



# *Maitreyee*

Briefing of the Human Development and Capability Association  
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Dear HDCA Members,

An urgent and engaging critique of the capability approach and the human development paradigm is that it fails to sufficiently take into account the extent to which power permeates social structures. From the perspective of this critique, the capability approach crucially lacks a theory of power. Thus, while shedding light on the ‘ought to’ question of human well-being, the capability approach remains fairly silent on the question of ‘how to’ realize the different realities that it, very valuably, helps visualize. Therefore, in an effort to further freedom’s dialogue with power, to help, as Amartya Sen notes, ‘look for a better comprehension of the social causes of horror’ this *Maitreyee* explores the issue of power as an integral part of social analysis within the human development framework.

In keeping with these motivations, ‘Insights’ commences with a review of Paul Farmer’s *Pathologies of Power* (University of California Press, 2005) by Amartya Sen. A book that through illustrations, rather than definitions, paints a portrait of power or powerlessness, and in doing so helps as Sen notes, insightfully identify institutional structures that “push some into the abyss, while others do just fine”. When dealing with the issue of power, one cannot escape the classical reading of Stephen Lukes. Cathy Shutt makes a critical assessment of Luke’s revised edition of *Power: A Radical View* (Palgrave, 2005) Finally, Fernando Ponce pushes this exploration on power further by providing a nuanced sketch of how power can sometimes be manifest in ‘structural violence’.

‘In the Practice’ begins by examining how structures of power are manifested in the life of people. Through life histories, Peter Davis illustrates the reality of structural violence and its effects on a Hindu man and Muslim woman in Bangladesh. Venkatesan presents telling statistics about the way structural violence affects the lives of Dalits in India. Finally, we conclude by discussing some ways in which the effects of structural violence can be counteracted by social movements. We publish the second part of our interview with Smitu Kothari (*Maitreyee* 4, February 2006) on social movements.

Our next *Maitreyee* in February 2007 will focus on the multidimensionality of wellbeing and the ways in which dimensions are chosen in various contexts. As always, we welcome comments and suggestions. If you wish to propose a specific theme or wish to contribute by sending us a short article, do not hesitate to contact us.

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## *Insights*

### *Foreword to 'Pathologies of Power'<sup>1</sup>*

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“Every man who lives is born to die”, wrote John Dryden, some three hundred years ago. That recognition is tragic enough, but the reality is sadder still. We try to pack in a few worthwhile things between birth and death, and quite often succeed. It is, however, hard to achieve anything significant if, as in sub-Saharan Africa, the median age at death is less than five years.<sup>3</sup> That, I should explain, was the number in Africa in the early 1990s, *before* the AIDS epidemic hit hard, making the chances worse and worse. It is difficult to get reliable statistics, but the evidence is that the odds are continuing to fall from the already dismal numbers. Having made it beyond those early years, it may be difficult for us to imagine how restricted a life so many of our fellow human beings lead, what little living they manage to do. There is, of course, the wonder of birth (impossible to recollect), some mothers’ milk (sometimes not), the affection of relatives (often thoroughly disrupted), perhaps some schooling (mostly not), a bit of play (amid pestilence and panic), and then things end (with or without a rumble). The world goes on as if nothing much has happened.

The situation does, of course, vary from region to region, and from one group to another. But unnecessary suffering, debilitation, and death from preventable or controllable illness characterize every country and every society, to varying extents. As we would expect, the poor countries in Africa or Asia or Latin America provide crudely obvious illustrations of severe deprivation, but the phenomenon is present even in the richest countries. Indeed, the deprived groups in the “First World” live, in many ways, in the “Third”. For example, African Americans in some of the most prosperous U.S. cities (such as New York, Washington, or San Francisco) have a lower life expectancy at birth than do most people in immensely poorer China or even India. Indeed, location alone may not enhance one’s overall longevity.

#### **Explanation and Remedy**

How can we come to terms with the extensive presence of such adversity – the most basic privation from which human beings can suffer? Do we see it simply as a human predicament – an inescapable result of the frailty of our existence? That would be correct had these sufferings been really inescapable, but they are far from that. Preventable diseases can indeed be prevented, curable ailments can certainly be cured, and controllable maladies call out for control. Rather than lamenting the adversity of nature, we have to look for a better comprehension of the social causes of horror and also of our tolerance of societal abominations. However, despite many illuminating studies of particular aspects of these general problems, investigators tend to shy away from posing the questions in their full generality. To confront the big picture seems like an overpowering challenge.

Paul Farmer, however, is not easily overpowered. He is a great doctor with massive experience of working against the hardest of diseases in the most adverse circumstances, and, at the same time, he is a proficient and insightful anthropologist with far-reaching discernment and understanding. Farmer’s knowledge of maladies such as AIDS and drug-

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 419 pages, ISBN: 0-520-23550-9. Price: US\$27.50, £17.50.

<sup>2</sup> Reproduced with kind permission from University of California Press. The copyright has been granted only for readership among the members of the Human Development and Capability Association. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> This astounding figure is not a typographical error. See World Bank 1993, table A.3, and 1994.

resistant tuberculosis, which he fights on behalf of his indigent patients, is hard to match. This he combines with his remarkable expertise on culture and society, acquired not just by learning from a distance but also from actually living and working in different parts of the deprived world. In addition, Paul Farmer is a public health interventionist with a dogged determination to work toward changing iniquitous institutions and mismatched arrangements. As the co-director of Harvard's Program in Infectious Disease and Social Change (working with Dr. Jim Yong Kim, another remarkable public health expert), Farmer has led several major initiatives in changing the direction of health care and intervention (for example, in tackling drug-resistant TB).

