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# The Seductive Force of 'Noumenal Power': A New Path (or Impasse) for Critical Theory?

*Simon Susen*

## Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to examine Rainer Forst's account of noumenal power<sup>1</sup>. Forst's proposal for a revised critical theory of power<sup>2</sup> is firmly embedded in his philosophical understanding of the right to justification<sup>3</sup>. Whereas the latter has been extensively discussed in the secondary literature, the former has – with the exception of various exchanges that have taken place between Forst and his critics at academic conferences – received little attention. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap in the literature. Given the increasing influence of Forst's scholarly writings on paradigmatic developments in contemporary critical theory, it is imperative to scrutinize the key assumptions underlying his conception of noumenal power and to assess its usefulness for overcoming the shortcomings of alternative explanatory frameworks. In order to accomplish this, the analysis is divided into four parts. The first part provides some introductory *definitional* reflections on the concept of power. The second part focuses on several *dichotomous* meanings attached to the concept of power – notably, 'soft power' vs. 'hard power', 'power to' vs. 'power over', and 'power for' vs. 'power against'. The third part elucidates the principal features of Forst's interpretation of 'noumenal power', in addition to drawing attention to his typological distinction between 'power', 'rule', 'domination', and 'violence'. The final part offers an *assessment* of Forst's account of noumenal power, arguing that, although it succeeds in avoiding the drawbacks of rival approaches, it suffers from significant limitations. The paper concludes by giving a synopsis of the vital *insights* that can be obtained from the preceding inquiry.

## I. The concept of power

Power is a highly controversial concept, which has been, and continues to be, given numerous different meanings in both academic and non-academic discourses. Notwithstanding the question of whether or not one shares Forst's view that the meaning of this important concept is rarely made explicit, especially in the context of normative discussions<sup>4</sup>, a cursory survey of the relevant literature suffices to illustrate that the term 'power' remains an essentially contested<sup>5</sup> category in social and political thought. In a general sense, it refers to an actor's ability to do something in one way or another. In German, the noun *Macht* ('power'), which is semantically related to the verb *machen* ('to make or to do'), expresses this basic meaning of the concept of power. In Latin languages, the emphasis is placed on 'capacity' to describe 'power': in French, *pouvoir*; in Italian, *potere*; in Spanish, *poder*. These terms suggest that access to 'power' requires the capacity to do something and/or to act upon the world in a particular way.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, it would be erroneous to assume that a power relation is necessarily a relation of subordination and domination<sup>7</sup>, since such a fatalistic perspective would make it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of the exercise of power<sup>8</sup>. Notwithstanding the question of whether one wishes to make a case for the essentially *noumenal* nature<sup>9</sup> of power or seeks to characterize the fundamental constitution of power in an alternative way, it is crucial not to reduce *all* modes of exercising power to their negative, repressive, or oppressive variants. For such a one-sided approach draws attention away from those kinds of power that lead to, or presuppose, both genuine and legitimate processes of human empowerment. The objective of the next sections is to contribute to a sociologically insightful, comprehensive, and non-reductive understanding of power.

## II. Dichotomies of power

It is striking that, within both classical and contemporary currents of social and political thought, it is common to attach numerous *dichotomous* meanings to the concept of power. This tendency appears to suggest that it is possible to distinguish fundamental types of power in binary terms. In this respect, the following conceptual oppositions are especially

important: (1) 'soft power' vs. 'hard power', (2) 'power to' vs. 'power over', and (3) 'power for' vs. 'power against'.

(1) There is the distinction between 'soft power' and 'hard power'. The former is soft in the sense that it refers to *symbolic* forms of power. These may be articulated conceptually, linguistically, discursively, and/or ideologically. The latter is 'hard' in the sense that it concerns *material* forms of power. These may be observed and measured empirically, insofar as they constitute tangible components of social reality. Soft power, as a constructivist may suggest, is about the representational world; it is made of symbolic forms – such as conceptual, linguistic, discursive, and/or ideological imaginaries. By contrast, '[r]eal and hard power, a 'realist' might say, is about the empirical world, it is made of material stuff, like political positions, monetary means or, ultimately, military instruments of force<sup>10</sup>. In short, the former is aimed at *persuasion*, whereas the latter asserts its influence by virtue of *coercion*.

(2) There is the distinction between 'power to' and 'power over'. The former designates an entity's capacity to do something and/or to act upon the world in a particular way. In this sense, it may be described as a *productive* form of power. The latter captures an entity's capacity to exercise influence, or even control, over something or somebody in a particular way and to a specific extent. In this sense, it may be interpreted as a *coercive* form of power. Power to is essential to social order, and indeed to human life, insofar as subjects need to be able to act upon the world, in order to shape it according to their individual and collective interests, needs, desires, beliefs, and/or convictions. Actors cannot construct the symbolic and the material elements of their reality unless they possess a certain degree of power *to do* so. The purposive, cooperative, and creative potential of human entities would be useless without their capacity to exercise at least a minimal amount of power to when relating to, attaching meaning to, and acting upon the world.

Power over is crucial to the stratification of behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns of existence that emerge within social order in particular and within human life in general, illustrating that subjects have to be able to influence one another, in order to shape each other's interests, needs, desires, beliefs, and/or convictions. Actors cannot construct the symbolic and the material elements of their reality unless they exercise a certain degree of power *over* one another. Peoples ability to have an impact upon the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of their existence is inconceivable without their capacity to exercise at least a minimal amount of power over the physical, social, and personal facets of their lifeworlds.

- Power to can be defined as *the capacity of A to think or to do something in accordance with A's – consciously or unconsciously pursued – interests, needs, desires, beliefs, and/ or convictions.*
- Power over can be defined as *the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*<sup>11</sup>.

In relation to both the former and the latter, it is important to recognize that something may be thought or done *for (and by using) good or bad reasons*<sup>12</sup> - that is, the *validity* of the grounds on which something is conceptually or empirically performed is, at least in principle, *contestable*. With respect to both the former and the latter, it is, furthermore, vital to acknowledge that both A and B may end up thinking or doing something *'for the sake of or contrary to'*<sup>13</sup> A's and/or B's interests. In brief, both the cogency of the *reasons* behind and the role of the *interests* underlying human thoughts and actions are not necessarily straightforward, let alone transparent.

(3) There is the distinction between *'power for'* and *'power against'*. The former stands for power as the *assertion* of something or somebody. The latter refers to power as the *rejection* of something or somebody. The dialectics of power for and power against - which may be conceived of in terms of the relationship between power and counter-power<sup>14</sup> or, if one prefers, power and anti-power<sup>15</sup> - lies at the heart of behavioural, ideological, and institutional struggles between asymmetrically positioned actors in stratified societies. Indeed, the conflict between experiences of empowerment and experiences of disempowerment is embedded in the friction between mechanisms of domination and processes of emancipation, which appears to permeate all stratified small-scale and large-scale societal formations.<sup>16</sup>

It would be mistaken, however, to establish a normative hierarchy between power for and power against. Just as both of them can involve experiences of empowerment and processes of emancipation, both of them can entail experiences of disempowerment and mechanisms of domination. Still, the dialectics of power for and power against indicates that the deep *ambivalence* of the human condition is an object of permanent struggle *for* and *against* specific constellations of power. One of the most obvious, and historically most tangible, examples of this ambivalence is the tension-laden constitution of modernity.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, there is a *dark* modernity: its *repressive* facets cannot be dissociated from the socio-historical preponderance of *instrumental* reason. On the other hand, there is a *bright* modernity: its *emancipatory* aspects have been brought about, as well as grasped, by the discursive force of *critical* reason.<sup>18</sup> The former are intimately associated with variations of control – such as power, authority, order, discipline, obedience, enclosure, and heteronomy –

and materialize themselves in social processes of domination, regulation, exploitation, alienation, fragmentation, exclusion, and discrimination<sup>19</sup>. The latter are expressed in Enlightenment ideals – such as progress, tolerance, liberty, equality, solidarity, dignity, sovereignty, and autonomy – and manifest themselves in social processes of liberation, self-determination, and unification<sup>20</sup>. Irrespective of the kind of objectives that individual and collective actors may, or may not, pursue in particular contexts, their daily efforts to gain access to material and symbolic resources are entangled in struggles for and against constellations of power.

### **III. Noumenal power**

This section proposes to elucidate the principal features of Forst's account of *noumenal power*. In the relevant literature, one is confronted with a large variety of approaches to power: Hobbesian, Lockean, Rousseauian, Marxian, Durkheimian, Weberian, Arendtian, Schmittian, Foucauldian, Bourdieusian, Habermasian, Honnethian, Fraserian, and Butlerian approaches - to mention only a few. The term power is a contestable concept, to which different meanings can be ascribed, depending on the theoretical perspective one may wish to defend. We should concede at the outset that no definition of power is available that avoids essential contestation<sup>21</sup>, even if Forst harbours the hope that his own explanatory framework may be an exception in this respect.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, it is worth considering Forst's proposal for a critical theory of noumenal power in detail. In essence, his conceptual outline is based on several key assumptions, which shall be examined in subsequent sections.

#### **1. Cognitivism**

Power cannot be understood without taking into account the *cognitive* structures and processes by which it is sustained. In order to shed light on the underlying factors shaping the power of power exercised by human actors, it is imperative to grasp what goes on *in the heads* of those who are subjected to its power or who have freed themselves from it<sup>23</sup>. Noumenal power is firmly embedded in spheres of cognition – that is, in realms of reflection and intention. This is not to suggest, however, that noumenal power constitutes a separate form of power alongside threats of force<sup>24</sup>. Rather, this is to affirm that it is the very core of such threats as exercises of power<sup>25</sup>. Put differently, all human forms of power can be characterized as noumenal to the extent that they cannot be dissociated from the mental configurations and activities that

produce, reproduce, and – potentially – transform them. In order to comprehend 'how an exercise of power moves persons'<sup>26</sup>, we need to provide 'a *cognitive* account of power that is neutral with regard to its positive or negative evaluation'<sup>27</sup>. Such a noumenal approach conceives of power as *the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*<sup>28</sup>. According to this definition, the cognitive (to think) and the performative (to do) dimensions of social existence are fundamental to the exercise of power. In a world constructed by subjects capable of self-justification, there is no exercise of power through particular actions without the motivational influence exerted by structures and processes of cognition.

## **2. Rationalism**

Power, as it unfolds within and exerts its influence upon the social world, cannot be divorced from the civilizational force of *reason*. Indeed, *to have and to exercise power means to be able – in different degrees – to influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others*<sup>29</sup>. Even if – and, on some occasions, especially when – it may not be immediately obvious that, and how, the exercise of *power* is inextricably linked to shaping, instrumentalizing, governing, colonizing, or even isolating the space of *reasons*, the former is unthinkable without the omnipresence of the latter. There is no human performativity without its permeation by human rationality, and vice versa. The intertwinement of power and reason is especially apparent in the unfolding of human practices that are – consciously or unconsciously – driven by ideological patterns of motivation. For instance, '[r]eligion [...] is a very powerful motivating force in many societies and for many people'<sup>30</sup>; although radical secularists may argue that religious beliefs are largely or completely *irrational*, those who are motivated by faith invoke *reasons* when justifying their actions and/or those of their fellow devotees. Just as human performativity and human rationality are intimately interrelated, so are human practices and human interests: reasons explain beliefs, and beliefs explain interests and actions<sup>31</sup>.

From a noumenal perspective, then, there is no doubt that the deeper one digs, the more one needs to inquire into peoples *reasons*<sup>32</sup>. The realm of reasoning – expressed in the species-constitutive capacity of justifying one's actions – constitutes a foundational sphere of the anthropological condition. For human beings, it represents the basic level of explanation of



their actions as *their* actions - as what they see as justified<sup>33</sup>. The historic transition from *Mund* (mouth) to *Mündigkeit* (maturity)<sup>34</sup> took place, and continues to take place, to the degree that human subjects acquired, and continue to acquire, the capacity – literally – to speak on their own behalf, as rational – and, therefore, responsible and accountable – entities able to provide reasons for, and to attach justifiable motives to, their actions. *Justifications are basic*, not interests or desires<sup>35</sup>, because human practices - including the exercise of power – are embedded in the daily exercise of *reason-guided* action.

