

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Heinrich Popitz.** *Phenomena of Power: Authority, Domination, and Violence.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. \$60.00, 240 pp., hardcover (9780231175944).

**A**warm welcome must be given to the translation of this classic, indubitably one of the most important texts ever written about power. Heinrich Popitz was one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most original, postwar German sociologists. He was deeply cultured, empirically astute and able to contribute to the long-standing German tradition of philosophical anthropology. But this book is also anthropological in another sense, as its precise title suggests. It concentrates on the micro-foundations of power, in this being indebted to the example of Simmel—though with clear parallels to the work of Erving Goffman constantly coming to the reader’s mind. One can characterize the book as a phenomenology of power, offering many insights into power mechanics of all sorts, few of which can be mentioned in a review but most of which occasion either thought or appreciation. The book is written with lapidary clarity; it was designed for students and has virtually no notes. To be set against this, however, is a very useful introductory essay by Andreas Gottlich and Jochen Dreher, placing the contributions of this book within the context of many of the key discussions of power of the quarter century that has followed its original publication.

The book opens with a general discussion of power, claiming simply that power is ubiquitous to human affairs, and that attempts to imagine social life without it are mistaken. The anthropological element at work here—the presence of the political problem—is ably argued and to this reviewer, wholly convincing. This should not be misunderstood. Though the book is largely about power in the simplest sense, as the imposition of the will of the few on the many, it is well aware of the arts of resistance—perhaps not surprisingly as Popitz’s own father was executed as one of the plotters against Hitler.

The first and longest part of the book, originally a text in its own right, claims that there are four forms of enforcing power. The first is—quite properly very much against the view of Hannah Arendt—that of violence, with striking insights offered into both glorification and indifference. The second form is that of threatening and being threatened, a rather more instrumental view of the workings of

power. Insights again abound, notably in a superb passage on the dilemmas faced by an enforcer. But it is in the third form, that of authority, that Popitz is most striking, and he devotes two chapters to the subject. What matters most is the acceptance of authority, based on a desire for recognition. Popitz writes about the social psychology involved superbly, as he does later when explaining the loyalty that the disadvantaged often have given their respect for a basic order within whose boundaries they can manage their lives. Here too, one must note the subtle historical digression about changing forms of social subjectivity, the last of—that of the recognition of individuality—has special features that the author elucidates with great skill. The final form is termed technical, with reference to Aristotle. What is meant here is the accumulation of properties and systems of knowledge which provide the terms of reference within which most of us have to live.

The second part of the book concentrates on stabilization. One chapter suggests that there are three routes to power, through superior organizational capacity, social solidarity and sheer coercion. These are illustrated in turn by life on a boat, within a prison camp and within an ideal-typical boarding school—with the analysis of the latter, in my own experience being simply horribly accurate. This sits a little uneasily with the first part of the book, but it does contain detailed analyses of the movements by means of which power becomes institutionalized. Another chapter is an abstract exercise seeking to establish the likely stages in the development of power, from the Neolithic to the emergence of modern bureaucratic states. The treatment here is not really successful: it places too much emphasis on the functional rather than the coercive side of power, and it is somewhat out of date.

Two criticisms can be levelled against this treatise. One is mild. There is much to be said for putting the two faces of power—if you like the zero-sum coercion of Nietzsche and the increased ‘powering’ stressed by Arendt and Parsons that can come from co-operation—right at the center of any treatment of power. Popitz knows about both faces, but clarity could be added by dealing with them more directly. The second criticism is more serious. Popitz does not have much to say about the social sources of power, oddly given his knowledge of Weber and his improvement on the great sociologist’s views at several points. The classic Weberian trinity of economic, political and ideological was developed by Gianfranco Poggi, the skilled translator of this volume, to which Michael Mann has of course added the military source of power. Popitz’s book remains a classic, but it is

also a pleasure to be able to say that there is progress in social studies—for in this one matter we have advanced!

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