But what is particularly relevant in appreciating the contribution of this powerful book is that Paul Farmer is a visionary analyst who can look beyond the details of fragmentary explanations to seek an integrated understanding of a complex reality. In his earlier publications, including *AIDS and Accusation* (1992), *The Uses of Haiti* (1994), and *Infections and Inequalities: The Modern Plagues* (1999), he has already done much to illuminate important features of global deprivations. Now, in this remarkable book, which is hard to put down, comes the big picture, firmly linked with informationally rich illustrations of individual examples.

Farmer points to what he calls "structural violence," which influences "the nature and distribution of extreme suffering." The book is, as he explains, "a physician-anthropologist's effort to reveal the ways in which the most basic right – the right to survive—is trampled in an age of great affluence." He argues: "Human rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm." Those "social conditions" and their discriminatory effects are the subject matter of this general investigation and the specific case studies that establish the overall picture of powerlessness and deprivation.

### Concepts and Methods

Some will undoubtedly ask whether this is not too general, too grand, and perhaps even too ambitious an inquiry. Also, are the questions absolutely clear? How exactly is "power" defined? Does Farmer delineate the "social conditions" precisely? Does he provide an exact definition of "structural violence"? In fact, that is not the way Paul Farmer proceeds, and it is important to understand the methodology that distinguishes this wonderful study.

A phenomenon can be either characterized by a terse definition or described with examples. It is that latter procedure that Farmer follows. That procedure is, of course, quite standard when we learn certain basic words (such as "red" or "smooth"), as Ludwig Wittgenstein (arguably the greatest philosopher of our times) has famously discussed:

An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing...attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance the word "slab" as he points to that shape... This ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an association between the word and the thing.<sup>4</sup>

Though not so primitive as "red" or "smooth" or a "slab," terms like "power" or "violence" can also, often enough, be helpfully communicated through examples.

This is not to deny that we can try to explain these complex terms in other ways as well, in particular by proposing a precise definition through the use of other words. That indeed is the usual procedure, widely used, in the social sciences. And yet, as we know from experience, this is sometimes highly misleading, since the capacious content of a social concept or its diverse manifestations may often be lost or diminished through the maneuver of

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<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein 1958, p.4.

trying to define it in sharply delineated terms. The expressions “power,” “structure,” and “violence” are not eccentric inventions of Paul Farmer; they have figured extensively in the literature on social inequality.<sup>5</sup> But attempts at defining them exactly by other words have typically been inadequate and unclear (and sometimes they have also generated the kind of “sociological jargon” that can sound arrestingly weird). For this reason, among others, the alternative procedure, by exemplification, has many advantages in epistemology and practical reason in parts of the social sciences. The epigrammatic definition, which many social scientists seek, often cannot escape being misleadingly exact; it can be precise but precisely inaccurate. A rich phenomenon with inherent ambiguities calls for a characterization that preserves those shady edges, rather than being drowned in the pretense that there is a formulaic and sharp delineation waiting to be unearthed that will exactly separate out all the sheep from all the goats.

Farmer does not fall for the temptation of a make-believe exactness. While keeping his eyes firmly on the general picture as he sees it, he goes from one case study to another to explain what “structural violence” is like (or how disparity of “power” may operate). We see the evident similarities as well as the rich variations of form and expression. By learning from Farmer’s book as a whole, we get an overall understanding that draws together the diverse details spread across these harrowing accounts.

### **Acéphie’s Powerlessness**

For example, in discussing deprivations in Haiti, Farmer observes that “political and economic forces have structured risk for AIDS, tuberculosis, and, indeed, most other infectious and parasitic diseases” and adds that “social forces at work there have also structured risk for most forms of extreme suffering, from hunger to torture and rape.” He discusses in each case exactly how this structuring of risk, in distinct forms, blights the lives of many, without touching the affluence of others. He moves from Haiti to Mexico, then to Russia, then to Peru, then to the United States, and right across the world, looking for – and insightfully identifying— institutional structures (that?) push some into the abyss, while others do just fine. The carefully chosen details in each case help us to understand Farmer’s notion of “structural violence” through a process that is not altogether dissimilar to the teaching of the idea of a “slab.”

Indeed, power inequalities can work in many distinct ways. Take the case of Acéphie, the comely woman born in the small village of Kay through which runs Rivière Artibonite, Haiti’s largest river. She is lucky to be born into a prosperous peasant family, but her luck does not last for long. When the valley is flooded to make room for a reservoir, the villagers are forced up into the stony hills on the sides of the new lake. Their voice does not receive hearing. The displaced people – the “water refugees”—seek whatever jobs they can get (no longer able to grow rice, bananas, millet, corn, or sugarcane they grew so abundantly earlier), and Acéphie’s family ceases to make ends meet. Nevertheless, Acéphie – like other young women in families of water refugees – carries the family’s agricultural produce (miserable as it is) to the local market. The soldiers, stationed on the way, watch the procession of girls who walk to the market and often flirt with them. The girls feel lucky to get such attention, since soldiers are powerful and respected men.

