

MY OWN BOOK REVIEW

Frameworks of Power: Redux

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In a lengthy career, I have written and edited many books but the one that has been consistently most cited is *Frameworks of Power*. *Frameworks* was just one of a portfolio of books. The portfolio began with my doctoral thesis (1975), followed by a thesis written as EGOS Postdoc (Clegg, 1979). It was 10 years later that *Frameworks* was published in its first edition. Other parts of the portfolio include Clegg et al. (2006), Cunha et al. (2021), Clegg and Haugaard (2012), Haugaard and Clegg (2012), and Clegg and Haugaard (2009). Some slight antecedents of *Frameworks of Power* can be seen in the earlier books, while later papers and books show traces of the seeds planted therein, some of which contributed to the second edition.

Some background on where the story began. It was written mostly in the small town of Armidale, in rural New England, in the north of the state of New South Wales in Australia. In 1985, after 9 years of working in the interdisciplinary School of Humanities at Griffith University, in Brisbane, I was appointed to the Chair of Sociology at the University of New England (UNE). Amongst my duties was taking ownership of a course dealing with 'Power and Control'. I recall that around the end of 1987 or the beginning of 1988, I decided that as I had written a number of lectures for this course, I might as well try to publish them. The first publisher to whom I sent the proposal rejected it, so I approached Sage, who accepted it. I chose Sage because they did the best job of trying to sell books to me, so I reasoned that they were a good team to join. The book was completed towards the end of 1988 whilst a visiting professor at the University of Otago, in southernmost New Zealand.

I had previously developed a card index system that cross-referenced an extensive range of photocopies of articles made for the earlier research and maintained and enlarged subsequently. These were the primary resource for the book. Rereading some of these was instructive; I formed different judgements of the merits of some of the papers that I previously did not regard so well as I did on this later reflection. In addition, I had time to read. In those days the students were mostly external, receiving cassette tapes of the lectures, so I had more time for reading and reflection than one has in the increasingly bureaucratically busy contemporary university.

Why did I write *Frameworks of Power*?

Having read and deeply absorbed Steven Lukes' (1975) elegant and economical *Power: A Radical View*, which was the dominant book on power in the 1970s, as well as having followed debates about the influence of Marx on sociological thinking, such as Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, I became increasingly dissatisfied with Lukes' third dimension of power constituted as hegemony over 'real interests'. There was a simple reason for this: dissatisfaction. There seemed to be no point from which one could pronounce on the matter of real interests without an a priori standpoint. I was well aware of the historical consequences of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist definitions of subjects' 'real interests' and the terrible consequences of these, in terms of economy and society, the millions of deaths, the gulags, and destruction. To postulate an analytical definition of subjects' 'real interests' that was theoretically ascribed seemed to me to be a consequence of an overly structural way of thinking; that correct analysis could assess and determine what interests were real for which subjects seemed unwarranted. To use a phrase that I knew from ethnomethodology, it seemed to treat people as if they were 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967). I wanted to write about power and its consequences but to do so without such assumptions.

Ethnomethodologically, we are all experimental actors in our own lives and dramas, striving to create 'standing conditions' (Harré, 1986) that enable us to work our will on the world, doing so through our biographies, our work, our organizations, sometimes in concert with others and other times in contest with them. Strategy is always a matter of striving, with no guarantees (Clegg et al., 2023), at whatever level. Power, as a process of striving to achieve will or strategy, led me to very different conceptions of power which I worked out with a pot of sharpened 2B pencils, an empty pot in which to place those that had become blunted and required re-sharpening, and many white pages that needed filling. I used the space and time required to fill these white pages by continuing earlier explorations of what is now known as critical realism (Clegg, 1983)

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as well as actor-network theory (Callon & Latour, 1981), always with a sensibility framed by the ethnomethodology that had long inspired my thinking as well as a keen historical interest, seen both in the genealogical sweep of the book from Machiavelli and Hobbes to Lukes and beyond, as well as my ability to accommodate a history of the state.

I had also read Foucault and so introduced the students in the course I was teaching to some of the arguments deriving from Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish*; I knew these were important ideas and that the students should know about them. A loose association of ideas began to form around concepts from Foucault, realism, via Bhaskar (1975), Harré (1986), and Harré and Madden (1985), and around actor-network theory, via Callon (1984) and Callon and Latour (1981). It was these resources, in retrospect, always with an ethnomethodologically inspired flavour, that, more than anything else, framed my theorizing. Above all, I strove to theorize power relations simultaneously through terms that inscribed both a theory of social order and a theory of social change. I was committed to a post-humanist ontology and so I delighted in showing power relations as a phenomenon that might be transformed by the pestilence of fleas borne by rats (Anderson, 1974) or a virus such as HIV, non-human actants of significant consequence in the scheme of their respective times.

