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Images revisited – Postmodern Perceptions of Power and Democracy: Empowerment in the Danish Case

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Abstract

Danes have a nuanced perception of societal power. The common perception is that politicians, media, citizens, capital, interest organisations and experts all have power. Most people conceptualise power as being blurred, systemic and structural. Nevertheless, the Danes generally do not feel powerless or distant from power. Paradoxically, while experiences of power as "system" are common, the actors appear to be both resourceful and active – there is a high degree of empowerment. Confidence in individual capacity to make a difference is considerable. As one of those interviewed, "Dave", says about the time that the municipality was going to close "his" pub: "I wouldn't stand for it!" Dave got in touch with the regional department of one of the national television networks, the largest newspaper in the region and a national tabloid, successfully getting them to cover the case. His next step was the circulation of a petition and arrangement of support concerts featuring top names from the golden age of Danish rock music. Ultimately, the pub survived . The story is a striking example of the extent to which ordinary Danes believe that it can pay to exercise one's influence – that one is able to make a difference.

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Empowerment touches upon the question as to how democratic and political identities and proficiencies are acquired and honed (Kristensen, 1998). Empowerment concerns both individual political capacities as well as the formal and informal framings and opportunities for attaining political influence in society; with that also the interplay between, on the one hand, individual political identity and learning, as well as on the other hand, rights and political-democratic arenas and institutions. In Danish work with the empowerment concept, attempts at describing this interplay have included distinguishing between two dimensions: one referring to the rights of individuals to participate in relation to political institutions, which can best be translated as "objective" or "external" empowerment, and one referring to individuals' exercise of their rights, which can best be translated as "subjective" or "internal" empowerment (Goul Andersen et al., 2000; Bang et al., 2000; Kristensen, 2002). Empowerment thus focuses on the individual's opportunities to act and the arena in which this action takes place.

One can argue that the empowerment discussions have placed themselves between, on the one side, the demands of the New Right regarding the responsive state and the societal rights and responsibilities of the citizenry, and on the other side, the demands of the New Left pertaining to the decentralisation and democratisation of the welfare state (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994; Giddens, 1998). To be able to say something as to the degree to which citizens register and experience empowerment, it is necessary to provide some insight in terms of the experience of the power relations in society and the democratic institutions – how do they appear? This helps thematise the relationship between the actual conditions and the subjective experience of them. In this context, some of the central questions then become: how do we understand and experience society? How is the formation of the "cognitive map" or political image of society for the individual member of society established? How is power understood and handled? What relations exist between conceptions of power, democracy and empowerment as seen in relation to the lifeworld of the individual? In a new study under the auspices of The Danish Democracy and Power Study, *Images of power – portraits for the understanding of power and democracy* (Kristensen, 2003), the focus is specifically on how

the members of contemporary Danish society *experience* power in society and their own role in democracy. The article at hand builds on the results of this study, as summarized in the following.[1]

Perceptions of power and society

In recent years, the Danish People's Party has had immense success by capitalizing on the dichotomy between "over-Denmark" and "under-Denmark". On that background, one could well expect that stereotypical representations of power continue to prevail, i.e. that Danes generally perceive themselves to be members of a hierarchical society in which the "rich get richer" and the bureaucracy and power elite dominate, making little pretence to conceal their scorn for the well-being of ordinary people. *Images of Power* is based on comprehensive interviews with actual Danes, in which conceptions of the modes of operation in society and power relations are laid bare. These portraits serve as period pieces, i.e. descriptions of citizens in the postmodern information society.[2]

This kind of a study has never previously been conducted in Denmark. It does, however, share much in common with other studies. The large questionnaire-based study conducted by Damgaard et. al. (1980) examined Danish people's sense of the power relations between political institutions. Attitudes were relatively differentiated in Damgaard's study. However, one common feature is that "social distance" is significant for how people understand power relations: when asked to describe where power is located, i.e. who has power, people *"refer"*, to *others*. Moreover, these "others" are clearly separated from – and distant from – one's own placement in society (Damgaard et al., 1980: 185). In the "Cultural Studies" tradition with sociological investigations of labourers' "images of society" (in particular Lockwood, 1966; Newby, 1977; McKenzie & Silver, 1968, etc.) conducted in the United Kingdom in the 1950s to the mid-1970s, a thoroughly class-based understanding of society and power relations is uncovered. The workers' sense of society can be drawn as a dichotomous picture, divided in "us" and "them", representing the powerless and the powerful, respectively. This conception stands in contrast to that of the middle class, a typical status/hierarchy-based understanding of society and the image of same as a "social ladder", which one can ascend gradually. The point of departure in David Lockwood's classic study, *"Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society"* (1966), is that social relations and

placement in the structure of society according to occupation establishes specific perceptions of power and society. There is typically a dichotomous "us/them" understanding of society, or what Lockwood also labels as a class-based "power-model". Those who are not a part of "us" are equal with "the others", e.g. bosses, superiors, officials and authorities. There are strong ties to the like-minded, extensive internal solidarity in the group.

A central analytical point of departure for Lockwood (and the Cultural Studies tradition in general), with inspiration in Marx's distinction between "Klasse an sich" and "Klasse für sich" was exactly this connection between the objective class situation and consciousness, i.e. the subjective understanding of this situation (Bulmer, 1975). Lockwood's study then indicates that it is the power in relation to one's immediate surroundings and work-situation that structures one's perception of the societal power relations. The relevance of this assumption is increasingly questioned today, as factors such as the relationship between the media and public, cultural pluralisation, or globalisation, etc. are entirely absent in this tradition. Society is understood in the British studies as being an aggregated and magnified body of the hierarchy of working life, i.e. as the enterprise "writ large", with the same authoritarian relations and the same impotence. In terms of the distinction between the near/distant power relations, this tradition exclusively picks up on the former. The question then becomes whether – or to which degree – one can expect to find something resembling Lockwood's dichotomous perception of class in contemporary society. Some elements would appear to be detectable, but not particularly widespread nor in complete form. This is partly because there have hardly ever been many of Lockwood's classic workers in Denmark, but primarily because one must fundamentally question whether it is the "immediate sphere" – the working situation in particular – that fundamentally structures identity or perceptions of power.