When Captain Jacques Honorat woos the tall and fine-featured Acéphie, with her enormous dark eyes, reciprocation eventually follows (even though Acéphie knows that Honorat is married and has several other partners). The sexual relation does not last long, but it is enough to disrupt Acéphie’s life, while Captain Honorat dies of unexplained fevers. After

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Farmer himself has made effective use of the concept of “structural violence” in earlier studies; see, for example, *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Structural Violence* (Farmer, Connors, and Simmons 1996).

trying to qualify herself as a domestic servant in the neighboring town of Mirabalais, the twenty-two-year-old Acéphie moves to Port-au-Prince and finds a servant's job, at a tiny wage. She also begins seeing Blanco Nerette, who comes from a similar background (his parents were also water refugees) and now chauffeurs a small bus, and they plan to marry. However, when Acéphie becomes pregnant, Blanco does not welcome the news at all. Their relationship founders. Also, thanks to her pregnancy, Acéphie loses her job. The battle for economic survival turns intense and is now joined by disease. Acéphie dies of AIDS – loved still by her own family but uncared for and unhelped by society. She leaves behind a daughter, also infected with the virus. That is the beginning of another story, but not a long one.

The inequalities of power that Acéphie faced in her brief life involved *bureaucracy* (beginning with displacements to make room for the new reservoir without adequate rearrangement), *class* (reflected in Acéphie's relations with her employer and with Captain Honorat), *gender* (related to her standing vis-à-vis the males she encountered – from the soldiers to Blanco), and of course the *stratified society* (with the absence of public facilities for medical attention and care for the poor). Acéphie did not encounter any physical violence, but Farmer is persuasive in seeing her as a victim of structural violence.

### **Poverty, Inequality and Power**

The asymmetry of power can indeed generate a kind of quiet brutality. We know, of course, that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. But inequalities of power in general prevent the sharing of different opportunities. They can devastate the lives of those who are far removed from the levers of control. Even their own lives are dominated by decisions taken by others. In one chapter after another, Paul Farmer illustrates the diversity and reach – and also the calamitous consequences—of structural violence. The basic theme and the theses become firmly established through these disparate but ultimately blended accounts. The whole draws on the parts, but firmly transcends them, in the integrated understanding that Farmer advances.

That understanding also suggests lines of thinking about ways of remedying the deprivations and the disparities. For example, if inequality of power, in different forms, is central to deprivation and destitution, then little sense can be made of the frequently aired and increasingly popular slogan, “I am against poverty, but I am really not bothered by inequality.” That attempt at a putative dichotomy can be disputed from different perspectives, for example, through an appreciation of the powerful effects of social and economic inequality on the unfreedoms that the subjugated experience.<sup>6</sup> The proposal to distance inequality from poverty is severely challenged by Farmer's many-sided documentation of the impact of inequality of power on the lives that the subjugated can live. This diagnosis does not, of course, yield any instant solution of the problems; but it does indicate the difficult – and often ignored – social and economic issues that must be firmly faced to eliminate preventable morbidity and escapable mortality.

We live in an age of science, technology, and economic affluence when, as Farmer points out, we can, for the first time in history, deal effectively with the diseases that ravage humanity. And yet the reach of science and of globalization has stopped short of bringing reasonable opportunity for survival within the grasp of the deprived masses in our affluent world. This is where the pathologies of power take their toll. As Farmer argues, “Anyone who wishes to be considered humane has ample case to consider what it means to be sick and poor in the era of globalization and scientific advancement.”

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<sup>6</sup> See among other studies, Marmot, Smith, and Stansfeld 1991; Marmot, Bobak, and Smith 1995; Wilkinson 1996.

Depressing as Farmer's case studies are, their overall message is constructive and optimistic. The solutions are by no means easy, but they are not beyond the reach of our informed and resolute effort. This volume is a major contribution to the understanding that is needed for a determined encounter. We must avoid being like the man, to quote Dryden again, who "trudged along unknowing what he sought,/ And whistled as he went for want of thought." Paul Farmer teaches us how to stop whistling and start thinking. We have reason to be grateful.

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## **Review of *Power: A Radical View* by Stephen Lukes (Palgrave, 2005)**

**Cathy Shutt<sup>1</sup>**

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In 1974 Stephen Lukes wrote a concise book entitled *Power: A Radical View*. It was a contribution to a debate that was taking place between American political scientists and sociologists who were seeking ways to think about power theoretically and study it empirically. They were motivated by the desire to determine whether American politics was characterised by a ruling elite or a pluralist democracy.

A 'one dimensional view' of power had been proposed by Robert Dahl in 1957. Dahl had defined power in terms of 'A's successful attempt to get B to do something B would not otherwise do'. Power could hence be measured by observing whose preferences prevailed in decision making over overt conflicts. This theoretical formulation of power was subsequently criticised, for the exercise of power was not restricted to decision making but extended to the control of decision making agendas. Those critics argued that there exist 'predominant values, beliefs rituals and institutional procedures ("rules of the game") that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain groups at the expense of others'. (Lukes, 2005: 21). This became known as the 'second face' of power.

Lukes posited a third, and more radical face of power. He argued that bias can be perpetuated unconsciously by 'socially structured patterns of groups' and need not necessarily involve overt conflict. His particular concern was the investigation of how certain individuals or groups influence or shape the preferences of those they dominate; instances of latent conflict between the interests of those exercising power and the 'real interests' of those they exclude (2005:27-8).

The conceptualisation of power in the 1974 edition of *Power: A Radical View* was contentious and, by Lukes' own admission, presented many difficulties besides the obvious methodological ones associated with recognising and measuring unobservable conflict. His naming the non-agent specific notion of *bias* as power was judged to complicate the distinction between power and structural constraint and his attempts to resolve this confusion,

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank John Gaventa, Jethro Pettit and Rosalind Eyben for comments on an earlier draft.

seen to be unsatisfactory.<sup>2</sup> Despite Lukes emphasising that power is an essentially contested and value laden notion, his use of the concept of what others termed ‘false consciousness’ – the idea that power distorts knowledge and that those who are dominated are not aware of their ‘real interests’ - was judged to be condescending. It was said to imply that ‘enlightened academics’ could ‘look down to discern the genuine interests of those not similarly blessed’ (2005: 149). Some also felt that Lukes did not go far enough in recognising the socially embedded nature of power.