In retrospect, in writing *Frameworks* I was following a path that I had first charted in a book called *Organization, Class and Control* (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980). The structure of the book sought to try and start at the beginning and trace debates that subsequently arose, to provide a concluding focus on what seemed to be of contemporary relevance. Without being familiar with the genealogical method at the time of writing the 1980 book, this method approximated to it.¹ For me, it was simply a way of trying to make sense of the historical sweep of significant ideas in a field, from a theoretical standpoint.

What did and did not happen, next?

In 1989, I left Australia, which had been my home for 13 years, and moved elsewhere for three and a half years, a move that I rapidly came to regret, for a variety of reasons. What I did not regret was initiating a shift from a sociological context to one framed by management and organization studies. By now I was embedded in the Sage catalogue,² when in 1992 I proposed a

Handbook of Organization Studies (which resulted in Clegg et al., 1996, 2006), the proposal was well received, as was the subsequent volume. It must have been around this time that Sage asked me to produce a second edition of *Frameworks*. Little did they or I know at the time that it would not be delivered until 30 years later.

Many things delayed it; a return to Australia, job moves with new expectations and obligations, a shift in the professional landscape that saw books devaluing and ranked papers becoming the currency of careers, as well as a great many other research and publishing projects in which to become entangled. Sometime, in the wake of the second edition of *Power: A Radical View* (Lukes, 2005), I thought that I should attempt to do the same thing with *Frameworks*. Many things transpired to make the gestation of this second volume unduly long. The reasons were complex; computer systems had changed; I had nothing that could read the floppy disks on which I had written the first draft using institutional computers. Other projects that required my input constantly arose and demanded immediate attention, with many other book projects also in play. Time slipped away.

Initially, sometime around 2014 or so, I started to prepare to revise the book. My thoughts at the time were that I would systematically comb the pages of what had been launched as the *Journal of Power*, founded by my friend Mark Haugaard in 2008 (which became the *Journal of Political Power* in 2011 to aid university librarians in not putting it in the engineering code of the Dewey system). There were many excellent contributions that I initially thought that I would incorporate into the increasingly elusive second edition. I started the exercise while on leave; but for a reason I cannot recall, I had to drop the task; other things needed more immediate attention, as was increasingly the case. That was just as well because Mark Haugaard (2020) had done something similar to what I had thought of initially doing, rendering that exercise redundant. Also, I realized that the narrative arc of the original book might not easily accommodate all the new material. Anyway, I had managed not to make much progress beyond marking up those papers that I might consider . . . but never used.

The second edition

It was only in 2022, in the middle of the pandemic, that I returned to the task of thinking about a second edition, inspired by an online presentation on the current state of the world made to the Baltic seminar, organized by David Jones. Finally, the trigger to prompt the second edition was fired. I started to write, with no distractions other than some deeply unfulfilling online tutorials, with first-year students whose presence in the tutorials was minimal. After 3 weeks of intensive work, I had drafted two new chapters; a revised introduction

¹ The structure of the 1980 book was influenced by that of *The New Criminology: For a Social Theory of Deviance* by Taylor et al. (1973). Peter Hopkins, the editor at Routledge and Kegan Paul, asked David Dunkerley and I to do something on similar lines for the sociology of organizations, which became *Organization, Class and Control* (1980). *The New Criminology* had been a very successful volume; hence the request. *Organization, Class and Control* also proved to be successful.

² In 1990 Sage published *Modern Organizations: Organization Studies in the Postmodern World*, a book commissioned by Sue Jones, who at that time was their redoubtable social science editor.

and a new concluding chapter. I worked from a typescript that my friend Daphne Freeder had produced for me for an earlier occasion, correcting files that Sage supplied.

At this stage, I had not changed the text of the original edition very much, just written new material. As I re-read most of the book for the first time in many years, I felt that my views had not changed substantially and that I still largely agreed with my earlier self. Some slight modifications were made to dated examples from the original text; other changes were made at the proof stage. As a result of re-reading the text that I had written long ago, I decided that cutting it up with debates that had subsequently occurred would only make the text needlessly complicated, so I largely let it be.

The new material was focused on extending the part of the book that few citations seemed to bother with, the discussion of the sociology of the state that concluded the first edition. I developed the Baltic seminar slides to focus on the conjunction of the COVID-19 pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and concerns about energy supplies and the climate crisis, using the framing of the model of circuits of power developed in the original edition. I was aided in thinking about this by virtue of a couple of papers that I had written on related themes in the preceding years (Clegg, 2014; Dery & Clegg, 2015). These ideas became 'A history of the present'.

Revising that book for the second edition, reading it again, I realized that over the more than 30 years since I had written it, I had not changed my mind in major ways about much that had preoccupied me in the first edition. To be honest, I was not sure if my assurance in the words of all those years ago was a sign of confidence in what I had initially written and a failure to move further or, perhaps, an indication that I had put down roots and flourished from their planting. I preferred to think it was the latter. What I ended up doing was to pull some other long-standing ideas into the frame, as Roy Suddaby's (2025, NP 59) perceptive review of the second edition understood. He wrote that 'the novel contribution of the second edition of *Frameworks* is in how it draws our attention to history's role in masking power'.

