Relations of Power

Throughout the preceding chapters, power has figured as a central theme. It is the purpose of this chapter to pull together the various (and not entirely consistent) notions of power that have emerged from developments in critical social theory, in order to arrive at clearer definitions of what power is and how it may operate, and to develop a working framework whereby to analyse power relations in theory and in practice.

Starting with a discussion of the ambivalent relationship between power and the modernist project as a whole, I will then look at how power relations have been understood from structural and poststructural perspectives, moving beyond the conflation of power with notions of an oppressive force, towards understandings that encompass the possibility that it may also operate in more productive modes. This leads to the setting out of a conceptual matrix whereby to distinguish the directional nature of power relations, and their capacity both to limit and to open up forms of social opportunity. Following on from a discussion of the contested concept of empowerment, this matrix is used as the basis for an exploration of how practice may seek to shift the terms of power relations in emancipatory directions.

Power and modernism

Power is an issue that has haunted modernism. Modernity has presented itself as aspiring to fairness and an inclusive citizenship, abolishing exclusive notions of caste or inherited status. It offered the overthrow of previous traditional or feudal forms, in which the status quo had been secured by the deployment of naked force and notions of absolute divine/monarchical authority, and substituted a vision of a
more consensual, participatory politics. However, beneath this façade, modernity has been characterised by a systematic reiteration of inequalities of opportunity, and situations of oppression and abuse. It is out of this context that a particular paradox has emerged: on the one hand, certain notions of power are no strangers to everyday or academic discourses, while, on the other hand, for something so apparently familiar, there has been remarkably little clarity as to what power actually is. It perhaps represents that which, were it to be fully revealed, might be most directly threatening to the vested interests of modernity (or even postmodernity). Unravelling the operation of power may thus be seen to constitute a defining core of the enterprise of critical theory.

Sometimes, concepts of power have been rendered peripheral to modernist analyses of social and interpersonal processes, thereby maintaining the illusion that the current organisation of social relations is somehow fair and natural (see Apfelbaum 1999). Where notions of power have entered into modernist discourses, its operation has been seen as (naturally) serving to promote the tenets of modernity. For example, people, acting as individuals, may be seen to engage in forms of competitive jostling for position – a pursuance of self-interest that, as with free-market economics, is seen to work ultimately for the benefit of all. Crucially, power has tended not to be construed as a relation between people, but as an entity in itself – an attribute or property of either ‘society’ or ‘the individual’. Much of the dynamism of power becomes lost when it becomes reduced either, within positivism, to a fixed status or quality that a person may (or may not) possess or, within humanism, to some subjective sense of centredness, capability or personal authority. No integrated understanding of the operation of power is possible as long as one remains caught between the poles of the subject/object dualism that is central to modernist thought.

For the early political philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, the exchange and regulation of power was seen as central to the ‘social contract’. Participation as a modernist citizen was seen to involve a bargain whereby each person elected to forfeit some of their individual power – their right to act howsoever they chose – and vest this power with the civil state, giving it the authority to govern and regulate in the interests of all citizens. Such a bargain was seen as essential for maintenance of social cohesion, but also as being in the ultimate interest of all individuals. In this way, a paradigm was constructed in which all citizens were rendered equal by