These critiques are part of the reason for a second edition of *Power: A Radical View*, which contains the whole of the original text in its first chapter. Although Lukes confesses that he committed the ‘exercise fallacy’ - conceptualising power as ‘power over’ instead of the dispositional concept of ‘power to’, a capacity - and discusses the utility of both concepts, he continues to defend the importance of his fascination with a particular subset concept of power: ‘power over’, exercised as domination. Much of the book is devoted to considering how to define, recognise and study how willing compliance to domination is secured.

Lukes is adamant that, despite being difficult to define, power is a concept that should be studied and attempts to allocate responsibility for powerlessness whether caused by impotence or domination should not be restricted to the examination of intentional acts of agency. The powerful should be held accountable for the powerlessness of others in society; powerlessness which he conceives as ‘*injustice* rather than bad luck’ (2005:68). For Lukes, this necessitates appropriating responsibility for unintended acts that create or increase powerlessness and once again he seems to blur the distinction between power (agency) and structural constraint.

In the first new chapter of this new edition, Lukes develops a conceptual map for the analysis of power and briefly discusses the relative merits that alternative notions of interests might offer in attempts to assess of the effects of power on people’s ‘real interests’. Should subjective, self-revealed preferences that may not be overt in situations where people cannot voice their concerns be used, or are more objective measures of welfare such as those defined by Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach? Lukes comes to no firm conclusions but ends chapter by critiquing Foucault’s theoretical contribution to the power debate in an effort to explore mechanisms by which domination may be achieved. He cites a number of intriguing applications of Foucault’s work, including Hayward’s (2000) which provide examples of individuals willingly disciplining themselves in ‘patterns of normative control’ in the belief that they are making rational free choices.

In the final chapter, Lukes defends aspects of his conceptualisation of the third face of power and grapples with question of ‘[w]ho is to say who is dominated and on what basis?’ (2005:111). After acknowledging some categories such as slavery which are understood universally as domination, Lukes once again considers the pros and cons of using more subjective/inter-subjective categories to explore the notion. Taking up Nussbaum’s arguments that the capability approach needed an objective definition of valuable capabilities in order to deal with internalized patterns of domination, Lukes argues that domination might objectively be said to occur when any human beings are prevented from reaching their capabilities for human functioning due to the power of others (2005: 118). Again Lukes fails to reach a firm conclusion and for him domination remains an essentially contested concept.

What individual readers make of this new edition of *Power: A Radical View* will largely depend on their reasons for reading it. As Lukes remarks, ‘how we think about it [power] relates in a number of ways to what we are trying to understand’ (2005: 63). Those that are concerned with the minutiae of the power debate might find it unsatisfactory and

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<sup>2</sup> See Haugaard (2002:38) for a fuller discussion of the perceived shortcomings of arguments presented in the first edition of *Power: A Radical View*.

conclude that the old structure and agency problems have not been resolved and/or that Lukes is not talking about power at all.

For readers who wish to think broadly about issues of power and injustice, Lukes' stubborn resistance to conform to some of the theoretical neatness desired by some of his peers, particularly his insistence that we must consider the unintentional effects of 'power', makes this work all the more intriguing. That being said, anyone seeking a basic introduction to the wider power discourse might be well advised to start with a volume such as Haugaard's *Power: A Reader* before tackling the second edition of Lukes' *Power: A Radical View*.

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## *On the Concept of Structural Violence*

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What is structural violence? I would like to answer that question by first situating it in a context in which it emerged, the Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1960s, the Latin American Catholic bishops faced a grave dilemma about what would be preferable for society: peace or social justice? In other words, could the violence of the guerrilla movements and popular movements be understood, explained and justified as a fight for a just society? In their General Assembly, held in Medellín (Columbia) in 1968, the Catholic bishops tried to address that dilemma and published a document on justice and another on peace. The latter conceived peace as follows: 'Peace is before all the work of justice. It supposes and requires a just social order.' This meant that 'peace in Latin America was not... the simple absence of violence and pouring of blood'. Thus, while the oppression by powerful groups gave the impression of maintaining peace and order, in reality such 'ordered' oppression embodied violence because, not only did it foster rebellion and war, but also more importantly it perpetuated an unjust social order

It is within this context that the concept of structural violence has to be understood. The documents of the Medellín conference observed that Latin America found itself in a situation of injustice that could be called institutionalized violence. Because of the dynamics of the national and international economy, of the cultural and political life, whole populations were lacking the bare human necessities and lived in a state of deprivation that denied them participation in the social and political life. This was a violation of fundamental human rights and this was *not* peace

We can highlight three elements in this understanding of violence. First, injustice and violence are seen as equivalent. The dilemma that worried the Latin American bishops was a false one because there cannot be a separation nor opposition between the struggle for justice and the construction of peace. Every injustice is an assault against peace. Therefore the struggle for a just social order is to be conceived as a struggle for authentic peace and not as a threat against it. In that sense, the Latin American continent lived (and still lives) under structures of violence because it lived (and still lives) under structures of injustice.

Second, the violence in question has an institutional, or structural, dimension. This

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Spanish by Séverine Deneulin. The author thanks Juan Hernández Pico for helpful suggestions.

does not mean that the repressive and violent actions of individuals do not exist. They do, and these are assaults against peace and human rights, but these actions have to be considered within their wider context of the structural dimension of violence. In other words, long before repressive violence, and even when violent actions of this kind do not happen, Latin American societies are in themselves violent and producers of violence against the excluded. There exist institutions which are institutionalising or structuring in the violence, such as private corporations, unequal economic relations, and the political system.