### **3. Recognitivism**

There is no exercise of power without dynamics of *recognition*. Put differently, power relations are recognitive relations. In contrast to the exercise of physical force or violence, power rests on recognition.<sup>36</sup> For its existence needs to be implicitly or explicitly confirmed by both those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised, in order to exert any kind of influence at all. Even – or, perhaps, especially – in situations in which the exercise of power is reduced to mere physical force or violence, the attempt to reduce human subjects to sheer objects, deprived of their sense of autonomy and agency, cannot isolate them from the noumenal-social contexts<sup>37</sup> in which they are immersed. Indeed, within the human world, an exercise of physical force is meant to have a *noumenal effect*<sup>38</sup> on those exposed to it. As such, it may be aimed at robbing actors of their dignity. Even if and when it is intended to accomplish this, however, it implicitly *recognizes* their very humanity.

### **4. Justificationism**

Given its meaning-laden constitution, there is always an implicit or explicit *reason* behind the exercise of noumenal power. The exercise and effects of power are based on the recognition of a reason – or better, and more often, of various reasons – to act differently than one would have acted without that reason.<sup>39</sup> Subjects, when exercising a particular form of power, need to be motivated by a 'good enough' reason to act<sup>40</sup> and do so by virtue of implicit or explicit *justifications*. In fact, '[p]ower rests on recognized, accepted justifications<sup>41</sup>. Irrespective of the question of whether – from an external point of view – their justifications may be regarded as 'good' or 'bad', 'convincing' or 'unconvincing', 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate', they are vital to the exercise, as well as to the efficiency, of power. From a noumenal perspective, power exists only when there is such

acceptance<sup>42</sup> of presuppositions, whose validity needs to be projected onto interactional situations, in order for them to acquire legitimacy and to provide culturally codified spheres suitable for the unfolding of human agency.

## **5. Pluralism**

When navigating their way through the matrix of social life, actors are confronted with a *spectrum* of kinds of acceptance<sup>43</sup>. These range from those founded on critical reflection and personal conviction, those motivated by sheer opportunism and complicity, to those based on arbitrary authority and forceful imposition. Notwithstanding the normative defensibility of implicit or explicit patterns of justification, the noumenal constitution of the social world implies that all human forms of power, in order to acquire a noticeable degree of empirical significance, require being validated through *variegated* processes of recognition.

The heterogeneous constitution of social life manifests itself in the pluralist configuration of justifications. Different interactional realms generate, and are in turn generated by, different spaces of justifications<sup>44</sup>. The objective, normative, and subjective presuppositions underlying specific patterns of justification diverge across spatiotemporally contingent contexts. A comprehensive analysis (and critique) of power must reconstruct these *different modes* and their *possible combinations* in a given social situation<sup>45</sup>, in order to account for the fact that subjects capable of action and self-justification can be motivated by *various* reasons<sup>46</sup> when exercising, or responding to, particular modes of noumenal power. In short, noumenal types of power are no less pluralized than the life forms within which, and in relation to which, they operate.

## **6. Motivationism**

Power – as it is exercised within, and exerts its impact upon, the human world – needs to be understood in *motivational* terms. Regardless of their specific – for instance, intuitive or discursive, practical or theoretical, instrumental or value-rational, pragmatic or ideological, internal or external – grounds of motivation, actors have to be *driven* in one way or another in order to exercise power. Crucially, however, power may not only be shaped by the motivations of the actor exercising it, but also be aimed at influencing the motivations of other individual or collective actors. The difference between these two options is expressed in the aforementioned distinction between power to and power over: the former designates the capacity of A to think or to do something in accordance with As

- consciously or unconsciously pursued - interests, needs, desires, beliefs, and/or convictions; the latter refers to the capacity of A to *motivate* B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done<sup>47</sup>.

## **7. Performativism**

Power is inconceivable without the *performative* structures and processes by which it is supported. In order to shed light on the underlying factors shaping the power of power exercised by human actors, it is essential to comprehend what actors *do* by virtue of power, as well as what they *fail to do* due to their (relative or absolute) lack of access to power.<sup>48</sup> Noumenal power is located in spheres of action – that is, in realms of practices, performances, and enactments. Thus, power to<sup>49</sup> concerns the capacity to do something, whereas power over<sup>50</sup> relates to the capacity to do something to somebody else by exercising a certain degree of control over their thought and/or behaviour. Owing to the noumenal constitution of power, the German word *Macht* is usually employed to describe a power relation exercised over human subjects, rather than over nonhuman forms of existence. The fact that *Macht* is exerted exclusively over human, rather than nonhuman, entities is indicative of the noumenal constitution of power in the social world: the human exercise of 'power over' (*Macht*) is conceivable only as a distinctly human performance (*machen*) in relation to human performers (*Macher*).

## **8. Consequentialism**

The exercise of power would be pointless if the consequences triggered by it were irrelevant. As stated above, *to have and to exercise power means to be able – in different degrees – to influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others*<sup>51</sup>. Unless it succeeds in being 'socially effective'<sup>52</sup>, the exercise of power is futile. If subjects exerting both particular types and particular degrees of power were not concerned with the consequences of their actions, their performances would remain largely irrelevant – not only to themselves, but also to their natural and social environments. Hence, to recognize that the phenomenon of power is noumenal in nature<sup>53</sup> is to acknowledge that the social world is a conglomerate of both things in themselves (*Dinge an sich*) and things for themselves (*Dinge für sich*) – that is, of forms of being that are objectively present, normatively assembled, and subjectively grasped. Power constitutes a consequentialist category in the sense that it *impacts* upon the physical, social, and personal dimensions of our existence as well

as, more importantly, upon the ways in which we engage, or fail to engage, with them.<sup>54</sup> There would be no point in exercising power if it bore no relation to the objective, normative, and subjective construction of reality.

## **9. Normativism**

Noumenal power constitutes a *normative* force. As such, it is always open to questioning, competition, and struggle. Therefore, any analysis of noumenal power has to accept ambivalence and contestation; it can never be final and completely objective<sup>55</sup>. Revealing its normative constitution, noumenal power is enmeshed in social relations whose participants – since they are equipped with critical, reflexive, and moral capacities – possess a *sense of justice*.<sup>56</sup> Put differently, noumenal power is exercised by, as well as exerted upon, actors who constantly produce, reproduce, and transform *normative orders*.<sup>57</sup> Behavioural, ideological, and institutional patterns of functioning are inconceivable without their validation by means of noumenal power within realms of normativity, which provide the presuppositional parameters for generating sustainable degrees of social legitimacy. In fact, the *first demand of justice* of those subjected to a normative order<sup>58</sup> is to have *standing as equal normative authorities* within such an order<sup>59</sup>. Both the exercise of and the exposure to noumenal power are symptomatic of human subjects' need to define - and, if required, to redefine – the place they occupy within normative orders. They are able to act upon this need, however, only to the degree that their right to justification<sup>60</sup> is implicitly or explicitly recognized. Ideally, all those who are subjected to a normative order should be its co-authors as equal participants and normative authorities in adequate justificatory practices that critically reflect on and constitute that order<sup>61</sup>.

Every normative order is constructed, and potentially reconstructed, by actors with normative powers<sup>62</sup>. These powers emanate from peoples' critical, reflexive, and moral capacities, by means of which they can attach meaning to, make judgements about, and position themselves in relation to *social arrangements* by either confirming or undermining their legitimacy. Every social order in general, and every social subsystem in particular, is based on a certain understanding of its purpose, aims, and rules – in short, it is a normative order as an *order of justification*.<sup>63</sup> Notwithstanding the typological specificity of the social realm one may wish to examine, each of them possesses not only its own mode of functioning but also its own order of justification. Consider, for instance, the following social realms: the economic

realm, the political realm, the cultural realm, the artistic realm, the religious realm, the scientific realm, the technological realm, or the military realm – to mention only a few. In each of these social realms, subjects justify their actions in different ways, but they do so by referring (implicitly or explicitly) to the underlying grammar of the normative order in which they find themselves immersed. It is possible to characterize a normative order as democratically ruled<sup>64</sup> to the extent that those who build it are the normative authorities who co-determine this order through democratic justification procedures<sup>65</sup> – that is, through the rule of reciprocally and generally justifiable reasons<sup>66</sup> invoked by those able and willing to articulate – and, if necessary, to defend – them. Given every human actor's ineluctable situatedness within normative orders, there are no forms of noumenal power capable of bypassing the foundational status of justificatory processes.

## **10. Contextualism**

Noumenal power cannot be exercised in isolation from noumenal-social contexts<sup>67</sup>. As such, it is not a free-floating force, abstracted from spatiotemporally contingent settings. Rather, it is always *situated* in space and time – that is, in relationally configured sets of circumstances encountered, as well as shaped, by human actors. Noumenal power may emerge in a variety of contexts: in the context of a *single event*<sup>68</sup>, such as a performative act carried out by a charismatic figure; in the context [...] of a *sequence of events*<sup>69</sup>, such as a succession of small-scale or large-scale happenings changing the course of history; or, in the context of a general *social situation or structure*<sup>70</sup>, forming the intersectionally constituted background to interactions taking place between different subjects. In a broad sense, every type of noumenal power is embedded in an *objective* context of physical states of affairs, in a *normative* context of cultural conventions and arrangements, as well as in a *subjective* context of personal feelings, thoughts, and perceptions.<sup>71</sup> In short, there is no noumenal power without a particular context, or sets of contexts, in which it is located and to which both those exercising it and those exposed to it make implicit or explicit reference when engaging in social interaction.

## **11. Coherentism**

Noumenal power, in order for it to be effective, requires a minimal degree of *coherence*. In essence, this is due to its embeddedness in different forms of order – notably, *social orders*<sup>72</sup>, *normative orders*<sup>73</sup>, *orders of justification*<sup>74</sup>, *orders of action*<sup>75</sup>,

*political orders*<sup>76</sup>, and – finally yet importantly – *orders of power*<sup>77</sup>. Inevitably, both the exercise of and the exposure to noumenal power take place within different kinds of order. In fact, its attachment to socio-ontologically contingent variants of order reveals its multifaceted constitution: noumenal power is *simultaneously* a social, normative, justificatory, performative, political, and potent manifestation of symbolically mediated modes of existence. Its situatedness within a range of orders is indicative of the grammatical organization of power.

## **12. Discursivism**

Noumenal power is articulated through different *discourses*. As such, it is exercised through the construction of different narratives – notably, *narratives of justification*.<sup>78</sup> It is not simply because human beings are storytelling animals but, rather, because they need to provide rationally defensible justifications for their actions that the narratives they attach to their experiences are crucial to their exercise of, as well as exposure to, noumenal power. In the light of such narratives, social relations and institutions and certain ways of thinking and acting appear as justified and legitimate [...].<sup>79</sup> In this respect, the primary question is not whether these narratives stand up to scrutiny, when dissecting their epistemic claims to *universal* validity, but, rather, whether they permit those who implicitly or explicitly endorse them to justify their thoughts and actions in relation to the *particular* sets of circumstances in which they find themselves situated. Put differently, narratives of justification constitute discursive frameworks that attribute coherence, cogency, and legitimacy to behavioural, ideological, and institutional expressions of both individual and collective modes of agency.