In this connection it is also a well-established assumption in sociology that if people are not capable of controlling or coping with the world around them, they will simply reduce it to the dimensions of their immediate surroundings (Castells, 1983). Hermeneuticists therefore often examine the down-to-earth experiences as a part of the filter and "tool box" used to process and interpret the more distant phenomena (including the political system). Identities and "everyday cultures" incarnate the central features and characteristics of the actors. Not only are they indicative of values, they also express an individual dimension of acknowledgement. However, the formation of political attitudes and awareness can hardly be

narrowly understood as an extension of the work sphere, as in Lockwood et al., where almost all aspects of the social are derived from working life. It is hardly possible in studies of contemporary society to assume beforehand that working life fundamentally structures our entire life form. There are a number of structuring forms found in modern society that must be assumed to be common for all, regardless of occupation. Modern society is marked by pronounced spatial, temporal and institutional differentiation (Mortensen, 1987: 15). It is therefore not possible to assume that working life is the very *source* of identity. It has become necessary to seek influences in the "more distant" relations, including processes in the media and globalisation.

Identity and late modernity

More modern variations of Lockwood's traditional, dichotomous understanding, as expressed in "the power model", can be found in Castells' (1997) conceptualisation of "resistance identities".[3] Resistance identities are assembled around relatively unambiguous positions, and the image of the world is overwhelmingly dichotomous. There are a few – but important – recurring *symbols* that are central to their shared universe. These symbols are continuously reproduced and confirmed. The identity creates clarity and unity in a context that is (experienced as being) marked by conflict and the drawing of borders. Resistance identities are typically found among marginalised groups in society and can, according to Castells (1997), be said to comprise of smaller, possibly stigmatised groups, whose positions in society are threatened or beyond the frontiers of the dominant logic. Resistance identities often emerge in the constitution of a counter-discourse up against the prevalent identity discourses (i.e. by producing alternatives to the established order cf. hippy culture). Conceptualisations of us/them thrive in these environments.

Most thought in relation to politics and power is constructed and built up around traditional (and logical) oppositional pairings, e.g. workers vs. management and the owners of capital, which is also a form of opposition that has been central to the establishment of the existing political party system (Andersen, 1984). However, the social structure is visibly more differentiated in contemporary "network" or "information society" than was the case in classic industrial society. The class-based divisions and us/them dichotomies based on income or ownership of the production apparatus is replaced or supplemented by other, more

individual and self-identity-based orientations, which for example could concern ethnic, knowledge-based, lifestyle-based, generation-based, gender-based or entirely different types of contrasts and divisions. Also, there are other kinds of breaks in relation to the "usual" notions concerning identity and perceptions of society. Analyses of modernity have indicated that post-material values have attained a central placement alongside the "traditional", material values. Claim is often made that the authoritarian orientations and material values that characterised industrial society have largely been replaced by individuality, self-realization and freedom to choose personal lifestyle. A familiar, general frame of understanding in the late modern society is that a shift has occurred away from traditional, interest-based and ideological politics towards an increasingly individually oriented understanding of politics (Inglehart, 1997; Bech, 1992). When orienting themselves in relation to the political picture, people generally do so less in terms of their working situation and the class they belong to; personal values play an ever-increasing role. Subjective cultural factors that create meaning provide the "input" for identity construction and serve to motivate individuals in societies of this type (Kaare Nielsen, 2001). The field for the construction of identity becomes diffuse, which also makes it more difficult to construct applicable theories. Modern life forms unfold in a vast array of contrasting possibilities.

Late modernity and the general increase in the level of education in society is claimed to have led to the proliferation of so-called *self* or *project identities* (Castells, 1997; Kaare Nielsen, 1994; Hall, 1992). The self is increasingly organized as a reflexive project in which the individual works mediated materials into a coherent biographical narrative, which is under constant revision (Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 2001). Greater knowledge, improved material standards, modified production conditions and new technologies contribute to the creation of new opportunities and conditions, increased reflexivity, and focus on self-realisation, self-fulfilment, and life politics (Giddens, 1994). The social "map" of identities is recreated as a result of structural and institutional adjustments. The identification processes through which we establish our social and political identities have thereby become increasingly variable and unpredictable. Parallel to this, there are more voices claiming that patterns of political action are undergoing transformation, from a collective to an increasingly individual orientation. Ever-increasing numbers of people can be characterised as "expressivists" (Gibbins & Reimer, 1999; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992). These processes point to the spread of *pluralistic* perceptions of society.

According to Giddens (1991) the new life forms resulting from late modernity remove us from traditional types of social order. This leads to liberation of the individual and ever-increasing individualization. A separation of time and space occurs, as well as an uncoupling from traditions. Late modernity forces the individual to constantly make decisions, i.e. to act *reflexively*. This also gives rise to a need for ontological certainty[4] and practically grounded knowledge pertaining to everyday life, which Giddens refers to as *the practical consciousness* (Giddens, 1991: 36). Practical consciousness entails familiarity with the rules, routines and strategies that serve as the basis for the constitution of everyday social life in relation to time and space. The term can be drawn upon in relation to abstract systems, e.g. expert systems, which increasingly affect our everyday life. For example, most of us know how to use a computer, but far fewer understand the fundamental principles of a computer's basic functioning. The practical consciousness contributes to the reduction of uncertainty and "navigates" us through an everyday influenced and characterized by uncertainty and risks. Conversely, the systems contribute to making life easier and more nuanced by conveying insight, competence and ideas to us. Distinction is made between types of conceptions that are partially based in one's own life situation and concrete experiences (the classic hermeneutic perspective), and partially in conceptions that are more "handed down" and "mediated" and therefore presumably more uniform (albeit they are probably interpreted or "decoded" differently). We are all spectators in the electronic age; on a daily basis we are presented with (or bombarded by) traditions and narratives about power and politics. The question here, then, is how differently people decode these kinds of "handed down" images of society and understandings of power. In this connection, distinction is made as to a *practically based consciousness* vs. an *abstract* and/or *mediated understanding* and approach to power in society, which points to opposite positions regarding where power is seen from.