Third, the bishops did not claim to do theology or philosophy. In the 1960s they only wanted to present an ethical judgment on how Latin America society functioned in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s the concept of structural violence was taken further by theologians.. The relationship between injustice and violence was not put into question, indeed it became part of the official social thinking of the Church. But they added the intuition that social structures, and not only individuals and their actions, are violent and exercise violence on powerless victims. In the context in which it emerged, it was the equivalent of analyzing the guerrilla and revolutionary violence in a broader context, which was seen as reactive violence against an original violence: the violence exercised by structures. In sum, we can outline the cycle of violence in three stages: first, there is the structural violence of the injustices, second there is the revolutionary violence, which emerges as a reaction to the original violence, and finally there is the violence of the state-sponsored repression of the revolutionary violence.

Is explaining the cycle of violence in this way the same as justifying it? For some, it is, and this was the position taken by some Christian-left leaning groups in the 1980s. This position contributed to legitimize armed rebellions in Central America, but it was not really original. It only presented a new basis – the concept of structural violence – for the theory of just wars, worked out by the medieval Catholic social tradition. For others, such as the Brazilian bishop Helder Camera, to explain the violent reaction against structural violence was no the same as justifying it. The cycle of violence described above is in reality a growing spiral, because violence generates more violence. Even if the revolutionary violence can be explained and justified from viewpoint of its origin, it is to be condemned from the point of view of its consequences. This is also the conclusion of some Central American theologians when they realized the consequences and the poor results of the Sandinist revolution and other revolutionary experiences which awoke great hopes and expectations in their times.

Another development of the concept of structural violence was the concept of structural sin. If injustice and its expression as violence take structural forms, it is because the reality of sin has also a structural dimension. Injustice as such has exceeded the pure will of the individual human being, and has penetrated social structures, which in turn forces many people to live in situations contrary to their dignity of human beings. This is why contemporary theologians consider some social structures as sinful, even if no human will is directly attached to them. This is a violence that is truly perverse because it hides within social practices that are apparently ‘normal’ and does so without holding visible people responsible and without immediate solutions.

This might sound very theoretical, but it is unfortunately very real. For example, the laws which regulate land distribution in some Latin American countries reduce the possibilities for human development of some indigenous groups. These laws were enacted in Congress by democratically elected representatives. Today, these constitute structures of production which are unfavourable to excluded people, but nobody is made responsible for the violence of these structures upon people. Its authors have died, and current governments are subject to these laws, unable to change them. Respecting these laws brings an apparent peace, but the implementation of these laws is intrinsically unjust and is violent toward peasants.

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## *In the Practice*

### *On Life Histories, Power Resources, and Structural Violence in Bangladesh*

**Peter Davis**  
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Why do poor people always seem to have such bad luck? In *Pathologies of Power*, Paul Farmer demonstrated how case studies can be used so powerfully to uncover the 'structural violence' pitted against the disadvantaged. Patterns of experience examined in spatial and temporal contexts suggest that underlying the apparent waves of bad luck facing the power-resource poor, pernicious social structural phenomena are at work. The life trajectories of Amit and Jasmin in Bangladesh, summarised below, outline unique experiences, but also illustrate patterns that recurred over and over in the lives of many impoverished people.<sup>1</sup>

Amit was a 46 year old Hindu man in the village of Gopalpur. While Amit is a Brahmin and derived some social capital from this, he was socially disadvantaged within predominantly Muslim Bangladesh.

The independence war was a particularly difficult time for Hindus in Bangladesh. Amit was 22 in 1971 and his father died from dysentery while they were sheltering in India during the war. When they returned he found that their house had been burnt while they were away. After the war Amit worked hard to build up his life again with a rice trading business and managed to add 9 *kata*<sup>2</sup> of land to the 8 *kata* he inherited from his father. He was also able to buy 12 cows. When he was 26 in 1975 he married and received a Tk 1200 dowry. Over the next 11 years four children were born: 3 girls and a boy.

In 1977 things started going wrong. Amit had been given 16 *bighas* of land by his in-laws as they had chosen to leave the country and move to India. A local Muslim group in the area had occupied the land and had produced false papers claiming ownership. Amit started a court-case attempting to secure ownership of the land. In total the case cost him Tk. 17,750<sup>3</sup> in various fees and payments to the advocate (*ukil*), the assistant advocate, the *hajira* for papers, the police, and various witnesses. While he was travelling by train on the way to the court hearing he was kidnapped by members of the group he was opposing. Another gang rescued him but then also demanded the land in exchange. In the circumstances he realised his life was in danger and he gave up his fight for the land. This was the first of a series of five successive downward steps in Amit's life.

The second downward step was in 1983 when his house was burgled. His in-laws had also left him with many of their possessions after they left for India. Local criminals were

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the author's doctoral research in which 242 life-history interviews conducted in Kushtia district, Bangladesh, from 1999- 2001.

<sup>2</sup> 20 *kata* = 1 *bigha* = 1/3 of an acre.

<sup>3</sup> One UK pound is currently worth about 130 Taka in 2001 it was worth about 70 Taka.

aware of this and he lost Tk. 21,000 worth of goods. Then in 1990 their first daughter was married. The total cost of the wedding was Tk. 28,000. This included a dowry of Tk. 14,000 in cash and gold. The money was raised from loans, mortgaging land, gifts and sale of assets (a cow and 8 pieces of roofing iron). Amit knew that the cost would cripple him but he realised that if he didn't make this investment his daughter would not be able to marry. In 1994 Amit became ill and needed to have a liver stone operation. He sold 4 *kata* of land (worth Tk. 6000) and his *matobar* helped raise the remaining money in the community with a collection. Without this help he said he would have died. In 1997 his second daughter was married at a total cost of Tk. 28,000. To raise this money a cow was sold, two NGO loans were taken out and Tk. 5000 was received in gifts.