## **13. Foundationalism**

Noumenal power, regardless of its capacity to impose itself upon the course of history, cannot be exercised, let alone experienced, by human subjects without presuming that they possess a *right to justification*.<sup>80</sup> Of course, while this right can be implicitly or explicitly recognized, it can also be covertly or openly misrecognized, undermined, or violated. Yet, all efforts to deny its existence – irrespective of whether they are based on argument or on force – are futile in that, ultimately, they highlight its ubiquity in all realms of human sociality: the very attempt to repudiate the right to justification *presupposes* the right to justification; for such an endeavour can claim to possess objective, normative, or subjective

validity only to the extent that it can purport to be justified. Far from being reducible to a metaphysical fantasy, the *right to justification* of social and political relations between free and equal persons<sup>81</sup> is embedded in communicatively structured lifeworlds, in which all subjects are not only capable of speech and action but also capable of reflection, interpretation, and explanation. Notwithstanding the situational or typological specificities of the numerous ways in which noumenal power may, or may not, operate, it cannot bypass, let alone eliminate, the right to justification enjoyed by those who exercise, and those who are exposed to, it.

#### **14. Structuralism**

An important test of the realism of the theory of noumenal power is whether it can explain *the power of "structures,"* be it general social structures or more particular organizational structures [...].<sup>82</sup> When seeking to shed light on the structural constitution of social life, it is vital to recognize the centrality of four aspects of noumenal power:

- (a) *Grounding:* There is no social order, and indeed no social subsystem, that is not founded on a specific understanding of its purpose, aims, and rules<sup>83</sup>. Every interactional order established between directly or indirectly interrelated subjects constitutes a normative order<sup>84</sup> based on an order of justification<sup>85</sup>. The more differentiated a society becomes, the more diverse the justification narratives on which its order as well as its subsystems are based turn out to be. Far from being sustained by a single grand narrative alone<sup>86</sup>, all social orders and social subsystems are produced, reproduced, and transformed by multiple – coexisting and, on several levels, competing – patterns of justification.
- (b) *Reproduction:* Social structures, in order to be both relatively stable and relatively forceful, need to be accepted on the basis of [...] narratives and justifications<sup>87</sup> by those who draw upon and function within them. Irrespective of their actual or potential limitations and shortcomings, as long as they are perceived as inevitable, or even as natural, they tend to imprint themselves in the minds and bodies of those who consciously or unconsciously reinforce their legitimacy by reproducing them. The normative power of the factual<sup>88</sup> is tantamount to the factual power of the normative, to the extent that '[w]hat goes without saying goes<sup>89</sup>.

- (c) *Influence*: Social structures exert influence over human actors. As long as the noumenal power structure that supports social power relations is still in place<sup>90</sup>, the latter's background solidity is confirmed by the former's interpretive narrativity, thereby maintaining a particular order of action<sup>91</sup> on the basis of a viable degree of implicit or explicit justification. In this regard, a distinction can be drawn between influence and power: the former is not intentionally exercised by persons over others<sup>92</sup>, whereas the latter is meaning- and purpose-laden. Structural influence is nonhuman and nonintentional. Noumenal power, by contrast, is human and intentional. Structures do not 'exercise' power as persons do<sup>93</sup>, whereas persons exercise power in a way that structures fail to do.
- (d) *Resource*: There is no noumenal power without noumenal capital<sup>94</sup>. Within the human world, power is *exercised within* structures<sup>95</sup>. Put differently, there is no human agency without a background of resourceful structurality. To the extent that the essential power of such structures is of a noumenal kind, defining values, norms and rules and social positions, such power structures enable persons with sufficient *noumenal capital* in the appropriate sphere<sup>96</sup> to mobilize their material and symbolic resources to interact with and to act upon the world in a purposive fashion. Within spheres of noumenal power, subjects participate in the construction of reality by positioning themselves in relation to, while being positioned by, others. Thus, social structures can be conceived of as a *resource* to exercise power over others<sup>97</sup> as well as, ultimately, over oneself. Indeed, without the background resources<sup>98</sup> provided by social structures, there is no foreground agency driven by noumenal power.

## 15. Relationalism

Noumenal power is, by definition, a *relational* state of affairs. The relational constitution of noumenal power has several implications.

- (a) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *sociality*. As such, it describes a social relation<sup>99</sup> between directly or indirectly interconnected entities.
- (b) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *agency*. As such, it is based on a relation between agents<sup>100</sup>, whose performances contribute either to its reproduction or to its transformation.



- (c) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *indeterminacy*. As such, it demonstrates that, as long as a relation of power exists, at least one alternative way of acting is open<sup>101</sup> to those involved in its construction.
- (d) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *structurality*. As such, it permeates both symmetrically and asymmetrically organized social arrangements – that is, not only relations of empowerment and emancipation but also relation[s] of subordination and domination<sup>102</sup>.
- (e) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *normativity*. As such, it illustrates the sociological significance of a tension-laden constellation: even when a relation of noumenal power turns into a relation of overwhelming physical facticity<sup>103</sup> and, consequently, the latter's violence is aimed at annihilating the former's normativity, the exchange of justifications<sup>104</sup> remains the only way in which reason-giving entities can convert critical reflexivity into the motivational cornerstone of the symbolically mediated interactions shaping the development of society.
- (f) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *rationality*. As such, it exerts its influence upon the world through the space of reasons within which social or political relations are being framed – relations which form a structured, durable, and stable social order of action and justification<sup>105</sup> and relations without which there would be no possibility of hermeneutically guided self-realization.
- (g) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *validity*. As such, its longevity depends on its ability to obtain sustainable levels of discursive acceptability. Indeed, '[i]n cases of unjustifiable asymmetrical social relations which rest on a closing off of the space of justifications such that these relations appear as legitimate, natural, God-given, or in any way unalterable and leave hardly any alternative for those who are subjected, we encounter forms of *domination*<sup>106</sup>. Noumenal power - even when it is misrepresented by the veil of total legality, infallibility, transcendentalism, or inalterability – can never obliterate the need for discursive acceptability pervading all spaces of justifications, whose legitimacy hinges upon rationally defensible validity.
- (h) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *justification*. As such, its existence is indicative of the fact that '[r]elations and orders of power are relations and orders of justification<sup>107</sup>. Behavioural, ideological, and institutional

patterns of functioning are supported by narratives of justification<sup>108</sup>, for the former's quest for legitimacy would be unsustainable without the latter's claims to validity. All [...] forms of being moved by justifications are 'noumenal' in the relevant sense insofar as they involve a certain relation in the space of justifications.<sup>109</sup> Both the justificatory quality of reasons<sup>110</sup> and the rational quality of justifications are preconditions for the noumenal quality of social relations.

- (i) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *reality*. As such, it lies at the core of the empirical constitution of human existence. A noumenal account of power relations is more 'realistic' than theories which locate power in material or physical means<sup>111</sup>, to the extent that the former uncovers the parasitical nature of the latter: in the human world, the exercise of merely material or physical force is derived from intentions and motivations, which, in order to reach at least a minimal degree of legitimacy, require rationally defensible justifications. Even extreme forms of violence cannot eliminate the forceless force of justification based on the better argument.
- (j) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *resources*. As such, it is inconceivable without access to noumenal capital<sup>112</sup>. Subjects occupying different positions in society need to be equipped with different dispositions, permitting them to mobilize their material and symbolic resources in order to engage in processes of interaction, deliberation, and justification.
- (k) Noumenal power constitutes a relation of *humanity*. As such, it defies systemic tendencies towards transforming social relations into relations between things<sup>113</sup>. Commodification processes, following the profit-maximizing logic of the market, as well as bureaucratization processes, following the administrative logic of the state, can convert subjects into objects and, consequently, social relations into reified relations. The most profound colonization of communicatively structured lifeworlds by instrumentally driven systems, however, cannot do away with the nominal power exercised by subjects capable of both action *and* self-justification.

## **A typology of power**

In order to avoid advocating a reductive conception of the noumenal constitution of social life, we may distinguish four types of power:

- (a) *Power*: The concept of 'power' can be defined as the capacity of A to *influence the space of reasons* for B and/or C (etc.) such that they think and act in ways they would not have done without the interference by A<sup>114</sup>. Crucial, in this respect, is the presupposition that the move by A must have a *motivating force* for B and/or C (etc.) that corresponds to A's *intentions* and is not just a side effect (i.e., a form of influence)<sup>115</sup>. In other words, power is not reducible to a force that makes individual or collective actors behave and/or think in one way or another. Rather, it stands for a subject's capacity to ensure that its *purpose* - based on specific goals or targets - is the impetus behind the processes of action and/or cognition performed by *another* individual or collective subject.
- (b) *Rule*: The concept of rule refers to a form of power where the powerholder does not only use his or her capacity to decisively influence the space of justifications for others, but where certain *comprehensive* (religious, metaphysical, historical, or moral) *justifications* (and usually a mixture thereof) *determine the space of reasons within which social or political relations are being framed* - relations which form a structured, durable, and stable social order of action and justification<sup>116</sup>. Irrespective of the question of whether a particular form of rule is based on good or bad justifications, it provides the normative framework in which human actions and interactions take place. Rule, then, constitutes the *regulatory umbrella* of social life. The behavioural, ideological, and institutional modes of functioning prevalent in different spheres of society are governed by different types of rule: political rule, cultural rule, educational rule, economic rule, judicial rule, religious rule, or scientific rule - to mention only a few. There is no society without context-specific sets of rules.
- (c) *Domination*: The concept of domination designates an *asymmetrically structured power relation* that hinges upon *a closing off of the space of justifications* such that these relations appear as legitimate, natural, God-given, or in any way unalterable and leave hardly any alternative for those who are subjected<sup>117</sup>. Different modes of domination are sustained by different forms of hegemonic justification, designed to reinforce the notion that there is no viable alternative to the existing state of affairs.

There are numerous means by which the realm of reasons<sup>118</sup> can be sealed off, if only temporarily, three of which are particularly common: in the first scenario, domination may be accepted because of the persuasive influence of the *dominant ideology*; in the second scenario, domination may be accepted because active and explicit opposition to it may trigger tangible variants of *repression*; in the third scenario, we may be confronted with a *combination* of the previous two options. All forms of political domination, however, imply (i) the rule by unjustifiable norms<sup>119</sup> as well as (ii) the lack of democratic procedures and structures, by virtue of which the normative parameters underlying a specific ensemble of social arrangements can be discussed, called into question, revised, and – if necessary – replaced by an alternative.

- (d) *Violence*: The concept of violence describes a power relation in which the exchange of justifications is denied entirely and the space of reasons is supplanted by means of *sheer physical force*<sup>120</sup>. Any situation to which this applies presupposes that a relation of noumenal power<sup>121</sup>, characterized by the constant negotiation of normativity, is converted into a relation of overwhelming physical facticity<sup>122</sup>, marked by the imposition of illegitimate legitimacy. Under such extreme circumstances, subjects are degraded to mere objects, implying that, rather than being recognized as fully-fledged members of humanity, they are deprived of their sense of, and access to, self-realized and self-realizing agency. At that moment, power as a normative force moving an even minimally free agent fades away [...].<sup>123</sup> In such a constellation of reifying desubjectivization, the noumenal power of reason is shattered by the arbitrary force of violence. Power is a way of binding others through reasons; it breaks down when the other is treated as a mere 'thing' and no longer as an agent of justification whose compliance rests on some form of recognition.<sup>124</sup> As long as there is power in the noumenal sense, there are subjects able and willing to recognize one another as sovereign, yet interdependent, entities.

As illustrated above, power – far from being reducible to a fixed, neat, and clearly defined category – should be examined in terms of a *continuum of social relations*. In the social world, power is a relation between two or more subjects, which manifests itself in different forms and different contexts, while shaping human actions and interactions to different degrees and according to

different parameters, in addition to being governed by different causes and leading to different consequences. The continuum of social relations comprises a spectrum of power relations, which can be schematized on four principal levels:

- (a) the exercise of *power as 'power'*, based on a subjects capacity to influence other subjects by influencing the space of reasons;
- (b) the exercise of *power as 'rule'*, based on a subjects capacity to set the agenda within particular spaces of reasons by ensuring some comprehensive justificatory frameworks prevail over others;
- (c) the exercise of *power as 'domination'*, based on a subjects capacity to close off the space of justifications by virtue of a dominant ideology and/or a disciplinary system, guaranteeing the hegemonic position of the ruling forces;
- (d) the exercise of *power (or, to be exact, power beyond power) as 'violence'*, based on a subjects capacity to use mere physical force in order to pursue, and to realize, a specific goal.