Dimensions of the power perceptions

What kind of conceptions of power and which identities emerged in the study and how do they relate to the orientations described above? The images of power are in general pluralistic. Perceptions are occasionally dichotomous; however, *not* as with Lockwood, where the class-related positioning comprised the pivotal point for the understanding of power, and one's

"adversary" could be localized and pointed out immediately. To the contrary, there is another form in which the experience of power relations is not generally derived from one's working situation or class structure. An important discovery in this connection is that there is no sense of decided powerlessness among the actors – people are not "afraid" of power and definitely do not consider themselves to be at great distance from it. This hangs somewhat together with another point concerning the images of power and society, namely that where e.g. Lockwood wrote about a hierarchical society with a clear and identifiable top, the results of this study point in the direction of experiences of a society with multiple centres of power. At the same time there is talk of the authorities or "men of power" being capable of displaying a certain element of responsiveness, as exemplified by "Dave", who represented from the outset one of the least "empowered" positions in the study. On the one hand, he has a clear conception of power as being very hierarchical. It comprises a large "apparatus" or a "system", which on the other hand actually demonstrates itself not to be so distant after all; it is possible to talk with the men of power.

In terms of power in the political-administrative system, fingers are overwhelmingly pointed at civil servants, bureaucrats, and the "knowledge elite". A remarkable aspect of the study is the marked experience of power among civil servants. What is more, this is in the "negative" interpretation, where such an exercise of power is experienced as illegitimate. The tendency is, then, that regardless of whether the understanding of power is dichotomous or pluralistic, the bureaucrats are regarded as being very powerful (by which it can be assumed that this has occurred at the expense of the politicians). Another interesting aspect in this connection is that this perception is also found in the large group that does not have concrete, personal experiences of power among civil servants. I am therefore inclined to interpret this to be a sign of *handed down/mediated* understandings of power – that there are certain, though likely quite ambiguous, discourses concerning power that are in play here. While people do not necessarily *live* in such "images of power", where bureaucrats dominate the daily routine, they can nevertheless easily be regarded on a subjective level as "fact" about the exercise of power, which – almost reflectively – can be referred to.

Somewhat correspondingly, many respondents point at the media as being powerful. It does not always appear as though people entirely know why; perhaps in this instance it is merely because it is *expected* that one points at the media. "John", for example, points out that the people require "bread and circuses". There are tendencies here that seem "familiar", cf.

typical left-wing rallying cries about entertainment as "opium for the people". On the manifest level, there is a clear sense that the media possesses ample power. On the latent level, the nature of the power they possess is less clear. In many of the understandings of power, the media easily becomes a part of a greater "power system" – once again, everything is close to melting together. By and large everyone points at the media, but have problems explaining why. Perhaps this phenomenon is due to the extent to which we are subject to a discourse pertaining to the power of the media and are thereby "raised" to point at the media. For most, the media comprises an anonymous power, but "they" (the media) definitely have power, it is said. It is rare that this "they" can be defined in more precise terms; in this sense, power is anonymous.

Finally, it is interesting to register how there would not appear to be any resemblance of a proportionate relationship between the degree of visibility in the media and references to power. Nobody specifically points out the Prime Minister or other specific persons, e.g. ministers, organisation representatives or experts, who are otherwise highly exposed in the media. To the contrary, reference is made to the news anchor (e.g. by "John") in relation to the power question (though not as a concretely powerful actor). Everything begins to "flicker", also in line with the presumable increase of the symbolic role and function of politics.

It is surprising how similar – at least on the manifest level – the different respondents regard power, particularly considering their contrasting backgrounds, social and cultural histories. The "forms of power" might well make good sense purely conceptually, but the concrete forms of power are referred to astonishingly rarely. Thus, they are not defined and demarcated categories among the respondents; they become blurred and mixed. They are unclear and ambiguous – and they become *systems* – or positions and boundaries pertaining to THEM and US. These "systems" are not comprised of specific wealthy men and top politicians; but rather, an anonymous and faceless system of diverse authorities, bureaucrats and experts: a structure in which it is not entirely possible to point out any specific apex of power. It is perhaps likely that there is a tendency that the level of "sophistication" of a respondent's perception of power is inversely proportionate to his/her ability to distinguish between forms of power; i.e. for those with the least sophisticated perception of power, power has melted together to form "the system". However, that which is interesting is that this relationship is anything but unambiguous and that the understanding of "the system" is also

quite widespread, even in the most advanced "images of power". The conclusion is therefore not simply that the more "powerlessness" a respondent expresses, the more they point at "the system". Neither the socio-economic position nor base can serve to explain the experience of a "power system". There is therefore no clear-cut "Lockwood" at play here – the experiences of power are generally too pluralistic and differentiated for this to be the case.

Based on the experiences of power and the power categories that the respondents describe and refer to, a typology of contemporary understandings of power will be presented in the following. First, two dimensions relating to the understandings of power will be put forward; these concentrate on some of the central analytical features associated with the questions in the study and the theoretical points of departure.