At the time of the interview (2001) he had one unmarried daughter remaining at home. His son was working as a helper of a goldsmith but he wasn't paid while he is learning the trade. Amit and his wife earned about Tk. 1700 per month from agriculture (3 *kata*), conducting *puja*, and making small items. As a Brahmin he performs *puja* and is respected among the Hindu community. However outside this small and relatively powerless community he does not have wide influence or power-resources to draw from.

Jasmin is a Muslim woman who was 43 at the time of the interview in 2001. She lived with her 61-year-old mother who suffered from a bad heart, chest pain, had broken the femur in her leg, and also had failing eyesight. Jasmin was married at the age of 14 in 1972 when her parents paid Tk 5000 for her dowry. In the following year Jasmin's father died and in 1975 her husband divorced her. By 1978 she had raised Tk. 4000 for dowry and married again and in 1980 gave birth to a daughter, but in 1984 was divorced again. She managed to arrange for her daughter, Roshida, to be married in 1996, but Roshida was murdered by her new husband shortly after she was married. Because she was in such a vulnerable position in the village, Jasmin chose to align herself with a faction in the village associated with one of the main political parties. This alignment helped her to secure work in a local rice mill where she earns about Tk. 300 per month. She also worked winding thread for local handloom businesses.

Apart from being poorly remunerated for her labour there were downsides to her (adverse) incorporation in the political faction in the village. In 1998 she became involved in a court case because neighbours in the rival faction were attempting to take over her land. The land was occupied forcibly by a stronger party and then the necessary legal paperwork corruptly arranged at the land office. She was given moral and some monetary support by the faction to defend her claim to her own land. However in 2000 she was attacked by members of the other faction because she had been supporting her poor neighbour who had taken out a case against their members for raping her daughter. In the attack, Jasmin's head was shaved in order to dishonour her and brand her as a loose woman.

These two life histories highlight how complex social structures create a sorting process which skews the distribution of crisis towards the power-resource poor. Illness was at the forefront of the risk profile and it is easy to understand how certain groups tend to be more exposed to illness than others. The power-resource weak tend to live in less healthy and more hazardous environments. They are more likely to lose vital income when ill. When they become ill their carers, particularly women, pay a high price. Also they are more exposed to accidents and live on and use land which is more flood or erosion prone.

In addition to skewed exposure to crises, when crises hit the power-resource poor they were less able to spread impact widely across their communities or over their life cycles. Some formal insurance policies exist amongst the poor but the uptake of these is low. Informal insurance strategies, such as fostering connections with the powerful, were much more important. However, these channels of coping are usually embedded in relationships of asymmetric reciprocity which resulted in coping which buttresses the power resources of the

strong party and thus reinforced the long-term structural disadvantage of the weak. Also the power-resource poor tended to have more limited relationship networks, especially with influential people.

Once a crisis occurs and insurance resources were deployed (informal and formal) the power-resource poor tended to translate an adverse event into harmful well-being decline. An economic crisis – loss of a job, or medical expenses for a parent – was more likely to cause long term harm than for power-resource rich people. Food intake was reduced and children were withdrawn from school rather than using a less harmful buffer to cope. The impact of one crisis often reduced a person's ability to cope with the next, leading to a trajectory of downward steps.

The life-history approach uncovered types of cumulative decline in a way that remains hidden to many other research methods. A life history approach also allows a different type of analysis to occur. Life cycle patterns can be identified, patterns of complex causation emerge and individual episodes of crisis, coping, and opportunity can be seen within the interrelated and wider context of national, community, and family trajectories. It allows patterns to emerge of diminishing or accumulating resources and socially structured behaviour. These patterns point the researcher towards the underlying social phenomena of structural violence and the informal social-protection system.

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### ***Pathology of Power: Caste and Capabilities***

**S. Venkatesan**

**Oneworld International Foundation, New Delhi<sup>1</sup>**

The broad motivation for writing this note is to bring to light the pathology of power structure in the Indian caste system, its casual relationship with different castes and impact on people's well-being – such as their ability to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have equal access to resources, political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect.

The traditional Indian social structure is highly characterized by a hierarchal caste system. An essential feature of the Indian caste system is the unequal and hierarchical ordering of various powers whether social, economic, cultural, civil, cultural or political. The Brahmins who are placed at the top of caste hierarchy enjoy most power and the Dalits (or Schedule Castes) who are placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy are denied any power. They depend and serve the higher castes. As a result, this seriously impacts on their ability to fulfil the freedoms they value.

The Schedule Castes (or SC) constitute about one fifth of India's population. The deprivation of this social group is associated with historical and continuing unequal power structure (in terms of social, economic and political power) intrinsic to the working of the caste system. The hierarchal and exclusive character of the caste system implies that every caste, except those at the top of caste order, suffers from unequal assignment of powers in some degree. The SCs are excluded from access to any rights except to serve the castes above them.

However, over time, caste-based power structures relating to property rights, employment, education, civic, religious and political rights have been replaced by a more egalitarian legal framework in the Indian constitution. Despite this transformation the unequal power structure to various rights still exists in significant degree. As a result, the SCs continue

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Dalit Studies and the Foundation, see <http://socialjustice.ekduniya.net>

to lack social, economic civil and political freedoms and to face discrimination, isolation and deprivation.