Ironically, the last option – that is, the use of violence – ‘lies outside of the realm of power, being instead a reflection of the lack of power<sup>125</sup>, precisely because it suppresses the exchange of justifications between reason-giving subjects. The aforementioned categories are ideal types<sup>126</sup>, in the sense that, in practice, the exercise of power usually falls somewhere in between<sup>127</sup> and may, in terms of both its causes and its consequences, fit more than one variant.

#### IV. The concept of 'noumenal power': limitations

Having examined its key underlying presuppositions, it is possible to provide a critical assessment of Forst's account of noumenal power. Despite its considerable conceptual depth and explanatory strength, Forst's approach suffers from significant limitations, which shall be examined in subsequent sections. For the sake of clarity, we shall follow the thematic structure of the preceding analysis.

##### a. The concept of power

To begin with, Forst claims that, although the term power is widely used in social and political philosophy, the meaning of this important concept is rarely made explicit, especially in the context of normative discussions<sup>128</sup>. Admittedly, the denotative sense of the word power is often taken for granted by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, it is true that especially those who grapple with, shed light on, and criticize both the causes and the consequences of different types of asymmetrically structured social relations should be able to offer basic definitional, explanatory, and evaluative insights into the concept of power. Given the vast amount of scholarly literature available on the subject<sup>129</sup>, however, it is untenable to affirm that the meaning of this concept is hardly ever made explicit.

At the same time, it is both naïve and deceptive to make a case for a *normatively neutral* notion of power<sup>130</sup> and to contend that we need a cognitive account of power that is *neutral* with regard to its positive or negative evaluation<sup>131</sup>. There is no such thing. It is no less erroneous and short-sighted to maintain that, while the epistemic validity of numerous conceptions of power suffers from being normative and contestable<sup>132</sup>, a better definition is available that *avoids essential contestation*<sup>133</sup>. Again, there is no such thing. It is, at best, ironic or, at worst, baffling that an analysis that sets itself the task of aiming to prepare the way for a *critical* theory of power<sup>134</sup> seeks to do so by giving the misleading impression that such an *intrinsically normative* endeavour can be accomplished by providing a neutral, non-evaluative, and non-contestable approach.

Horkheimer's famous distinction between traditional theory and critical theory<sup>135</sup> is based on the conviction that the latter, unlike the former, recognizes the *intrinsic normativity* of all aspects of social reality, including all conceptual attempts to grasp its inner workings, as expressed in explanatory frameworks

grappling with the nature of power within human societies. More specifically, such a reflection obliges us to draw attention to five fundamental presuppositions underlying the pursuit of a critical epistemology:

First, given that knowledge is always socially embedded, it is necessarily normative (*Erkenntnisnormativität*). Second, since knowledge is always generated from a specific position in the social space, even so-called descriptive knowledge is situation-laden (*Erkenntnisstandpunkt*). Third, to the extent that bodily actors, regardless of whether they are laypersons or experts, take on particular roles in society, knowledge is permeated by the relationally constituted functions fulfilled by those who make use of it in accordance with their contextually defined interests (*Erkenntnisfunktion*). Fourth, considering that cognitive actors are discursively competing entities, the production of knowledge is permeated by scientific power struggles (*Erkenntniskampf*). Fifth, because symbolic and informational resources can be used in various ways and for multiple reasons, the production of knowledge can be instrumentalized for extra-scientific – notably, economic – purposes (*Erkenntnisnutzung*). In short, the positivist quest for objectivity loses credibility when confronted with the relational constitution of epistemic enquiry. The conditions of knowledgeability are impregnated with normativity, positionality, functionality, conflictuality, and instrumentality.<sup>136</sup>

A genuinely critical theory of power needs to face up to its own immersion in normativity, instead of pursuing the illusory goal of reaching an epistemic state of neutrality, capable of permitting its advocates to rise above the structural constraints, and perspectival intricacies, of socially constructed realities.

### ***b. Dichotomies of power***

Undoubtedly, it makes sense to distinguish fundamental types of power in binary terms – notably, on the basis of the aforementioned conceptual oppositions: (1) soft power vs. hard power, (2) power to vs. power over, and (3) power for vs. power against. We need to acknowledge, however, that these dichotomous distinctions have been on the agenda ever since power has been studied (both empirically and theoretically) - above all, in the humanities and social sciences. Arguably, Forst's plea for a critical theory of power - emphasizing its allegedly noumenal nature - fails to add useful, let alone original, insights to recent and ongoing debates on the significance of these conceptual pairs for exploring the variegated functions of different modes of power in the daily construction of social life.

Striking in this context is Forst's distinction between *Herrschaft* and *Beherrschung*, which, although it is relegated to a footnote<sup>137</sup>, illustrates the limited use value of semantic hair-splitting. Surely, the concept of *Herrschaft* (domination) remains central to understanding social power dynamics, which – in all human life forms – are shaped by the interplay between (1) 'soft power' and 'hard power', (2) 'power to' and 'power over', as well as (3) 'power for' and 'power against'. Forst claims that '[i]t is unfortunate that *Herrschaft* - which means rule - is usually translated as 'domination', which corresponds to the German *Beherrschung*<sup>138</sup>. In this respect, however, we need to examine the validity of the assertion that *Herrschaft* means 'rule' and that *Beherrschung* means 'domination'. The noun *Beherrschung* is a concept that is hardly ever used in written, let alone spoken, German. By contrast, the verb *beherrschen* – which Forst does not mention in his account and which means 'to dominate', 'to rule', 'to master', or 'to control' – is commonly employed, not only in academic texts, but also in ordinary language. More importantly, even if Forst's distinction between *Herrschaft* and *Beherrschung* stood up to scrutiny, it would be far from obvious what, if anything, could be gained (theoretically or practically) from differentiating between these two terms. No prominent social or political theorist seriously believes that the exercise of power is *invariably* a matter of domination<sup>139</sup>, let alone that we should discard the possibility that – as indicated by Max Weber<sup>140</sup> – 'legitimate rule is *also* an exercise of power'<sup>141</sup>. On the contrary, not only is the terminological distinction between 'power' and 'domination' (or, in German, between *Macht* and *Herrschaft*) common in contemporary social and political analysis, but, in addition, it continues to be an object of controversy. Indeed, this conceptual separation compels us to reflect upon the interplay between fundamental forms of power – such as (1) 'soft power' and 'hard power', (2) 'power to' and 'power over', as well as (3) 'power for' and 'power against'. Forst's distinction between *Herrschaft* and *Beherrschung*, on the other hand, is of little – if any – use value for the critical study of power.



### **c. Noumenal power**

The obvious question that poses itself in light of the previous analysis is whether or not the concept of *noumenal power* makes sense. Forst appears to suggest that *all* forms of social power are noumenal forms of power. More specifically, he posits that power can be defined as *the capacity of A to motivate B to think or do something that B would otherwise not have thought or done*<sup>142</sup>. It is not evident, however, why we should use the adjective noumenal to describe any form of power that corresponds to the above definition. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

[...] I want to claim that the *real* and *general* phenomenon of power is to be found in the noumenal realm, or better – to avoid misunderstandings about Platonic ideas or a Kantian metaphysics of things in themselves - in the space of reasons, to borrow Sellars's famous phrase, understood as the realm of justifications.<sup>143</sup>

While Forst, explaining the presuppositions that undergird his own approach, spells out what noumenal does *not* mean, he fails to make explicit what it *does* mean and why it should be identified with the realm of justifications. In Kantian philosophy, as is widely acknowledged, a *noumenon* is an object that exists independently of the mind (thing-in-itself [*Ding an sich*]), as opposed to a *phenomenon*, that is, an object that is knowable by the senses through phenomenal attributes. Forst asserts that his own use of the term noumenal is not reducible to the way it is employed in Kantian metaphysics or in Platonic philosophy. It remains unclear, however, what *exactly* he means by noumenal and why he chooses to invoke this term to refer to the realm of justifications.

Another problem emerging in this context concerns the following issue: if *all* forms of social power are noumenal, then – at least in relation to the human world – the term noumenal power is a tautology. For, according to this definition, there is no such thing as a non-noumenal form of social power. What is missing in Forst's account, therefore, is a rigorous conceptual demarcation between the noumenal and the non-noumenal, based on a precise explanation of what these two spheres are supposed to represent and how they are supposed to differ. Forst's attempt to identify the former with the realm of justifications appears to imply that the latter can be conceived of as the realm devoid of justifications, but the reader is left wondering as to whether the difference between these two realms actually exists and, if so, whether the term noumenal, let alone the term noumenal power, should be regarded as

appropriate to shed light on their sociological – that is, ontological, genealogical, and functional – specificities.

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Forst's proposal for a critical theory of noumenal power is based on several key assumptions, which have been elucidated above. The validity of the principal presuppositions underlying Forst's conceptual outline shall be examined in the following sections.

### **1. Cognitivism**

Forst's *cognitivist* conception of power *overestimates* the role of cognition and consciousness in social life; at the same time, it *underestimates* the importance of the body and the unconscious. In the human world, the effective exercise of power is inconceivable without its capacity to shape our corporeal dispositions of perception, appreciation, and action. These tend to be acquired, as well as mobilized, in habitual and intuitive, rather than reflexive and discursive, ways. Both the exercise of and the exposure to power are, primarily, a matter of the unfolding of *bodily dispositions*, rather than of what goes on *in the heads*<sup>144</sup>, of human actors.

Admittedly, Forst seeks to avoid the cognitivist fallacy by conceding that the body should not be seen as a reality beyond justification<sup>145</sup> and that, instead, it should be interpreted as the result of a certain order in the realm of social justifications that makes persons think *and* feel about themselves in a certain way<sup>146</sup>. Despite this concession, however, Forst fails to acknowledge the socio-ontological centrality of the body, let alone the pivotal role played by the unconscious in shaping everyday actions and interactions. Ultimately, Forst's attempt to *cross-fertilize* the (neo-) Foucauldian focus on *bodily normalization processes* and the (neo-) Kantian focus on *cognitive categorization processes* is doomed to failure, because it does not go far enough. Forst's contention that the body is 'normalized' [à la Foucault] only through the adoption of certain categorizations and 'truths' [à la Kant] about its inner self<sup>147</sup> falls short of accounting for the fact that bodily dispositions are largely obtained, and drawn upon, *without* having to rely on noumenal classifications, let alone rational justifications.

## 2. Rationalism

Forst's *rationalist* conception of power places too strong an emphasis on the role of *reason* in the construction of social life. Indeed, it disregards not only the fact that reason is not always the motivational driving force behind human practices, but also the fact that subjects capable of speech and reflection often act in *irrational* ways, even if – and, sometimes, especially if – they exercise, or are exposed to, a specific degree and type of power. In this respect, it may be useful to distinguish between two types of reason: on the one hand, reason as a  *motive* or  *purpose*, implying a particular degree of  *intentionality*; on the other hand, reason as a  *root* or  *source*, implying a particular degree of  *causality*. The former may be conceived of as  *internal*,  *cognitive*, or  *volitional* reason (in German:  *Motiv* or  *Beweggrund*); the latter may be described as  *external*,  *situational*, or  *circumstantial* reason (in German:  *Ursache* or  *Grund*).