1. Power: Power for the few and the many

In relation to the experience of power (and sense of distance from it), two contrasting, ideal-typical understandings appear to be prevalent in terms of how people experience and deal with power. These are briefly described in the following:

The first perception is a *dichotomous understanding* equivalent to Lockwood's "power-image". Power can be placed (though it can be difficult to localise). According to this interpretation, society is characterised by injustice and inequality, and the "system" has banded together, conspiring to hold ordinary people down. The interests and culture of specific powerful groups determine relations in society. These groups are typically "the upper class", "capital", "the political elite", civil servants, etc. who "band together" to make sure that the views of others are excluded, passed over or overruled. When the norms and language of dominant groups are already an integrated part of the system, it means that they have all of the benefits beforehand; they are familiar with the rules of the game and "win" the democratic debate. It is a self-perpetuating dynamic. Within this category there is often a shared understanding that "Over-Denmark" is pulling the strings. Power is for the few, a perception building on *elitism*. This is also where we discover the resistance identities. The image of the world – the scheme of things – is dichotomous. *This perception is based on opposition or on one's own delineation in relation to power.*

The next perception deals with the *decentralisation of power*. According to this position, power cannot be unambiguously placed. Contemporary society is decentred; multiple centres of power exist. There is not one single, central instance in modern society in

11

which all power and decision-making is concentrated. This perception is based on consensus and *pluralism*. It is not an understanding in which power is absent or entirely equal or evenly distributed; rather, it is a fundamental assumption in which politics aim to create a community. Power is for the many: I can make a difference *myself*. The general image is based on engagement, the desire to get involved, and where the actors (to some extent) are empowered. There are several different ways of getting one's opinions across, but everyone who wishes to do so has the opportunity to participate in the solution of common political matters – either in relation to the "small" or the "big" democracy. The power game might well be slightly more complicated, but when all is said and done, it concerns us all.

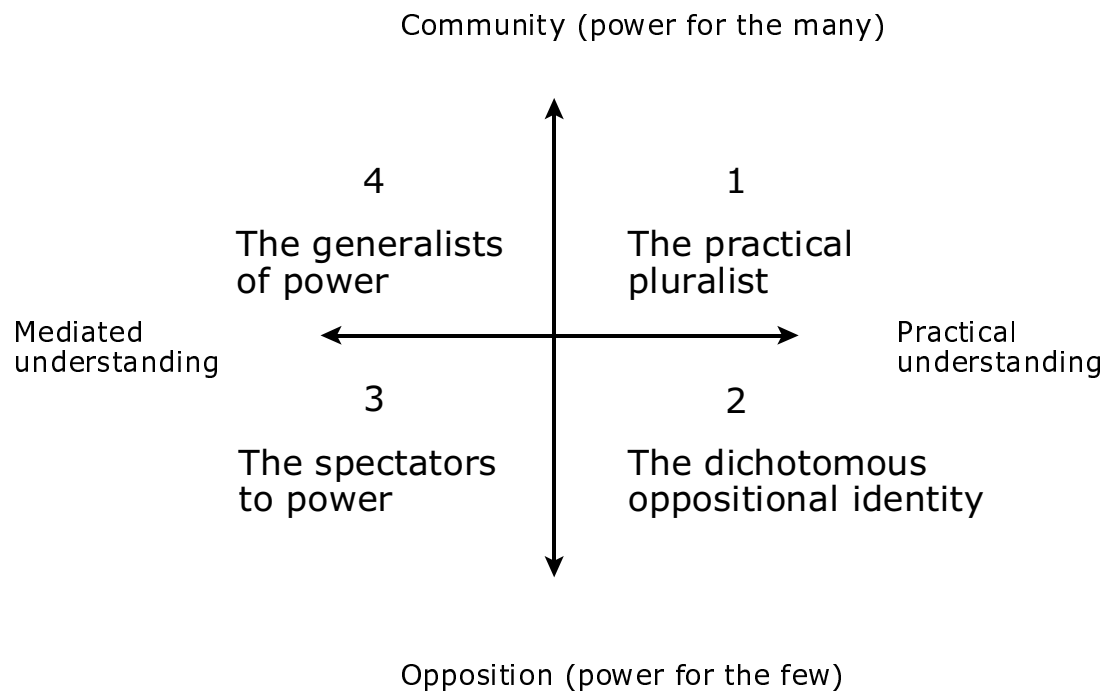## 2. Power: mediated vs. practice-based conceptions of power

This dimension concerns the tension between the abstract or *mediated* and the *practical*, *experience-based* reality. Everyday practical activities and the encounter with others in situations with face-to-face interaction makes up the content in our concrete experiences (and the practical consciousness). This is the basic conceptualisation we see in the hermeneutic tradition as well as in the British studies mentioned earlier. While e.g. Lockwood only has an eye for the concrete/immediate, it has become necessary to utilise an alternative approach when examining contemporary society, an approach that emphasises the mediated experience and the type of experiences we accumulate via mediated interaction. Development of the communication media separates social interaction from physical locality; people are able to interact with one another in new ways, despite not being placed together in time and/or space (Thompson, 2001). The process of self-development is increasingly nourished by mediated symbolic materials that expand the opportunities available to people. The self increasingly becomes a reflexive project that lays emphasis on coherent biographical narratives in which mediated materials play in (Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 2001). The growing network for mediated communication increases access to forms of information and communication stemming from distant sources. The media contributes to the growth of social complexity while simultaneously providing individuals with instructions as to how this complexity is to be dealt with (Thompson, 2001: 239).

The perception that the media has a hand in setting political agendas, perceptions of reality and opinions is quite widespread. One can hardly question the influence of the media in increasing the role of public opinion; however it is less certain exactly what this involves

(Goul Andersen, 1998).[5] According to some (Hjarvard, 1996) the media (the electronic media in particular) has contributed to the very establishment of the conception of a nation-state-centred community. The national community in a period became the central community, serving as the basis for the individual's perspective on himself and the world around him to an overwhelming degree (Pedersen, 1994; Hjarvard, 1996: 16). The question then becomes whether the media today in fact influences and steers the experience of certain political communities or the understanding of specific contexts in relation to power – or perhaps has the very opposite effect, atomising or fragmenting everything. People relate selectively to the streams of information – partly in terms of the choice of channels of information, but also in terms of what they embrace.