The empirical evidence shows that their capability deprivation with regard to other caste groups is higher. Recent data from Census 2001 shows that the literacy rates for the SCs was as low as 55 percent, compared to a national average of 69 percent. Similarly, the life expectancy estimates for 1998-99 show that at national level, the life expectancy for Dalits was 62 years and 66 for other castes. The infant mortality rate among the SCs was around 83 per thousand live births which was considerably higher than for the other caste (68 per thousand). The percentage of under-nourished children at national level was 54 percent for the SCs, and 44 percent for the non-SCs. An average of 44.15 percent of Dalits households did not have access to health care services, while this figure amounted to 37% for other households. Similarly, in terms of access to property or resources, such as ownership of agricultural land, 56% of Dalits owned less than one acre (of which 47.5% owned less than half acre). Landless and near landless (that is, those owning less than one acre) put together account nearly 70% of the total Dalits in 1991. Dalits have also witnessed an increase of 2.4 per cent in crime (from 26,252 cases against Dalits reported in 2003 to 26,887 cases in 2004).

The power structure curtails the freedom of Dalits to choose to live as they desire. It plays a fundamental role in the perpetuation of their poverty. Assessing the power structure of the caste system is important to understand the dynamics of well-being of Dalits. Power does matter and must be studied systematically in greater detail in order to understand better the ability of people to do or be what they have reason to choose and value.

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### ***Interview with Smitu Kothari: Part II<sup>1</sup>***

In our earlier interview with **Smitu Kothari**, we discussed the definition of social movements, the contributions they have made and the challenges they face. We conclude our discussion with Dr. Kothari in this issue of *Maitreyee*.

*How do social movements contribute to the formation of values?*

Before responding to your question, I would like to remove one misunderstanding that often creeps into discussions on social movements. This is framed by the question: what is the difference between social and political movements? It needs to be clarified here that for me, social movements are intensely and inherently political. As discussed in the first instalment of this interview, they engage with power – whether legitimised by patriarchy or by corporate capital and such engagement is both social and political.

Now to your question. As more of the world comes under the aggressive influence of neo-liberalism, the dominant economic and political systems continue to privilege the materialist side of human beings. The neo-liberal system and its institutions continue to seek to maximize private profit and in the process see value only in what the system can commodify. Nature is equally victimized so a complex ecosystem like a rainforest is only worth its value in tradable timber. The values of caring, of justice, of dignity, of self-restraint in the interests of the common good, are all subordinated to the dominant pursuit of iniquitous economic growth.

In this context, the contribution of social and political movements has been to bring back into the centre of political, cultural and economic reality a deeper engagement with those

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<sup>1</sup> For a biography of Smitu Kothari and the first part of the interview on social movements, see *Maitreyee* 4, February 2006.

aspects of human beings' role on this planet that further social justice and a recognition that we are an integral part of the natural world and what we do to that complexity of systems we do to ourselves. In that sense, values of interdependence, of responsibility, of ethical and moral life, as well as a deeper striving for equity and dignity are integral to an engagement in social movements. For instance, the traditional fishworker's struggles against intensive commercial and corporate fisheries are struggles for life against the maximization of private productivity and profit.

Another set of values are the values of collective action. This is of critical importance since the contemporary world gives increasing primacy to individuals and individual self-fulfilment rather than to collective well-being. Social movements re-engage individuals in collectivities that nurture complex levels of interdependence, in ways where the collective is able to engage in transformative action.

Finally, social movements have also been able to enhance our understanding of deeper spiritual connections between human beings and their past and future and of the need to build a relationship between the spiritual and the just.

*Social movements are often seen as a direct form of democracy in which people directly affected by a decision participate in it. However, political decisions are ultimately made by the elected Legislative Assembly. Is the role of social movements then only limited to 'social protests' or does it announce another age for democracy? Do they urge us toward theoretical innovations or different approaches to theorizing democracy? If so, could you share some ideas on what these might be?*

Social movements contribute both in protesting and providing society with a wider array of creative and innovative ideas for building a sane, dignified and just world. In doing so, both in its 'protest mode' and its 'idealism mode' (both of which are in a creative synergy in most movements), social movements engage with dominant institutions of democracy not only seeking to make them more accountable but also to highlight the serious limitations of these institutions. For instance, social movements have demonstrated that representative governments are extremely limited forms of democracy. In the case of India, the numerous issues at the heart of people's lives and livelihoods which parliaments and state legislatures rarely concern themselves with reflect how a few hundred elected *representatives* cannot *represent* over a billion people.

Further, social movements have shown that those in power are resistant to pursuing a politics of demilitarization, de-nuclearization, justice and ecological sanity as narrow self-interest and other political, religious and economic considerations have side-lined the most critical issues facing life on the planet. The politics of climate change is but one example that reflects the narrowness of dominant political and economic processes.

Therefore, social movements, point to the need to take away power from the centres of power and to create institutions with more decentralized *and direct* forms of democracy. So if you look at the experience of deepening decentralization in states like Kerala, India, to institutionalize decentralization and devolve decision making to village level or social movements around the world to assert self-rule and control over productive economic and natural resource systems or look at growing disillusionment with the capacity of governments to rule in favour of those who have historically been disadvantaged, you see in all of these a deep desire to strengthen a vast creative set of institutions and processes that nurture dissent and direct forms of democracy.