Forst tends to suggest that the preponderant force in noumenal power is the former, rather than the latter. Hence, he  *overstates* the significance of reasons based on  *intentionality* and  *understates* the significance of reasons founded on  *causality*. Such a rationalist conception of social life leads to a reductive conception of power, which fails to take into consideration not only the major relevance of non-rational modes of agency to the construction of society, but also the structural constraints affecting the course of history. Granted, the exercise of power is  *partly* reflected in the capacity  *to be able – in different degrees – to influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others*<sup>148</sup>. Yet, it is  *also* - and, often, more crucially - illustrated in one's capacity to act without any obvious, let alone self-regulated, reason. Unless the space of reasons is defined as a realm that includes non-rational, non-intentional, and non-discursive reasons, it constitutes too narrow a category to do justice to both the complexity and the variety of factors that play a decisive role in both the exercise of and the exposure to different forms of power.

## 3. Recognitivism

Forst's *recognitivist* conception of power is based on the Hegelian conviction that there is no exercise of power without the implicit or explicit recognition of power relations. Put differently, all power relations are recognitive relations. Just as it is vital to explore the manifold ways in which the exercise of power is based on processes of recognition, however, it is imperative to examine the numerous ways in which it is shaped by, and may reinforce, processes of *misrecognition*. The fact that, in the social world, processes of recognition and

processes of misrecognition are inextricably interrelated is highlighted by advocates of the 'politics of identity'<sup>149</sup>, the 'politics of difference'<sup>150</sup>, and the 'politics of recognition'<sup>151</sup>. Grammars of social conflict are constantly being defined and redefined not only by *struggles for recognition* but also by *struggles against misrecognition*. A critical theory of power needs to account for the fact that individual and collective actors can be marginalized by the hegemonic forces of society *because* of their identity, *because* they are different from the dominant groups, and *because* they lack recognition and suffer from exclusionary processes of misrecognition<sup>152</sup>. Since processes of inclusion often involve processes of exclusion in relation to multiple – notably, inferiorized and disempowered – actors, struggles for recognition *and* struggles against misrecognition are integral to the production, reproduction, and potential transformation of power relations.

#### 4. Justificationism

Forst's *justificationist* conception of power is problematic for a number of reasons.

- (a) Given the centrality accorded to justificatory processes in Forst's architecture of the social, it remains unclear why he characterizes his own approach as a 'critical theory of power'<sup>153</sup>, rather than as a 'justificatory theory of power', and as a theory of *noumenal* power<sup>154</sup>, rather than as a theory of *justificatory* power.
- (b) Forst posits that '[a]ll [...] forms of being moved by *justifications* are '*noumenal*' in the relevant sense insofar as they involve a certain relation in the *space of justifications*<sup>155</sup>. Again, the reader is left wondering why spaces of justifications should be characterized as noumenal, rather than simply as discursive.
- (c) Forst *presupposes*, rather than demonstrates, the validity of the assumption that the exercise of power is pervaded by the socio-ontological preponderance of justificatory processes. Yet, the notion that '[p]ower rests on recognized, accepted justifications'<sup>156</sup> applies to some, but not to all, variants of power. In numerous instances, subjects exercising a particular form of power are *not* motivated by a 'good enough' reason to act<sup>157</sup> - irrespective of the question of whether their deeds may be regarded as objectively, normatively, and/or subjectively justifiable. We need to resist the tendency to fetishize the role of justificatory processes by portraying them as omnipresent cornerstones of all

constitutive elements of social life. Not *all* '[r]elations and orders of power are relations and orders of justification'<sup>158</sup>, since some of the former are not motivated by, and/or bypass the reasoning logic of, the latter.

(d) One dimension that Forst fails to scrutinize in his account of the relationship between justification and power is the nexus between *validity* and *legitimacy*. The question of whether an action, representing an expression of noumenal power, can be considered justifiable or unjustifiable depends not only on *what* is being done, but also on *who* does it *when*, *where*, and *to whom*. For *objectivity* ("What?") is - inevitably - a matter of *social authority* ("Who?"), *spatiotemporal contextuality* ("Where and when?"), and *interactional relationality* ("To whom?").<sup>159</sup> What is missing in Forst's approach is a critical understanding of the intimate relationship between validity and legitimacy<sup>160</sup>, notably in terms of its far-reaching consequences for both the construction and the deconstruction of power relations.

(e) Forst's central claim that *[j]ustifications are basic*, not interests or desires<sup>161</sup>, is theoretically naïve and empirically untenable. To the extent that, in practice, *interests and desires tend to determine reasons and justifications*, rather than the other way around, the former are effectively more powerful than the latter. Human subjects provide all sorts of justifications for their actions, especially those that suit them and permit them to attach legitimacy to their practices, which take place within objectively, normatively, and subjectively contingent realities. Granted, while all human actions are *interest-laden* (that is, permeated by the existence of particular interests), not all of them are *interest-driven* (that is, motivated by the pursuit of particular interests). Arguably, the same applies to the role of desires in shaping human actions. The point in this context, however, is to acknowledge that Forst's assertion needs to be turned upside down in order to be sociologically defensible: *interests and desires are basic*, not justifications (or reasons). In everyday life, most justifications are given *a posteriori*, rather than *a priori*; that is, justifications tend to be provided (either before or after an action takes place) in order to attribute legitimacy to a specific action *in accordance with* a person's interests, desires, and experiences.

Most of the time, reasons to act in one way or another are derived not from reason itself but from the interests that underlie, or indeed

constitute, our *real* reasons. To attribute socio-ontological preponderance to justifications is tantamount to constructing an ideal reasoning situation<sup>162</sup>, in which all justifications - irrespective of whether they are deemed 'good' or 'bad' - acquire the status of an anthropological infrastructure, while interests and desires are relegated to the sphere of performative epiphenomena. The real interactional situation<sup>163</sup>, however, designates an empirical conglomerate of circumstances in which interests and desires tend to be at least as powerful as justifications and reasons in shaping human practices. To attach a foundational or determining status to one or the other means to fall into the trap of explanatory reductionism. A truly critical theory of power needs to develop a wide-ranging account of the multiple factors shaping human action. Such a daunting task requires providing not only a *typology of justifications*<sup>164</sup> and a *typology of rationality*<sup>165</sup>, but also a *typology of interests*<sup>166</sup> and a *typology of desires*<sup>167</sup>, without which there is no satisfying *typology of power*<sup>168</sup>.

- (f) Forst stresses the significance of narratives of justification<sup>169</sup> in the exercise of power. According to his theoretical framework, '[r]elations and orders of power are relations and orders of justification<sup>170</sup>, which are reflected in narratives of justification<sup>171</sup>. What Forst fails to take into consideration, however, is the fact that, far from being reducible to mere epiphenomena of an underlying power infrastructure, *narratives of justification enjoy 'relative autonomy'*<sup>172</sup>. Different narratives of justification emerge in relation to different historical circumstances characterized by different sets of power relations. This does not mean, of course, that the former constitute a mere product of the latter. One way of capturing the relative autonomy of narratives of justification is to explore the role of metanarratives in the modern era.<sup>173</sup> From a historical perspective, five types of metanarrative have been particularly influential: (i) *political* metanarratives, (ii) *philosophical* metanarratives, (iii) *religious* metanarratives, (iv) *economic* metanarratives, and (v) *cultural* metanarratives. A truly critical theory of power needs to offer an in-depth understanding of the multiple narratives of justification employed by actors to give hermeneutic coherence to their practices. Such a challenging task requires providing not only a *typology of justifications* but also a *typology of narratives of justification*, including a *typology of metanarratives*.<sup>174</sup>

## 5. *Pluralism*

Forst's *pluralist* conception of power is based on the assumption that actors, when navigating their way through the matrix of social life, are confronted with a *spectrum* of kinds of acceptance<sup>175</sup> and justification. Different interactional realms generate, and are in turn generated by, different 'spaces of justifications'<sup>176</sup>. What such a pluralist approach does not explain, however, is why some forms of power – and, correspondingly, some modes of justification – are more influential than others. A critical theory of society needs to confront the challenge of exploring not only the polycentric constitution of power, including the discursive practices by which it is either reproduced or transformed, but also the spatiotemporally contingent conditions that determine why social relations are asymmetrically structured and, hence, exert different degrees of influence on the micro-spheres (individuals), meso-spheres (communities), and macro-spheres (societies) of human existence.

## 6. *Motivationism*

Forst's *motivationist* conception of power posits that actors, in order to exercise power, have to be *driven* in one way or another. The social world constitutes a universe shaped by a large variety of motivational backgrounds. These may be intuitive or discursive, practical or theoretical, instrumental or value-rational, pragmatic or ideological, internal or external – to mention just a few possibilities. In this respect, the distinction between 'power to' and 'power over' is crucial: subjects may act primarily in accordance with *their own* ('power to') or *other subjects'* ('power over') interests, needs, desires, beliefs, and/or convictions. Forst's approach, however, sheds little – if any – light on the *potentially convoluted* constitution of motivational backgrounds, which can overlap and are not always clear-cut in terms of their intentional specificity. When carrying out an action, subjects may be driven (consciously or unconsciously) by numerous factors, in the broad sense, rather than only by reasons, in the narrow sense. In many cases, it is far from obvious how 'more decisive' factors can be distinguished from 'less decisive' ones, making it remarkably difficult to paint a clear and coherent picture of a possibly unclear and incoherent motivational background structure. A critical theory of society needs to face up to the complexity, diversity, and interpenetrability of the motivations that human actors may, or may not, have when engaging in the daily construction of power-laden realities.

## **7. Performativism**

Forst's *performativist* conception of power stresses that, within human life forms, all structures and processes are located in spheres of action – that is, in realms of practices, performances, and enactments. On this interpretation, the exercise of power (*Macht*) is essentially about being able (*pouvoir*) to do or to make (*machen*) something in a particular way (*Vorgehensweise*). In order to grasp the sociological relevance of power, it is imperative to comprehend what actors *do* by virtue of power, as well as what they *fail to do* due to their (relative or absolute) lack of access to power. The strength of such a performativist approach is that it does justice to the fact that, in the social world, power without performance would be powerless. Indeed, '[i]f power were not performative, our performances would be powerless'<sup>177</sup>. The weakness of such a performativist approach, however, is that, due to its underlying anthropocentrism, it focuses exclusively on *human* forms of agency. Given its motivationalist presuppositions, Forst's approach disregards the influence of nonhuman upon human forms of agency, let alone their confluence. In technologically advanced global network societies<sup>178</sup>, the demarcation line between human and nonhuman forms of agency has become (both theoretically and practically) more and more blurred, enabling our species to push the limits of the traditional separation between nature and culture.<sup>179</sup> A critical sociology of power needs to study both human and nonhuman forms of agency if it seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis of the multiple forces shaping the development of both individuals and society.

## **8. Consequentialism**

Forst's *consequentialist* conception of power emphasizes that, in order to have any relevance to the unfolding of human interactions, power needs to be *socially effective*<sup>180</sup>. Yet, Forst's claim that *to have and to exercise power means to be able – in different degrees – to influence, use, determine, occupy, or even seal off the space of reasons for others*<sup>181</sup> is problematic. For it reduces the consequentialist constitution of power to an individual or a collective subject's capacity to shape the *space of reasons* in particular, rather than conceiving of it, more broadly, in terms of the ability to affect the *space of social arrangements* in general. Such a limited perspective, founded on a peculiar combination of rationalist deontology (space of reasons) and sociological consequentialism (social effects), fails to account for the fact that the exercise of power is embedded in multiple modes of being-in-the-world:



- (a) objective, normative, and/or subjective;
- (b) behavioural, ideological, and/or institutional;
- (c) foundational, contingent, and/or ephemeral.<sup>182</sup>

(a) As physical beings, we are immersed in *objectivity*. As social beings, we are immersed in *normativity*. As self-conscious beings, we are immersed in *subjectivity*.

