferences can change once the context where they constitute themselves changes as well. The goal of deliberation is therefore to expose the constructed character of one's preferences and to show how preferences or interests are the *result* and not the *starting-point* of deliberation.

The third face of power adds something to this, showing how one cannot look for visible mechanisms of power *only;* it is also necessary to look for the invisible or indirect mechanisms of power, i.e., '[...] the means through which power influences, shapes or determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities, and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict.' (Gaventa, 1980, p.15) However, what can trigger change of *status quo* and ultimately, rebellion?

What Foucault teaches us, and that is incorporated and transformed into Lukes' account, is that it is necessary to become aware of the means used to maintain a system of domination; not only through disciplines but also through governmentality. Briefly, one cannot escape from power, because power is everywhere, it is 'action upon actions'; it is relational. Under this light, Foucault seems to present the most compelling approach to power, which to a large extent finds resonance in Reed's project of rebuilding a new kind of politics from the 'bottom up'. Furthermore, the conceptualization of power as cross-cutting the entire social body and therefore, of extending the political sphere to the social, grants a space for the development of individual and collective autonomous action that not always can fit in a 'political' scheme.

However, Foucault and Reed's conceptualization are not without problems either. Most of all, on the one hand, if power is disperse and is everywhere and, on the other hand, if we cannot rely on categories of 'community' or 'identity' and if 'race', 'gender' and 'class' are only concepts ideologically manipulated in the public sphere, what should be our starting point? Is a critical deconstruction of concepts sufficient to open the path for a new kind of politics, more egalitarian and inclusionary?

It seems that at the end of the day, we must return and take Dahl's question of 'who governs?' as our starting point. If one is committed to the democratic project, not only in terms of legal and political equality but also in terms of social justice and egalitarianism, we must postulate as our starting point the horizon of (political) freedom where the process of effective participation and deliberation is possible. However, it is naive to think that this happens transparently. Instead, this seems to imply a struggle in many fronts. To start with, methodologically speaking one should recognize the theoretical importance of critical activity. Critique is key to denounce, expose the visible and invisible forms of domination, the visible apparatus of individuation in contemporary societies, along the massification of culture and ideals. Critique has the crucial role of exploring the techniques of constitution of the self (Foucault) and the limits of subjectivization; the means used to construct and promote certain discourses in a hegemonic manner (like neoliberalism), the means used to create social and cultural myths and to invent reality and establish it as 'truth' (Arendt), by detaining monopolies of mass media and other means of cultural production. In short, critique has the task to expose the unbreakable link between power as domination and its naturalization, insofar by becoming 'natural' it acquires an 'objective' and unquestionable reality. (Bordieu) Therefore, critique has a double task of accounting for *what is* and *what is not*, understanding *why* it is not, and *how* can it become something.

Furthermore, by having critique as method and regulative ideal, theoretically speaking one finds the means to denounce the emptiness of concepts and its ideological purpose - what Reed would say of overcoming a discourse of 'underclass' that depreciates the black population and equates blacks to poor, criminals, lazy, and so on; to expose the false assumption that poor people are behaviorally different from the rest of American society and to fight against prejudices that are perpetrated via the media and several other cultural manifestations.

Simultaneously, it is important to develop empirical and comparative studies and research that account for the sources of poverty, for instance, as well as the dynamics between gender, class and race and how public policy is structured (and can be challenged) in order to reproduce the actual and past dynamics of power.

In this critical enterprise it also seems to me that we cannot merely dismiss Mills model of 'power elite'. Although it is not clear how exactly we could create an hypothesis to define the 'elite' as a group, and account for all the implications of their actions, it seems plausible to think that it is possible to gather enough empirical evidence to support the claim that the U.S. has a power elite, who

shapes the American political agenda, and who is constituted by individuals who share common interests and who have control of top institutional positions in the military, political and economical spheres.

As a concluding note I would say that our task becomes two folded: on the one hand, we should work in the links between institutions and the individuals who have the power to 'influence' its mode of functioning; on the other hand, we should follow Foucault's methodology and look at the local effects of actions, policies, discourses, see how ideologies are played and developed in space and time, and progressively work on the creation of alternative spaces where claims can be publicly formulated therefore opening a path for a new kind of politics.

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[1] For instance, the creation of National Security Council that imposes secrecy for all who are involved in its functioning. Mills believes that this is just an example of how the power elite manipulates the 'people' or the 'spectators' who are treated like 'children'.

[2] In their account, the distinction between power and force is crucial: while power is relational, implying compliance and a background of freedom where one can act and choose, force is non-relational, it implies noncompliance and one of its mechanisms is manipulation, where the conflict of values is resolved through imposition instead of compromise.

3 Foucault wants to explain the relation between the theoretical organization and the practical functioning that, given the observation, always escapes theory (this is why Foucault prioritizes the statement, over phrases and sentences). As he says in 'Truth and Power' to understand the modifications in the rules of formation of statements which are accepted as scientifically true, i.e., is to ask for '(...) what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions that are scientifically acceptable and, hence, capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, *the politics of the scientific statement*. At this level, it's not so much a matter of knowing what external power imposes itself on science as of what effects of power circulate among scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their *internal regime of power*, and how and why at certain moments that regime undergoes a global modification.' (Foucault, 2000, p. 114).

4 Foucault, 2000, p. 336, my italics.

5 Michel Foucault, 2000, p. 340, my italics.

6 Foucault, 2000, p. 343, my italics.

7 Foucault, 2000, p. 346, my italics.

8 If *everything is constituted by power relations, everything in principle can become the subject of domination, including the subject himself.* This is why power, knowledge and subjectivity are interdependent and mutually constitutive; the effects of one will be reflected on the others. As such, Foucault proposes to give up the conception of a subject as centre and show "the historical construction of a subject through a discourse understood as consisting of a set of strategies which are part of social practices."

9 They say that '[it] is tempting to conclude that the importance of race for patterns of sociopolitical participation has greatly decline.' (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990, p. 388).

10 They say: 'it is a well known tenet of African American history that the organized political activity of masses of the community from the 1950s through the early 1970s led to important gains in the are of civil rights, significantly altering the quality of life for many black people.' (Cohen and Dawson, 1993, p. 295).

11 As they say: '[...] living in a neighborhood with high levels of economic devastation leads to greater isolation from social institutions that are most involved in black politics, such as the black church and organizations dedicated to racial affairs.' (Cohen and Dawson, 1993: p. 291).

12 He says: 'the new black elite's political capacity ... presumed acceptance of overarching programmatic frame- works and priorities for governance and administration ... defined by the pro-growth, pro-business interests that reproduce entrenched patterns of racialized inequality.' (Reed, 1999, p. 5) Reed gives the example of Mayor Jackson in Atlanta in 1977. According to Reed's reading, Jackson's hegemonic control of the idea of black interest 'enabled him to subvert and co-opt the moral force of racial populism even in opposition to a militant insurgency by one of the most vulnerable ... elements of the black population: public sector workers employed to do unappealing work for poverty level wages.' (Reed, 1999, p. 5).

13 Gutmann, Amy, and Thompson, Dennis, *Why deliberative democracy?*, Princeton University Press, 2004.

14 Goodin and Niemeyer (2003) when asking participants what could explain their opinion change, three quarts of the jurors answered that information was the main cause of their shift.