Concrete and mediated forms are thus combined in the construction of understandings of the problems of the world. The majority merely embrace a small number of the mediated symbols. They also utilise their practical expertise to steer through an ever-denser forest of mediated symbolic forms (Thompson, 2001: 236-237). However, dependence is created by the systems providing the symbolic materials for self-development. People become increasingly dependent on a number of institutions and systems equipping them with the – both material and symbolic – means with which they construct their life projects. Some people actually establish a kind of non-reciprocal, intimate relationship to absent entities, e.g. popular figures in the media. Actors, television news anchors, sports idols, talk show hosts and popstars occasionally become well known and familiar figures that people talk about with one another in their everyday life, routinely referring to them by their first names (Thompson, 2001: 242). Again, "John" is a good example of this phenomenon. He includes celebrities and fictitious figures, from Bjarne Riis (Danish cyclist who won the Tour de France) o J.R. from Dallas in his universe of abstraction. There is, however, a distinct analytical difference in terms of the extent to which people draw upon a *practically based everyday consciousness* in relation to the *mediated and system-based understandings* in which theoretical terms and knowledge are also included as potential resources. We are now able to present a typology figure of the two dimensions of the conceptions of power:

Figure 1: Typology of power

Community (power for the many)

4
The generalists
of power

1
The practical
pluralist

Mediated
understanding

Practical
understanding

3
The spectators
to power

2
The dichotomous
oppositional identity

Opposition (power for the few)

The figure presents four different quadrants with matching ideal types, which will be briefly presented:

Quadrant #1: this group has a pluralistic conception of power: it concerns all of us. The distance to power is slight and the understanding of power is predominantly based on experience. People who look for practical and pragmatic solutions for everyday problems – and who have a fundamental orientation towards consensus – are often observed in this group. To the extent that it is possible to tie a specific dimension of action to this type, it is often comparable with a kind of *political entrepreneur*.

Quadrant #2: the ideal type in this category includes Lockwood's classic workers as well as resistance identities. A central aspect of this perception is the sense

that "the system is jerking us around". The archetype could be labelled the *dichotomous resistance identity*.

Quadrant #3:   this group comprises those who predominantly have mediated conceptions of power and primarily feel that power is for the few. The passive variant of this group includes *"the spectators to power"* (cf. "the spectator identity", Andersen et al., 1993; Van Deth, 2000) as well as those with tendentiously dichotomous understandings, who typically draw their opinions from the media, e.g. when "John" comments about power: "It's just like in Dallas". In a more active variant of this type it is possible to discover more modern versions of resistance identities, e.g. representatives from the "Autonomen" movement.

Quadrant #4:   this is where one finds the *"generalists of power"*, those whose conception of power is fundamentally pluralistic. The ideal type in this category bears features in common with Castells' project identity, which is reflexive and oriented towards consensus. This is also where one finds those referred to as the "theoreticians of power", who draw on scientific terms and/or mediated symbols, and who express a high level of abstraction in relation to the conceptualisation of power.

Conceptions of power, autonomy and empowerment

Fleshing out the quadrants above with ideal types opens the dimension dealing with the experience of one's own role, participation and engagement. The observations described would appear to constitute the basis to call attention to several oppositions, also in relation to some of our traditional conceptions and perceptions of power – i.e. things might not be so simple. It is therefore quite possible for tendencies towards powerlessness according to the one dimension of power and empowerment according to the other to appear simultaneously. For example, the portrait of interview person "Jimi" demonstrates how orientation and identity can be ambiguous and ambivalent in the late modern society. Jimi, who is a (previously independent) truck driver is to be found in Quadrant 2 in the figure above. He does not see any direct opposition or lack of logic between, on the one hand, having right-wing political opinions and convictions (and a self-identity as a self-employed businessman),

and on the other hand having a worker identity, complaining about the way management coordinates the conditions at work.

Jimi demonstrates a significant capacity for action, which is a general finding in the study. The respondents express faith in their own abilities, confidence in their future prospects; they believe in their own capacity to make a difference. If one is dissatisfied with something, one registers a complaint with the relevant authorities – one demands an explanation and has no objection against acting like a grouch in the public room (e.g. in relation to the municipality or school). The participants are not particularly characterised by a deep sense of "respect" (cf. Lockwood's or Newby's "deferential worker"). It is not possible to re-discover the humble, submissive, alienated souls described by Lockwood and others. To the contrary, there are very unambiguous signs indicating that the actors presented are anything but impotent. The dream of being master of one's own destiny is generally reflected, a dream in which personal *autonomy* is in focus. There are not many indicators of powerlessness or alienation in the sense that in those circumstances where one would otherwise expect to encounter "powerlessness", e.g. in conversation with a disability pensioner or an unemployed person, it is not there. This is a general finding in the study. The distance to power is surprisingly slight. Power is thus to some degree accessible in principle, as opposed to previously, when power in the classical sense was veiled and secluded by the hierarchy. Today power is perhaps sooner illuminated than hidden. There is no longer the same respect for power – and authorities no longer enjoy the same status. Moreover, the attitude would appear to be that should anyone assume a responsibility, they must also be capable of successfully playing the part. The respondents therefore voice a very critical view on – and approach to – power and the administrators of power. Another common feature is that there are considerable elements of Quadrants 3 and 4 in most of them, which relates to the question where power is seen from. There is a bit more sense of the "mediated" in their conceptions of power than one would initially expect to find on the basis of the lifeworld-oriented foundations that served as the methodological approach for this study. In this connection, a fundamental question was the extent to which an everyday consciousness founded in practice is drawn upon in relation to the mediated and system-based understandings when the image of power is constructed. On the basis of a hermeneutical, "lifeworld" point of departure, one would thus expect that the understandings of power were closely tied to the practical consciousness, understood as the immediate surroundings in