(b) As performative beings, we engage in and with the world by virtue of different forms of *behaviour*. As meaning-producing beings, we engage in and with the world by virtue of different *ideologies*. As organizational beings, we engage in and with the world by virtue of different *institutions*.

(c) As interdependent beings, we are situated in *foundational* fields, the existence of which is *necessary* for the emergence of social order. As socio-constructive beings, we are situated in *contingent* fields, the existence of which is *possible* within, but not indispensable to, the emergence of social order. As transient beings, we are situated in *ephemeral* fields, the existence of which is largely *irrelevant* to the emergence of social order.<sup>183</sup>

Both the exercise of and the exposure to power take place in the aforementioned modes of being-in-the-world, all of which affect the numerous ways in which we relate to, make sense of, and act upon reality. A critical theory of human reality must resist the temptation to reduce its scope of analysis to the space of reasons and, instead, shed light on the tangible consequences of the existence of power relations in the space of society.

## **9. Normativism**

Forst's *normativist* conception of power accentuates the fact that social relations are always open to questioning, competition, and struggle. Noumenal power is exercised by, as well as exerted upon, actors who constantly produce, reproduce, and transform *normative orders*. In this respect, we are confronted with an irony: on the one hand, Forst underscores the *normatively charged* constitution of power relations, including its discursive representations; on the other hand, Forst aims to defend a *normatively neutral* notion of power<sup>184</sup>, failing to recognize that there is no such thing as a non-partial, non-evaluative, and non-contestable account of power, because every epistemic claim to validity is permeated by relationally contingent degrees of social legitimacy. A

genuinely normativist understanding of power needs to accept its own normativity in order to grasp the relative arbitrariness that characterizes all forms of human sociality.

### **10. Contextualism**

Forst's *contextualist* conception of power is a reminder of the fact that all social practices are *situated* in space and time. As such, they are embedded in relationally configured sets of circumstances encountered, as well as constructed, by human actors. Noumenal power cannot be exercised, let alone transformed, in isolation from noumenal-social *contexts*<sup>185</sup>. Irrespective of whether one focuses on *objective* contexts of physical states of affairs, *normative* contexts of cultural conventions and arrangements, or *subjective* contexts of personal feelings, thoughts, and perceptions – every form of noumenal power is located in spheres of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity.<sup>186</sup> It is far from obvious, however, what determines which of these three foundational spheres of human existence is the most important one in shaping power relations in a *particular* situation. A critical theory of society needs to scrutinize the interplay between objective, normative, and subjective factors, shedding light on their specific role in producing, reproducing, or transforming power relations. Far from being reducible to 'an objective fact, a normative constellation, or a subjective projection, power is always a combination of these three elements in spatiotemporally contingent contexts.

### **11. Coherentism**

Forst's *coherentist* conception of power is based on a straightforward assumption: noumenal power, in order for it to be effective, requires a minimal degree of *coherence*. Different types of power are embedded in different forms of order: social orders, normative orders, orders of justification, orders of action, political orders, cultural orders, or moral orders – to mention only a few. These orders are symptomatic of the grammatical organization of social relations in general and of power relations in particular. While these orders are essential for defining the underlying parameters of social interaction, variants of *disorder* may be no less crucial in challenging, and redefining, these parameters. Indeed, in some radical cases, forms of *disorder* may become forms of *order* – that is, forms of *disordered order* – in which, paradoxically, the norm may be the absence of norms. Forst's approach is insightful in illustrating the socio-ontological significance of

different orders, but it contains little in the way of contributing to a critical understanding of the constitution, let alone the functions, of variants of disorder. In the social world, all forms of order can be challenged by manifold forms of disorder. In this regard, the interplay between orders and disorders of power is no exception.

## **12. Discursivism**

Forst's *discursivist* conception of power maintains that noumenal power is exercised through the construction of different narratives – notably, *narratives of justification*. In culturally codified life forms, human beings are expected to provide rationally defensible justifications for their actions. Narratives of justification constitute discursive frameworks that attribute coherence, cogency, and legitimacy to behavioural, ideological, and institutional expressions of both individual and collective modes of agency. Forst's approach, however, fails to cast light on the complexity of the *relationship between power structures and narratives of justification*. The interplay between, on the one hand, conservative and subversive power structures and, on the other hand, hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives of justification is irreducible to a homological architecture of social determinacy, according to which *dominant* actors necessarily support *reactionary* discourses oriented towards *maintaining* the status quo and *dominated* actors necessarily endorse *progressive* discourses oriented towards *challenging* the status quo.<sup>187</sup> A critical theory of society needs to face up to the fact that different power arrangements are sustained by varieties of discursive constellations, whose relative autonomy escapes the stifling logic of structuralist determinism.

## **13. Foundationalism**

Forst's *foundationalist* conception of power insists, above all, on the existence of one basic right: the *right to justification*. The problem with Forst's approach, however, is that it *presumes*, rather than proves, the validity of the assumption that human beings have a right to justification, as if it were built into their existence in a quasi-natural fashion. One may draw analogies with natural law theories, which face a similar problem, in the sense that they affirm that certain rights are inherent in the human condition.<sup>188</sup> Depending on one's take on this position, *particular* – such as civil, legal, political, social, economic, or sexual – rights may be interpreted as *universal* – that is, human – rights. Paradoxically, power relations may both confirm and undermine the

contention that human beings possess a right to justification: they may *confirm* it, insofar as the exercise of power, in order for it to be viable, needs to be justifiable, at least in the eyes of those making use of it; at the same time, they may *undermine* it, insofar as the exercise of power, in extreme cases, may not be justifiable, not even in the eyes of those making use of it. Indeed, despotic versions of power need not be based on reasonable justifications in order for them to be truly powerful. The right to justification is worthless to those actors who do not enjoy a right to power, let alone to empowerment.

#### **14. Structuralism**

Forst's *structuralist* conception of power draws attention to the centrality of four aspects of noumenal power: (a) *grounding*, (b) *reproduction*, (c) *influence*, and (d) *resource*. In essence, these four dimensions illustrate that noumenal power is inconceivable without the following:

- (a) the *normative orders of justification* in which it is embedded;
- (b) the *normative power of the factual*, which manifests itself in the taken-for-grantedness of the arbitrary;
- (c) the *normative impact of interpretive narrativity* on the emergence of relatively solidified forms of sociality; and
- (d) the *normative significance of noumenal capital* for the distribution of material and symbolic resources, which is reflected in the asymmetrical structuration of social positions and dispositions.

The strength of this approach lies in its capacity to unearth, in a realist fashion, the relative structural determinacy pervading all forms of human sociality. Its weakness, however, stems from its lack of explanatory force concerning the unfolding of human agency, notably with regard to its ability to challenge its own relative determinacy by virtue of species-constitutive features, such as the assertion of autonomy and self-determination guided by the empowering cognitive force of different forms of rationality. The cognitive resources of reason – epitomized in the species-constitutive triad of *Verstand*, *Vernunft*, and *Urteilkraft*<sup>189</sup> – are as relevant to exercising power as they are crucial to defying it. A critical theory of society needs to account not only for the structural determinacy of power relations but also for the extent to which they can be called into question – and, if considered necessary, subverted – by those who are directly or indirectly affected by them.

## 15. Relationalism

Forst's *relationalist* conception of power emanates from one central conviction: noumenal power is, by definition, a *relational* state of affairs. What is missing from this interpretation, however, is an analytically precise understanding of the five cornerstones of the social in general and of the exercise of power in the human world in particular: (a) *relationality*, (b) *reciprocity*, (c) *reconstructability*, (d) *renormalizability*, and (e) *recognizability*.<sup>190</sup>

- (a) Society can come into existence only to the extent that its members *relate* to one another. It is made up of *relational* selves, who cannot exist in complete isolation from each other. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*with-one-another* (*Miteinandersein*).
- (b) Society can come into existence only to the extent that its members *reciprocate* one another. It is sustained by *reciprocal* selves, who relate to each other on the basis of quotidian actions, reactions, and interactions. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*through-one-another* (*Durcheinandersein*).
- (c) Society can come into existence only to the extent that its members *reconstruct* one another. It is created by *reconstructable* selves, who constantly invent and reinvent themselves as well as the realities by which they are surrounded. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*beyond-one-another* (*Jenseitsvoneinandersein* or *aufhebbares Sein*).
- (d) Society can come into existence only to the extent that its members *renormalize* one another. It is shaped by *renormalizable* selves, who attribute meaning and value to each others, as well as to their own, actions. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*about-one-another* (*Übereinandersein*).
- (e) Society can come into existence only to the extent that its members *recognize* one another. It is generated by *recognizable* selves, who seek acknowledgment, acceptance, and appreciation when establishing meaningful relationships with their fellow human beings. As such, it constitutes a form of being-*within-one-another* (*Ineinandersein*).

In short, society can be considered an interactional realm that is brought into existence by *relational*, *reciprocal*, *reconstructable*, *renormalizable*, and *recognizable* selves. It is based on networks of *sociality*, *mutuality*, *transformability*, *signifiability*, and *identity*, which allow for the emergence of individual and collective forms of engagement oriented towards the construction of meaning-laden realities. All forms of social power are permeated by these five ontological conditions of human coexistence.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to examine Forsts account of noumenal power. In order to accomplish this, the foregoing investigation has covered a number of key aspects arising from the critical analysis of Forsts theoretical framework.

- The first part has provided some *definitional* reflections on the concept of power, stating that, in the most general sense, it refers to an entity's *capacity* to do something and/or to act upon the world in a particular way.
- The second part has focused on several *dichotomous* meanings attached to the concept of power, notably (1) soft power vs. hard power, (2) power to vs. power over, and (3) power for vs. power against.
- The third part has elucidated the principal features of Forsts understanding of *noumenal* power, arguing that it can be characterized as (1) cognitivist, (2) rationalist, (3) recognitivist, (4) justificationist, (5) pluralist, (6) motivationalist, (7) performativist, (8) consequentialist, (9) normativist, (10) contextualist, (11) coherentist, (12) discursivist, (13) foundationalist, (14) structuralist, and (15) relationalist. Furthermore, attention has been drawn to the presuppositional underpinnings of Forsts typological distinction between power, rule, domination, and violence.
- The final part has offered an *assessment* of Forsts account of noumenal power, maintaining that it suffers from significant limitations. Especially noteworthy, in this respect, is its inability to develop an explanatory framework capable of capturing the multiple ways in which power operates – not only in the noumenal sphere of reason and justification, but also, often more forcefully, in the empirical sphere of vested interests, unconscious desires, and asymmetrically structured interactions.

A genuinely *comprehensive* critical theory of society needs to engage with the multifaceted complexity of power<sup>191</sup>, instead of reducing it to its noumenal dimensions, which, irrespective of their socio-ontological centrality, represent only part of the story.

As should be clear from the previous sections, however, this article – far from simply engaging in a discursive demolition exercise – has sought to provide a balanced analysis of noteworthy strengths and weaknesses of Forsts conception of noumenal power. Therefore, it seems sensible to conclude by giving a synopsis of the vital insights that can be obtained from the preceding inquiry:

- (1) In a world shaped by meaning-generating entities, power is sustained by virtue of structures and processes of *cognition*. Our will to power is inseparable from our species-constitutive capacity to construct reality by interacting with it – and by doing so not only intuitively but also reflectively.
- (2) Even in its most inhumane and degrading variants, both the exercise of and the exposure to power cannot be dissociated from the civilizational force of *reason*. Subjects who lack access to power lack a *raison d'être*, since the ability to act upon reality in a purposive manner lies at the core of a meaningful existence. Our reason to live is entrenched in the life of reason.
- (3) To the extent that the successful use of power hinges on processes of *recognition* (and, potentially, on processes of *misrecognition*), the pursuit of social legitimacy is built into the condition of humanity. Struggles for recognition, as well as struggles against misrecognition, are so deeply implanted in the fabric of everyday life that the unfolding of power dynamics is intimately intertwined with practices of social positioning.
- (4) The exercise of legitimate power is inconceivable without the (implicit or explicit) acceptance of legitimate *justifications*. Failure to be able to provide a valid reason for ones exercise of power is tantamount to the lack of capacity to justify ones action(s). Regardless of the question of whether *reasons* and *justifications* are socio-ontologically preponderant over *interests* and *desires* (or vice versa), the development of humanity cannot be divorced from the civilizational force of rationality, which manifests itself in the species-empowering – notably (a) constative, (b) normative, (c) expressive, (d) communicative, and (e) imaginative – functions of human linguisticity.