It is also critical to highlight the fact that social movements have contributed to the evolution and enrichment of theory. They have not only played a dialectical role with practice but also a powerful dialectical role with theory and contributed to the transformation of disciplines, to the need to transcend disciplinary boundaries, to the redefinition of democracy,

and in challenges to western institutional forms – from the institutions of representative democracy to the very structures of finance and corporate capital. Movements have shown how dominant power sustains and legitimizes itself and how countervailing power that would nurture more egalitarian, equitable and just social, economic and political systems can be strengthened. They have also highlighted the need for a radical change in personal attitudes and sensibilities that would bring the necessary shifts towards a more just and caring world. They have thus demonstrated in practice alternatives to dominant worldviews, institutions and attitudes.

*Also, really, do social movements mark another age, or historically, is there a continuum or evolution that should check our characterization of social movements as a 'new age' for democracy?*

That's a really good question! There is continuity *and* disjunction. Continuity in the striving for dignity, agency and participation. Discontinuities because everyday forms of resistance and spontaneous revolts and protests are being framed around dramatically new issues. For instance, there is no longer a central focus on seizing the state. The focus is increasingly on democratizing society itself therefore drastically rethinking the role and structure of the state.

*What, in your opinion, have been the most significant challenges that such movements have faced and where have such challenges come from...politically and institutionally, speaking?*

Given the vast range and diversity of social movements, it's very hard to do justice to this question in the space and time that we have. But at a very broad level, one could generalize as follows: In the recent history of social movements, the biggest challenges have come from dominant institutions of power, particularly economic, social and cultural power, as well as institutions of religious power. Challenges also come from deeply held beliefs that people have as they have been informed, socialized and influenced by the dominant myths of economic and political development. At the level of individuals, challenges to social movements come from deep insecurities and personal ambitions and a vested interest in sustaining the status quo. Further, social movements are challenged from within seeking to change internal hierarchies and power equations, personal insecurities, financial and resource limitations.

*The diversity in our world presents a range of alternative proposals to mainstream economic development. Yet, the popular discourse on development seems to be limited to a fairly narrow set of priorities, which are 'globally' endorsed. In such a situation, how can movements within countries challenge development discourses that are geo-politically sanctioned/necessitated?*

One of the things that one must appreciate is that nothing changes in a linear form; there is no action-reaction type of phenomenon. The process of change is an extremely complex political process. Most often it is difficult to predict how a particular issue will appeal to a particular constituency. For instance, let's take the random example of the French Revolution. The mobilization against the monarchy in France did not start off with the realization of the revolutionary potential it had to transform the system they were seeking to change. Nor did the tribal communities who first resisted British colonialism in India realize they were laying the foundation of an anti-colonial movement that would make history.

The important thing is not to look for the results for what you do. This is not to deny the need for validation, which is necessarily sought as part of the struggle's evolution. There is clearly a need for affirming victories. However, struggles are not for winning or losing. Struggles are inspired from strong beliefs to oppose say, environmental destruction or unjust

or iniquitous development. They emerge from a belief that your cause is a just cause, that the awakening of your conscience needs to be channelled to strive for change. How and when it will resonate or create the conditions for transformation are hard to predict.

Consider the case of Bolivia where the majority indigenous people have been ruled by an authoritarian minority. For decades now, the majority's struggles for democracy and justice had met with repression and state violence. Even just ten years ago, many individuals in the movement, some of whom I've know personally, felt deeply frustrated because decades of struggle had yielded few gains and changes in the nature of the dominant system. The important thing, however, is that they persisted and as we've all recently seen and heard, they now have their first indigenous President. Victory is a struggle that has just started. There is no dearth of powerful people inside and outside Bolivia who would like to see their new President fail; there are numerous vested interests that will try to and therein lays the need for sustained struggle and eternal vigilance.

*Would you have some insights to share with younger scholars who seek to combine scholarship with activism?*

First thing: A good scholar must also be a good activist and vice-versa. It is a false dichotomy. This is not to say that diligent, engaged research is illegitimate if it is not combined with action; it is extremely necessary. But it is critically important for scholars across the academic spectrum to be self-critical about whether scholarship is legitimizing unjust, iniquitous and ecological disastrous systems, or is it affirming greater ecological sanity, equity and dignity.

Unfortunately an overwhelming majority of research is oriented to protecting the status quo. Therefore it is critically important to nurture the dissenting imagination and spirit and strive to better understand the structures of injustice and to engage the human consciousness and conscience to make this planet a more humane and just place. The younger generation has a historical role to play in whether they will legitimize the structures of injustice or will they contribute to a better world.

Social movements are the crucibles of experimentation and change. Therefore, it is critically important for scholar-activists or activist-scholars to relate with, learn from and inspire movements.

*With this we conclude our interviews with Smitu Kothari.*

## **Announcement**

### **2007 HDCA Conference**

#### ***Ideas Change History***

**16-20 September**

**The New School, New York City –  
a university born of dissent and democracy (<http://newschool.edu/history.html>)**

*'The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else.'* (Keynes)

This conference will be an opportunity to reflect on the future challenges of spreading the idea of human development and capability and thus to the mission of the HDCA.

The conference will address such questions as: (i) the role of actors and institutions that carry ideas into government policy and influence change such as the political parties, schools and universities, civil society groups; (ii) democracy and social movements; (iii) the role of the media; (iv) history of economic thought and current trends in the economics in universities and government policy; (v) capability approach as a framework for economic policy; and (vi) intellectual freedom in academic institutions.

The conference program will also include the broad themes of Human Development and Capability, including: (i) measurement methods; (ii) conceptual and theoretical issues; (iii) policy applications as they relate to the broad range of basic concerns including poverty and inequality, democracy and public action, freedom, justice, human rights, and the challenges of globalization.

Conference Director: Sakiko Fukuda-Parr (([fukudaps@newschool.edu](mailto:fukudaps@newschool.edu)))