16

which we live our lives. There is evidence indicating that the coupling between lifeworld and the understanding of power is not particularly tight. On the other hand, there is much evidence indicating that the respondents retrieve metaphors from the immediate sphere and interpret reality on this basis, or utilise these as components in their conception of power. To a certain degree, it would appear as though it is "the immediate sphere" that delimits the framings for the fundamental understanding of power. Not in the sense that "the immediate" structures this, but to the contrary, that it serves as a source of inspiration, basis and mental toolbox for this purpose. The method employed in the study is arguably directed at emphasising this aspect. The method is "biased", as it were, in the direction of reading people's lifeworld experience into their image of the world around them. The methodological approach in this study must be assumed to be appropriate as a tool for uncovering precisely this type of mechanisms and lifeworld-based understandings (which a quantitative questionnaire would be poorer at capturing, as it would be "biased" in the opposite direction).[6] However, there is not much evidence indicating that the immediate world of experience (particularly work) comprehensively structures the perceptions. The image of power – as flickering as it might appear to be – is in many respects the same for the various types, but the content and concrete filling can be quite different. Generally speaking, there is talk of an understanding of power with great, individual variations, though also with quite a clear core of common conceptions. There is thus a surprising uniformity among the understandings of power, not merely overtly, but also on the latent level. In terms of "types", many of the respondents belong to the group with a prevailing *pluralistic* and *mediated consciousness*. They are typically also the ones who are capable of considering power abstractly, as well as turning things on their heads: e.g. "Paul" demonstrates the capacity to turn the perspective on power from a focus on the forms of power, or "language of power", to the "power of language".

Summary

The results demonstrate that our "images of power" range from the simple and dichotomous to the extremely abstract and differentiated. The interviews also provide ample indication that life is truly lived very differently, while at the same time it is also understood quite uniformly in many respects. At the same time, some of the cultural and value-related diffusion processes become more discernible, as well as the diversity characterising modern society and its

pluralisation. There is generally a positive orientation towards diversity, which might previously have been interpreted in a number of binary oppositions (e.g. between capital and work, black and white, man and woman, etc.; cf. Connolly, 1995). Whereas opposition between rich/poor and capitalist/worker etc. might have been pointed to in the past, those interviewed in this study sooner point towards *proficiencies* and *knowledge resources* as the basis for the lines of division in modern society, as well as a power-base in relation to the "resource-strong" members of society, if a difference is to be drawn forth.

In this connection, one of the general conclusions of this study must be that the modern autonomous individual no longer has use for a conception of "the other" to be able to identify oneself (Dean, 1996). In a modern world it is no longer necessary for the individual to identify with a certain community, a certain group or with a certain set of preferences to the extent that this can be said to be determinant for the individual's understanding of power or identity. We identify ourselves with many different groups. While solidarity has not disappeared, it is no longer exclusively associated with specific groups or to a shared "we". This also means that us/them understandings pertaining to class/group apparently do not have the same relevance (at least if one is thinking about the occurrence of a clear consciousness about being in the same situation as others with whom one shares common interests). The images of power are not tied to the display of an individual political or power-related causality – and the images are not a projection of a monological power.

One can then raise questions as to the role political power and the sphere of the political play in our lives. There are more and more aspects of life that are political, while at the same time politics is becoming less and less profiled. In the past, politics was more something that was coercively thrust over the people from above. Politics have since become more pervasive. Everything is political, and the coercive role, which otherwise can have a structuring function, becomes increasingly difficult to establish. The statements of the respondents are not particularly characterised by markedly ideological ponderings or projects. As such, the study does not produce any universal understandings of power; rather, we witness more fragmented conceptions of society and power. At the same time, individual understandings varies in relation to varying spheres. This also has implications for the conceptions of power: none of the respondents narrowly construct their understandings on the basis of the instructions of the "grand narratives". For example, none of the respondents are pure, "hardcore" liberals who narrowly perceive the state as their enemy, the root of all evil.

Conversely, none of the respondents are unambiguously left wing, i.e. regard the capitalists as their enemy, the cause of all their problems, etc. Instead, more limited aspects form the framework surrounding the "narrative" or the understanding of power. For example, the basis can be comprised of bits about developing countries, gender, traffic, etc. Many perceive the world of power as an aggregated and symbolic world – and power is predominantly systemic. While "Peter", the farmer, clearly regards the bureaucrats in the EU and Copenhagen as his opponents, one can nevertheless hardly claim that there is any construction of definite conceptions of enemies in his mind, which is quite characteristic. Borrowing from Laclau & Mouffe (1985), it might be possible to claim that while antagonistic conceptions are generally absent, the relationship exists as an *agonism*, i.e. a sense of opposition not sufficiently strong enough to be regarded as an "enemy". There are no tendencies towards simple dichotomies and conceptions of enemies in the understandings of power. To the extent that they can actually be observed, one can sooner describe them in terms of the emergence of an "agonism" than an actual "antagonism": a potentially threatening "otherness" is thus considered to be a *legitimate otherness*, i.e. as an *adversary* rather than as an enemy.

The study indicates that the images are more subtle than one otherwise might have expected. Power is an unavoidable factor in modern life. We do not believe in simple solutions that are able to get power and repression (the conception thereof) to "disappear" or eradicate fundamental inequalities, liberating the individual from constricting bonds. We are more likely to believe that there are many forms of power, many groupings with power, as well as many aspects and factors that either impede or advance the use of force and room for manoeuvring. Consequently, considerable emphasis is placed on *individual autonomy*. We empower ourselves individually: i.e. we create our own arena of possibility and we learn to work within it. Collective mobilisation is too difficult – we are still unable to achieve agreement about a shared project. In this sense, collective political identifications appear to be less prominent than previously was the case – and the image of society as being divided in clearly defined political groups is correspondingly less clear. This does not *necessarily* express the permanent state of affairs, i.e. perhaps it is merely a "recession" in terms of mobilisation. However, society no longer appears to be characterised by clear, recognisable conflicts and class relations; the collective contexts that are associated with them are also less prominent. Power was more clearly identifiable in the past – it was played out in the parliament or in relation to the workplace. It is now "everywhere" and "diffuse", which

people would appear to have recognised – either directly or indirectly. Contrarily, while power might previously have been configured in terms of hierarchy, institutions and distant authorities, power has also become conspicuous in many different ways.