- (5) When navigating their way through the matrix of social life, actors encounter a *spectrum* of modes of acceptance and justification. To the degree that different interactional realms are produced, reproduced, and potentially transformed by different objective, normative, and subjective parameters, constellations of power evolve in relation to a multiplicity of physical, social, and personal components of human existence.
- (6) In order to exercise power, actors have to be *driven* in one way or another, implying that they follow variable and adjustable, yet also both habitualized and habitualizing, cognitive patterns of *motivation*. It is because human subjects have a deep-seated need to relate to, to make sense of, and to act upon reality that their daily participation in the construction of society is pervaded by context-specific modes and degrees of intentionality. In a universe shaped by purposeful actions and projections, there is no will to live without the will to exercise, and the willingness to be exposed to, power.
- (7) If power were not performative, our performances would be not only powerless but also pointless. Asserting its empirical significance, the will to power (*Wille zur Macht*) is not necessarily a will to domination (*Wille zur Herrschaft*) but, more fundamentally, a will to action (*Wille zur Tat*).
- (8) Power matters because both its presence and its absence have *consequences*. To exercise power means to exert some kind of influence upon the physical, social, and/or personal dimensions of our, and/or other peoples, existence. If it bore no relation to the objective, normative, and subjective construction of reality, the exercise of power would be irrelevant to the constitution, let alone the evolution, of humanity.
- (9) Within the social world, power is exercised by, as well as exerted upon, actors who constantly produce, reproduce, and potentially transform *normative orders*. Just as there is no normativity without contestability, there is no pursuit of justice – and, indeed, no pursuit of injustice – without the value-laden regulation of social realities.
- (10) Power cannot be understood in isolation from the sociohistorically specific *contexts* in which it emerges, for all human practices are situated in space and time. The construction of human existence is



shaped by the tension-laden confluence of *objective* factors (such as physical states of affairs), *normative* factors (such as cultural conventions and arrangements), and *subjective* factors (such as personal feelings, thoughts, and perceptions). Power - far from being reducible to 'an objective fact, a normative constellation, or a subjective projection' - constitutes a combination of these three elements in any human life form.

- (11) In order to be effective, power requires a minimal degree of *coherence*. Different types of power are embedded in different forms of order – such as social orders, normative orders, orders of justification, orders of action, political orders, cultural orders, and moral orders. Any attempt to challenge a particular power constellation is futile if it fails to confront, let alone to subvert, its grammatical organization.
- (12) The exercise of power is inextricably linked to the construction of context-specific *discourses*, which serve the vital function of providing narratives of justification. Both as participants and as observers, human subjects draw upon narratives of justification, in order to attribute coherence, cogency, and legitimacy to behavioural, ideological, and institutional expressions of both individual and collective modes of agency.
- (13) Notwithstanding the question of whether human beings possess a *right to justification*, either in a foundationalist sense (as a natural right) or in a constructivist sense (as a sociohistorically contingent right), power is exercised by, and potentially imposed upon, subjects who are not only capable of speech and action but also capable of reflection, interpretation, and explanation. Any exercise of power that, in the eyes of those who are affected by its influence, fails to obtain at least a minimal degree of justifiability is unviable, since legitimacy cannot be sustained without a healthy level of acceptability.
- (14) Given its reliance on relatively *solidified* forms of interaction, the social world is composed of multiple sets of power *structures*. Power constellations constitute structural relations that are (a) grounded in orders of justification, (b) reproduced by the normative force of the factual, (c) sustained by spheres of influence, and (d) shaped by the unequal distribution of resources.

(15) Power is, by definition, a *relational* state of affairs. Owing to their relational constitution, power constellations are never forever: inasmuch as they can be *constructed*, they can be *deconstructed* and *reconstructed*. Power is most powerful when those affected by it are able to relate to it without noticing it. Power is least powerful when those affected by it notice it without being able to relate to it. Either way, it permeates – while, at the same time, being permeated by – five pillars of human sociality: relationality, reciprocity, reconstructability, renormalizability, and recognizability. As long as the social does not go away, power will be here to stay.

## Notes

1. See Forst (2015b). See also Forst (2015c).
2. Forst (2015b, p. 111).
3. See, for instance: Forst (2012 [2007], 2013 [2003], 2014, 2015a). See also, for example: Allen *et al.* (2014) and Forst (2015b, esp. p. 117).
4. Forst (2015b, p. 111).
5. See Lukes (2005 [1974], p. 108). See also Lukes (1986a, 1986b, 2007). In addition, see Forst (2015b, p. 113). Furthermore, see Gallie (1956).
6. On this point, see Susen (2014b, pp. 14–15).
7. Forst (2015b, p. 111).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 111 (*italics in original*).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 115 (*italics in original*).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 115 (*italics added*).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 115 (*italics added*).
14. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 123.
15. See, for instance, Susen (2008a, 2008b).
16. On this point, see, for example, Susen (2009a, 2015b).
17. On this point, see Susen (2015a), pp. 16–18. See also *ibid.*, pp. 1, 16–22, 44, 75, 113, 119, 143, 174, 178, 179, 180, 190, 191, 204, 205, 219, 223, 235, 236, 269, 273, 276, 279, and 285n86. On *the social and political challenges arising from the experience of ambivalence under modern and/or postmodern conditions*, see, for instance: Bauman (1991), Bauman

and Tester (2007, esp. pp. 23–25 and 29), Hammond (2011, pp. 305, 310, 312, and 315), Iggers (2005 [1997], pp. 146–147), Jacobsen and Marshman (2008, pp. 804–807), Kellner (2007, p. 117), Mulinari and Sandell (2009, p. 495), Quicke (1999, p. 281), Susen (2010d, esp. pp. 62–78), and van Raaij (1993, esp. pp. 543–546, 551–555, and 559–561).

18. On this point, see, for example: Susen (2016b, esp. pp. 430 and 432–433, 2017b, esp. pp. 104–105). See also Outhwaite (2016) and McLennan (2017).
19. Susen (2015a, p. 17).
20. Ibid., p. 17.
21. Forst (2015b, p. 113).
22. On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 113: '[...] I think a better definition is available that avoids essential contestation.
23. Ibid., p. 114 (*italics added*).
24. Ibid., p. 114.
25. Ibid., p. 114.
26. Ibid., p. 115.
27. Ibid., p. 115 (*italics added*).
28. Ibid., p. 115 (*italics in original*).
29. Ibid., p. 116 (*italics in original*).
30. Ibid., p. 118.
31. Ibid., p. 118.
32. Ibid., p. 118 (*italics added*).
33. Ibid., p. 118 (*italics in original*).
34. On this point, see Susen (2007, pp. 35, 37, 40, 69, 72, 82, 227n23, and 251). See also Susen (2018, p. 48). In addition, see Habermas (1987 [1965/1968], p. 314).
35. Forst (2015b, p. 118) (*italics added*). On *the concept of 'justification'*, see, for example: Bergmann (2006), BonJour and Sosa (2003), Fahrmeir (2013), Forst (2012 [2007], 2013 [2011], 2013, 2014, 2015a), Habermas (2004 [1999]), Jetté (2003), McCain (2014), Müller-Doohm (2000), Porter (2006), Vaisey (2009). On *the concept of 'justification' in Luc Boltanski's 'pragmatic sociology of critique'*, see, for instance: Blokker and Brighenti (2011), Boltanski (2002, 2009b), Boltanski *et al.* (2010, 2014 [2009]), 2014 [2010]), Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 2006 [1991]), Corcuff (1998), Eulriet (2014), Lemieux (2014), Livet (2009), Silber (2011), Stark (2009), Susen (2012b, 2014 [2012], 2014a, 2014d, 2014 [2015], 2015c, 2016a), Susen and Turner (2014), and Wagner (1999).

36. Forst (2015b, p. 115), On this point, cf. Susen (2007, pp. 145, 193, 196–197, and 202n93).
37. Forst (2015b, p. 115).
38. Ibid., p. 115 (italics added).
39. Ibid., p. 116.
40. Ibid., p. 116.
41. Ibid., p. 116.
42. Ibid., p. 116.
43. Ibid., p. 116 (italics added).
44. On this concept, see *ibid.*, pp. 115n14, 116, 124, and 125.
45. Ibid., p. 116 (italics added).
46. Ibid., p. 116 (italics added).
47. Ibid., p. 115 (in the original version, the entire sentence appears in italics).
48. See *ibid.*, pp. 115, 115n14, 124, and 125 (to do something) as well as *ibid.*, p. 121 (to do certain things).
49. See *ibid.*, pp. 115 and 115n15.
50. See *ibid.*, pp. 113, 114, 115, 115n14, 115n15, 116n17, and 121.
51. Ibid., p. 116 (italics in original).
52. Ibid., p. 115 (italics added).
53. Ibid., p. 116.
54. On *the concept of 'engagement'*, see, for instance, Susen (2016c).
55. Forst (2015b, p. 126).
56. On this point, see, for example: Forst (2002 [1994], 2012 [2007], 2014). See also, for instance: Boltanski (1990), Boltanski (2009b, 2012 [1990]), Fraser and Honneth (2003), Honneth (2007 [2000]), Merle (2013), Miller and Walzer (1995), Nachi (2006), Rawls (1999 [1971]), Ricœur (1995), Turner (2014), and Walzer (1983).
57. On *the concept of 'normative order'*, see Forst (2015a). See also Forst (2015b, pp. 117, 118, 119, 121n30, 125, and 126). In addition, see, for instance: Forst (2002 [1994], 2012 [2007], 2013 [2003], 2013 [2011], 2014).
58. Forst (2015b, p. 118) (italics added).
59. Ibid., p. 118 (italics added).
60. See, for instance: Forst (2012 [2007], 2013 [2003], 2014, 2015a). See also, for example: Allen *et al.* (2014) and Forst (2015b, esp. p. 117).
61. Forst (2015b, p. 117).

62. Ibid., p. 117. See also *ibid.*, pp. 114, 120, and 126. On this point, see also Bohman (2007).
63. Forst (2015b, p. 119) (*italics in original*).
64. On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 125.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 115 (*italics added*).
68. *Ibid.*, p. 116 (*italics added*).
69. *Ibid.*, p. 116 (*italics added*).
70. *Ibid.*, p. 116 (*italics added*).
71. On this point, see *ibid.*, p. 119.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 119, 120, 124, and 125.
73. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 118, 119, 121<sup>n30</sup>, 125, and 126.
74. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 117<sup>n18</sup>, 119, 124, and 125.
75. *Ibid.*, pp. 120 and 124.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
78. On this point, see *ibid.*, pp. 117, 117<sup>n18</sup>, 119, 120, 121, 122, and 126. In addition, see, for example: Fahrmeir (2013), Forst (2013), and Forst and Günther (2011a, 2011b).
79. Forst (2015b, p. 117).
80. See, for instance: Forst (2012 [2007], 2013 [2003], 2014, 2015a). See also, for example: Allen *et al.* (2014) and Forst (2015b, esp. p. 117).
81. Forst (2015b, p. 117) (*italics in original*).
82. *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119 (*italics added*).
83. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
84. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 118, 119, 121<sup>n30</sup>, 125, and 126.
85. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 117<sup>n18</sup>, 119, 124, and 125.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
89. Susen (2007, p. 145).
90. Forst (2015b, p. 120.)

91. Ibid., p. 120. See also *ibid.*, p. 124.
92. Ibid., p. 120.
93. Ibid., p. 120.
94. Ibid., p. 126. See also *ibid.*, pp. 120 and 121<sup>n30</sup>.
95. Ibid., p. 120 (*italics in original*).
96. Ibid., p. 120 (*italics in original*).
97. Ibid., p. 121 (*italics in original*).
98. Ibid., p. 121.
99. Ibid., p. 112. See also *ibid.*, pp. 117, 118, 121, 125, 126, and 127.
100. Ibid., p. 115.
101. Ibid., p. 115.
102. Ibid., p. 111.
103. Ibid., p. 125.
104. Ibid., p. 125.
105. Ibid., p. 124.
106. Ibid., p. 125 (*italics in original*).
107. Ibid., p. 117.
108. Ibid., p. 117 (*italics removed*). On this concept, see also *ibid.*, p. 126.
109. Ibid., p. 116.
110. Ibid., p. 126.
111. Ibid., p. 118.
112. Ibid., p. 126. See also *ibid.*, pp. 120 and 121<sup>n30</sup>.
113. Ibid., p. 121.
114. Ibid., p. 124 (*italics added*).
115. Ibid., p. 124 (*italics added*).
116. Ibid., p. 124 (*italics added*).
117. Ibid., p. 125 (*italics added*).
118. Ibid., p. 125.
119. Ibid., p. 125.
120. Ibid., p. 125 (*italics added*).
121. Ibid., p. 125.
122. Ibid., p. 125.
123. Ibid., p. 125.

124. Ibid., p. 126.
125. Ibid., p. 126.
126. On *the concept of 'ideal type'*, see, for example: Haug *et al.* (2004) and Rosenberg (2016). See also Susen (2015a, pp. 57, 100, 204, 205, 207, and 217).
127. Forst (2015b, p. 126).
128. Ibid., p. 111.
129. See, for example: Bachrach and Baratz (1971 [1962]), Baumgartner *et al.* (1976), Bendix and Lipset (1967), Bentham (1971 [1843]), Berenskoetter and Williams (2007), Boltanski (2009a), Bourdieu (1976, 1979, 1992), Browne and Susen (2014), Burns and Buckley (1976), Champlin (1971a, 1971b), Clegg (1979, 1989), Clegg and Haugaard (2009), Cox *et al.* (1985), Dowding (1996, 2011), Emmet (1971 [1954]), Foucault (1979 [1975], 1980), Goldman (1986 [1972]), Habermas (1981a, 1981b, 1987 [1985]), Haugaard (1997, 2002), Hearn (2012, 2014), Hearse (2007), Hindess (1996), Hobbes (1971 [1651]), Holloway (2005 [2002]), Haugaard (2014a, 2014b), Holloway and Susen (2013), Honneth (1991 [1986]), Isaac (1987), Lukes (1974, 1986a, 1986b, 2007), MacKenzie (1999), March (1971 [1966]), Martin (1977), Marx (1972 [1852]), McClelland (1971 [1966]), Mendieta y Nuñez (1969), Miller (1987), Morgenthau (1971 [1958]), Morriss (2002 [1987]), Poggi (2001), Poulantzas (1980 [1978]), Russell (1986 [1938]), Saar (2010), Scott (1990, 1996, 2001), Simmel (1986 [1950]), Stewart (2001), Susen (2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013b, 2013c, 2014a, 2014b, 2015b, 2016a, 2016c), Susen and Turner (2011, 2014), Weber (1980 [1922]), Wolin (1988), and Wrong (1995 [1979]).
130. Forst (2015b, p. 111) (*italics added*).
131. Ibid., p. 115 (*italics added*).
132. Ibid., p. 113.
133. Ibid., p. 113 (*italics added*).
134. Ibid., p. 111 (*italics added*).
135. See Horkheimer (1976). On the *distinction between 'traditional theory' and 'critical theory'*, see also, for example: Bohman (1999, p. 459), Dallmayr (1992, pp. 121–124), Edgar (2005, pp. 8–10), Geuss (1981, esp. p. 55), Habermas (1987 [1965/1968], p. 302, 1987 [1981], p. xliii, 1988 [1963]-a, p. 211, 1988 [1971], pp. 2–3), Kompridis (2005, p. 299), Leonard (1990, pp. xiii, 3–4, 36–37, and 39), Power (1998, p. 207), Susen (2007, pp. 33, 38–39, and 238), and Velasco (2003, p. 20).
136. Susen (2015a, p. 61). On this point, see also Susen (2007, pp. 164–165, 2013b, p. 224).
137. See Forst (2015b, p. 114<sup>n11</sup>).

138. Ibid., p. 114<sup>n</sup>11.
139. Ibid., p. 114<sup>n</sup>11 (italics added).
140. See, for example, Weber (1978 [1922], pp. 30–38, 60, and 1082–1085).
141. Forst (2015b, p. 114<sup>n</sup>11) (italics added).
142. Ibid., p. 115 (italics in original).
143. Ibid., p. 112 (italics in original).
144. Ibid., p. 114 (italics added).
145. Ibid., p. 123.
146. Ibid., p. 123 (italics in original).
147. Ibid., p. 123.
148. Ibid., p. 116 (italics in original).
149. On the '*politics of identity*', see, for example: Susen (2010a, pp. 204–208, 2010b, pp. 260–262 and 271–274, 2013a, pp. 93, 97, and 100<sup>n</sup>35, 2015a, pp. 4, 171, 172, 180, 182, 193, and 272, 2017a, esp. pp. 170 and 178).
150. On the '*politics of difference*', see, for example: Susen (2010a, pp. 204–208, 2010b, pp. 260–262 and 271–274, 2013a, pp. 93, 97, and 100<sup>n</sup>351, 2015a, pp. 4, 109, 110, 171, 172, 180, 182, 183, 184, 272, and 318<sup>n</sup>4).
151. On the '*politics of recognition*', see, for example: Susen (2007, pp. 192–198, 2015a, pp. 4, 171, 172, 180, 182, and 272).
152. Susen (2015a, p. 199) (italics in original).
153. Forst (2015b, p. 111) (italics added).
154. Ibid., pp. 118 and 122 (italics added).
155. Ibid., p. 116 (italics added).
156. Ibid., p. 116.
157. Ibid., p. 116.
158. Ibid., p. 117.
159. Susen (2015a, p. 10) (italics in original).
160. On the relationship between '*validity claims*' and '*legitimacy claims*', see, for example: Susen (2007, p. 257, 2013b, esp. pp. 200, 207–215, 217–218, 219, 222, 225–230, 2013c, esp. pp. 330, 331, 334, 335, 337, 339, 341, 342, 343, 344, 349, 363, 365, and 369, 2015a, pp. 10, 55, and 200) and Susen and Baert (2017).
161. Forst (2015b), p. 118 (italics added).
162. Cf. Habermas's concept of the '*ideal speech situation*'; see, for example: Habermas (1970, pp. 367 and 371–374, 1988 [1963]-b, pp. 279 and 281, 1992, pp. 419, 422, and 452,



- 2001 [1984], pp.85–86,93,97–99,and 102–103,2001,pp.7–8,10–13,23,29,37,42,45–47,52, and 83–84, 2004, p. 875). See also, for example: Susen (2007, pp. 74, 88–90, 99–100n105, 116, 122, 123, 144, 261, and 306, 2009a, pp. 81–82 and 93–99, 2010c, esp. pp. 107–111).
163. Cf. *Susen's concept of the 'real speech situation'*; see, for example: Susen (2013b, 2013c). See also Susen (2007, pp. 144 and 261).
164. For a tentative outline of a *typology of justifications*, see, for example, Susen (2017d).
165. For a tentative outline of a *typology of rationality*, see, for example, Susen (2015a, p. 54). See also *ibid.*, pp. 13, 15, 20, 35, 44, 45, 48, 62, 90, 104, 105, 115, 116, 120, 121, 137, 165, 175, 183, 190, 191, 198, 199, 225, 227, 235, 236, 255, 261, 274, 281, and 292n39.
166. For a tentative outline of a *typology of interests*, see, for example, Susen (2016d, pp. 130–131).
167. For a tentative outline of a *typology of desires*, see, for example, Susen (2007, pp. 293–296).
168. For a tentative outline of a *typology of power*, see, for example, Susen (2014b, esp. pp. 14 and 20, 2015a, esp. p. 117). In addition, see Susen (2008a, 2008b).
169. Forst (2015b, p. 117) (*italics removed*). On this concept, see also *ibid.*, p. 126.
170. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
171. *Ibid.*, p. 117 (*italics removed*). On this concept, see also *ibid.*, p. 126.
172. On *the concept of 'relative autonomy'*, see, for example, Susen (2015a), pp. 80, 81, 88, 99, 101, 105, 129, and 266.
173. On *the concept of 'metanarrative'*, see *ibid.*, pp. 11, 27, 46, 107, 140, 141, 142, 143, 149, 166, 170, 186, 187, 188, 189, 218, 240, 245, 255, 256, 259, 260, 268, 271, 281, 291n23, 312n11, 334n29, 339n185, 339n187, and 340n192.
174. For a tentative outline of a *typology of metanarratives*, see, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 140–143.
175. Forst (2015b, p. 116) (*italics added*).
176. On this concept, see *ibid.*, pp. 115n14, 116, 124, and 125.
177. Susen (2014b, p. 14).
178. On *the concept of the 'global network society'*, see, for example: Castells (1996, 1997, 1998). See also, for instance: Baert and da Silva (2010 [1998], pp. 249–255), Beck and Lau (2005, pp. 525–533), Burawoy *et al.* (2000, esp. pp. 34–35 and 345–349), Buzan *et al.* (1998, pp. 388–391), della Porta *et al.* (2006), Featherstone and Lash (1995, pp. 1–15), Giddens (1990, p. 64, 1991, pp. 1 and 20–23), Kali and Reyes (2007), Latour (2005, esp. pp. 247–262), Ruby (1990, p. 35), Susen (2015a, pp. 118, 125, 170, 210, 227, 255,

and 277), and Toews (2003, p. 82).

179. On this point, see, for example, *Bruno Latour's actor-network theory*, which tends to reject traditional notions of the human subject and makes a case for a non-anthropocentric exploration of the concept of agency. See Latour (1990, 2005). For an excellent discussion of this issue, see, for example, Wilding (2010). See also Susen (2015a, pp. 143 and 312n14).
180. Forst (2015b, p. 115) (italics added).
181. Ibid., p. 116 (italics in original).
182. On this point, see Susen (2016c).
183. On this point, see Susen (2013b, p. 236n121).
184. Forst (2015b, p. 111) (italics added).
185. Ibid., p. 115 (italics added).
186. On this point, see Susen (2014c, pp. 349–350) (point 13). See also Susen (2017c, esp. p. 115); in addition, see *ibid.* pp. 104–106, 110, 113–115, 118, and 120.
187. On this point, see, for example, Susen (2016a, p. 220) (point 6). See also *ibid.*, pp. 201–202. In addition, see Susen (2014a).
188. On *the relationship between natural law and social theory*, see, for instance: Chernilo (2013a, 2013b), Chernilo and Fine (2013), Fine (2013), Thornhill (2013), and Turner (2013). See also Susen (2015a, pp. 215 and 275).
189. On this point, see Susen (2015a, pp. 13, 105, 215, 236, 259, and 275). On *the distinction between 'Verstand' and 'Vernunft'*, see, for example: Susen (2009b, pp. 104–105, 2010c, pp. 112–113, 2013c, pp. 326 and 330–331, 2015b, pp. 1027–1028).
190. See Susen (2007, pp. 192–198).
191. For a *Grundriß* of a critical theory of power, see, for example, Susen (2014b). See also Susen (2015a, esp. p. 117). In addition, see Susen (2008a, 2008b).

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