There can be great variations in the perception of which actors possess power in the immediate sphere and which ones wields power on a greater, aggregated level. Power is definitely not perceived in narrow terms in relation to the workplace; rather, it is seen in relation to general, overriding (economic and political) systems. Local politics are also generally experienced as something entirely different than parliamentary politics. Not only do many people vote for different parties in the different elections, but the democratic experience and the sense of immediate vs. distant politics are quite detached from one another in the minds of the respondents. There are relatively loose couplings between power in the immediate and distant spheres. It is typical that the immediate sphere can be easily concretised, while the distant sphere is more diffuse. It is quite possible that one understanding of power exists in the immediate sphere (which is often practice-based) while an entirely different understanding exists in the distant sphere (typically a systemic understanding). In other words, it is not that the conception of power in one sphere or on one level "sets" the understanding of power in the other spheres/levels.

Finally, one can reflect over what *mediation* in itself means for the conception of power and democracy in modern society. While I lack the data to cast light on these questions, there would appear to be reason to assume that the increased role of the media in society has consequences for the way people perceive these phenomena. Perhaps it is the mediation itself – which particularly casts light on the "big" democracy – that produces the paradoxical result that power is experienced as "diffuse" and systemic, as it indirectly gets people to provide contrasting perspectives on power in relation to "small democracy" and the distant politics, respectively. One could then assume that merely the circumstance that the media tends to focus on the "big democracy" to a higher degree than the "small democracy" means something for our perception of democracy. In this connection it might be particularly remarkable that the big democracy appears to be well illuminated and discussed but simultaneously very diffuse and difficult to understand and possibly "structural" as a result. On the other hand, one ought to be open to an interpretation according to which the media possibly deserves credit for the hints of registered appearances of "agonisms", i.e. a sense of legitimate opposition as opposed to the antagonisms and more hostile enemy relations that

characterised the class-society. The mere circumstance that the various groups and positions in society are constantly (potentially) exposed and concretely are present in the mediated and public space can unto itself have a dampening effect on the "angst towards foreigners", or serve to increase understanding for – and familiarity with – concrete otherness, thereby reducing the potential for conflict for the benefit of a more constructive dynamic.

Perhaps it is slightly surprising that so many respondents indicate that power is structural. However, there is not a widespread sense of powerlessness stemming from this perception. Power, apparently, is not markedly concrete, localisable or positionable. Reference is made in this regard to conglomerates of politicians, bureaucrats, experts, interest organisations, "big wigs" and capital – everything that is not specifically associated to the "lifeworld". Nevertheless, it is not possible to find a clear basis for the existence of a *dichotomy* between that which could pointedly be claimed to concern the *system* vs. *lifeworld* (Habermas, 1981). While people might well experience power to be systemic, they do not generally feel distant from the systems (though it does occur). Thus, there does not seem to be a fundamentally powerless or antagonistic relationship between "system" and "lifeworld". People do sometimes experience the systems as dauntingly powerful, repressive and nepotistic. However, on the other hand they also use the very same systems, discussing with them, living *in and with* these systems, whether it is the actual political-administrative systems, IT-systems, interest organisations or others.

Instead of "the others have power", the motto of this study could well be: "I've got power". In this context, as well as in relation to Damgaard's and Lockwood's studies, it might well be possible to talk of three distinguishable historic, welfare state epochs and types of society, and that this itself makes a difference:

Lockwood operates in the *industry- and class society climax*: he stresses the relationship between employer and employee. The conception of power can be determined to be: us/them-dichotomy.

Damgaard operates in the period of *corporatism*: he stresses the relationship between the political-administrative system and the two sides of the labour market. Organisational power dominates this conception of power and subsequently, "the others have power".

The study at hand focuses on the *epoch of the information society*. The "systems" and "the power of the system" are stressed here. The conception of power is associated with

various fields and policy areas and is possibly "diffuse", but can be determined to be: "I've got power".

Conclusions

It is evident that the societal context is particularly determinant in terms of where we look and what we search for when we strive to uncover relations of power. However, an important conclusion is that the conception of power – whether this is an "us vs. them" or "me vs. the system" dichotomy – does not equate with political apathy, alienation or impotence. To the contrary, there is a relatively pronounced experience of capacity to make a difference as well as a critical, active scepticism towards power.

A clear characteristic in the study is thus, that average Danes have a considerable need for autonomy and a marked lack of submissiveness vis-à-vis authorities. Active forms of getting involved and faith in one's own abilities constitute peoples decisive preparedness in the power game. Confidence in individual capacity to make a difference is considerable, as is the will to "take care of things yourself" and to hold authorities accountable, irrespective of whether one is on disability pension, a cabdriver, or farmer, and irrespective of whether it is one's boss, the bank, the municipality or the law that one has a problem(s) with. Remarkably, the respondents are not reticent to "admit" to possessing forms of power, if they feel this to be the case. If there is one thing to be learned from this study and the examination of the statements made by the respondents, it is that it is largely a tale of *empowerment* – and about the will to "take care of business" oneself, manage on one's own and refuse to be discouraged or just roll over and accept things the way they are. This is the case with the stories of "Scot" and "Dave", who refuse to submit to the given conditions and the established framework – and document a stubborn insistence on one's own autonomy or belief in a better world. It is difficult to imagine more "impossible" or "utopian" projects than those embarked upon by barkeeper Dave and IT-programmer Scot – the one engaging the authorities in a struggle over the closing of a local pub, the other working to "invent" a new and just basis for distribution for the solution of problems pertaining to global disparities, hunger, and an unjust distribution of resources. This is not so much a question of whether their projects succeed or not; rather, it is an illustration of the determination to make a difference. There is definitely power at stake in their approach – and it is possible to point towards concrete manifestations of repression,

(abuse of) power or systems that make errors, tie up and subjugate – but the attitude is remarkably: that can be changed! Furthermore, not only is this picture relatively unambiguous, it might be even more interesting that the picture is overwhelmingly the same, almost regardless of the base of resources (human as well as socio-economic), as well as the societal position from which things are observed.

Cf. Giddens, individuals in the late modern society are not able to merely "lean up against" specific (inherited) identities with their associated conceptions of power, as in Lockwood's type of society. *Images of power* thus becomes much more attached to *reflexivity*. Furthermore, in the course of this process, mediated understandings as well as subjective, life world experiences, and understandings of "power as system" are all mixed together. Perhaps this is the very reason why the experience of power also becomes fragmented and unclear. There are far fewer fixed anchoring points in contemporary society than those which the grand narratives, ideologies or class conflicts made available to us in the form of unambiguous understandings of power and the established and coherent forms of order. Such fixed anchoring points are far more difficult to uphold in a decentralised society. The consequence is naturally the experience of vagueness or polycentrism. When we are no longer able to draw on the instructions and understandings that the "grand narratives" equipped us with, perhaps we are also left with a sense of low visibility in relation to politics and power.

One could claim that a democratic problem exists if one is unable to distinguish where power is located in a society. This is a prerequisite for a living democracy in which common decisions can be made in a shared public space. The question therefore becomes how we are supposed to interpret the results of the study and what the consequences of this would appear to be in terms of "empowerment". Apparently we must interpret the most pronounced findings of the study as positive in terms of faith in one's own abilities and capacity to make a difference. In that sense, the actors appear to be both resourceful and active – there is a high degree of empowerment. However, the same results can be "spun" differently – given a more cynical interpretation – which emphasises the discovery of experiences of power as "system". According to such an interpretation, society is characterised by complexity; politics have "exploded". Politics unfold in closed arenas, which has rendered us without a chance to be able to observe where power is to be found. We cannot catch a glimpse of the powerful, as it

is difficult to see who is making the decisions: power is diffuse. The citizens are abandoned, left confused and disoriented in the democratic arena.

However, I am not immediately inclined towards subscribing to the latter interpretation, which is particularly due to the marked widespread perception among the respondents that power is regarded as being *legitimate*: Power is for the many – as opposed to being reserved for the few. In the past, the perception of power was presumably predominantly conceived as an oppressive, compulsive, repressive and authoritarian power. Perhaps it is now sooner regarded as a "necessary evil" – decisions must be made, goods must be distributed. Power is thus also experienced today as a constructive resource, and within this observation is also the germ for an explanation of the apparently paradoxical and conflicting phenomenon that power is perceived as structural and systemic, while at the same time most people continue to believe that "I've got power".

The general picture documents that the individual members of society want to be taken seriously. They indicate a high degree of individual autonomy, which attests to a relatively high degree of *subjective* and *objective empowerment*. However, this does not necessarily mean that we are in the midst of conditions that are defined by an absolute and all-inclusive form of democratic empowerment. In other words, there is not necessarily talk of a type of political learning, which e.g. bears an active and sustainable participatory engagement. In that sense it is "only" reasonable to talk about the experience of certain opportunities to make a difference. Conversely, this experience appears to be quite widespread; if nothing else, this would appear to attest to and foster optimism for considerable democratic potential.

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[1] The primary questions in this investigation are: How are power relationships experienced in society and which forms of power are pointed out? On a more fundamental level, how is the understanding of power basically constructed (e.g. dichotomically or pluralistic)? From where is power seen? Distinction is made between foundations in the local and the more distant power relations on the one hand, and on the other hand, a practical vs. symbolic consciousness and mediated understanding. How is one's own role experienced? How is engagement perceived – e.g. does one experience that one has the opportunity to make a difference?

[2] The methodological approach in the study is based on qualitative interviews with pre-selected respondents. The social construction of concepts pertaining to power (and relevant processes and dynamics) are attempted to be understood – factors that studies relying on quantitative questionnaires have problems capturing. The focus is therefore on the stories of people's lives, which first and foremost illustrate the individuals' own interpretations of reality and the manifest understandings of power of the respondents. The study simultaneously transcends this level, as it also attempts to expose the more latent structuring mechanisms and perceptions of power. 29 interviews were conducted in the course of the study. Of these, 11 have become portraits in the book. The aim of the interviews has been to capture a broad range of respondents representing varying positions in society, varying angles. The interview persons have therefore been selected on the basis of a number of "objective" characteristics, e.g. gender, age, occupation, geography, etc.

[3] Castells (1997) introduces a distinction between resistance identities and project identities (individuals belonging to the latter group are reflexive and consensus-oriented). Castells also forwards – for the sake of completion – a third identity type, *legitimacy identity*; however this is not the object of further discussion in this connection. Castells himself regards the other two types as being central to the information society.

[4] Ontological certainty is merely one – though extremely important – form of feeling of certainty. Certainty and confidence are crucial instruments for the individual in their daily routine, including faith in "abstract systems". According to Giddens, abstract systems are the societal institutions that individuals have ("blind") faith in, i.e. they rely on their expertise, as the individuals themselves have little or no knowledge in the area in question, e.g. the health sector (Giddens, 1991). The goal for the choices and decisions that are tied to this reflexivity include the establishment of ontological certainty. A self- identity with great ontological certainty is therefore, in Giddens' terms, the basis for dealing with the plethora of the existential questions of life and are thus in and of themselves a form of protection against angst and chaos.

[5] Perhaps it is the media itself (also via its self-understanding) that is disseminating the sense that the media is powerful. We can always contact the tabloids when offended.

[6] A phenomenological approach in which the respondents can describe their own opinions and understandings demonstrated itself to be preferable. It easily becomes a different discourse, if one is asked to point to power in a quantitative survey. As a respondent, it must feel a little bit like being a member of the jury in the Eurovision Song Contest: none of the songs are particularly striking, but somebody has to be given the 12 points!