My ideas shifted register in the second edition; while still using the frame of the circuits model, I followed my favourite social theorist, the late Zygmund Bauman (2000), a great scholar whom I knew and admired greatly, into thinking of these circuits as more liquid flows and processes, changing the contours of power relations as they flow across materialities and consciousnesses, organizing and disorganizing. That these flows are not fixed revealed the inappropriateness of the metaphor that my early visualization of my ideas as 'circuits' created; while circuits suggested stability to some readers, that was never my intention, but I did not make that clear in the prose. I admit, the metaphor now seems inappropriate; today, I talk and write of flows, but the term,

'circuits', has long acquired its own provenance, being quite often used.

Lineages, contributions and impact

The book remains influential. The circuits model sought to move beyond earlier conceptions that treated power either as a possession held by actors or as a structural property embedded within institutions. Instead, it conceptualized power as a dynamic process constituted through interrelated circuits operating across multiple levels of social reality. By integrating insights from various strands of social and organization theory, the circuits of power framework provided a sophisticated means of understanding how power is simultaneously exercised, reproduced, and transformed.

Earlier approaches frequently emphasized either the episodic exercise of power between actors or the structural conditions that enabled power relations, approaches that were explored in earlier chapters in the book. Neither perspective alone adequately explained how power became stabilized over time. Rather than viewing power as an attribute possessed by individuals, I conceived it as a relational phenomenon produced through interconnected processes operating at different levels. The framework identifies three interconnected circuits: episodic power, dispositional power, and facilitative power. Episodic power concerned observable interactions between actors, including conflict, negotiation, resistance, and influence. It corresponds most closely to traditional conceptions of power associated with Weber (1978) and Dahl (1957). Dispositional power refers to the social rules, norms, identities, and meanings that define what actions are legitimate and possible. Facilitative power concerns the technologies, systems, organizational designs, and material arrangements that structure action. These circuits intersect through what, following Callon (1984), I termed 'obligatory passage points', understood as strategic locations through which power relations must flow. Control of these passage points enables actors to shape organizational outcomes and reproduce power relations.

One of the model's most important contributions, I think, was the resolution it proposed of long-standing agency-structure debates. During the 1980s organization theory was characterized by tensions between perspectives emphasizing individual action and those emphasizing structural determination. *Frameworks* demonstrated that agency and structure are not separate explanatory domains but mutually constitutive elements within circuits of power: Actors exercise power within organizational settings, yet their actions are conditioned by established rules, meanings, and technological arrangements. Simultaneously, these structures can be modified through strategic action. The framework therefore provides understanding of how organizational stability and change coexist.

It was the elements of theoretical synthesis that distinguished this work from many other competing approaches. Whereas resource-dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and contingency theories (Hickson et al., 1971) emphasized contextual constraints, the circuits framework showed how power emerged through interactions between agents, institutions, and material systems. Consequently, the model offered an explanation of organizational processes that was richer than existing organization theories and incorporated a much wider scope of social and political, as well as organization, theory. The framework also helped reorient power research away from purely coercive conceptions. Much earlier organizational research focused on resources, producing various lists of 'power resources' as if these could be thought of without context, for which French and Raven (1950) was the model.

Has the book had an impact and made an enduring contribution, one that has legacy? I think so. It is my most widely cited product, with about five and a half thousand citations. Several of these I knew already, while some were quite surprising. So, with a mixture of purposefulness and delight in the random, I investigated a sample. Two, in particular, surprised and pleased me, because they were not what I might have expected. They were Swift (2013) writing about circuits of power in 'Poet-patron relations in late-medieval defences of women' and Flore (2021) writing about 'The circuits-of-power framework and dance institutionalisation in Cameroon'. What intrigues me is that a book written on power relations in 1989, as a contribution to social and political theory in a sociological and organization studies accent, travelled and was translated to these delightful realms of scholarly interest.

Perhaps the most visible empirical impact of the circuits of power framework has occurred in information systems research. Silva and Backhouse (2003) adapted the model to examine the institutionalization of information systems and demonstrated how technological implementation is simultaneously a technical and political process. Their work showed that information systems become institutionalized not merely because of technical efficiency but because actors successfully mobilize power across episodic, dispositional, and facilitative circuits. This study became one of the most influential applications of the framework and established the circuits model as an important analytical tool within information systems scholarship (Backhouse et al., 2006; Kromidha, 2017; Silva & Fulk, 2012; Simeonova et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2010). Technologies, performance metrics, information systems, and administrative procedures all become processes through which power flows, an insight particularly valuable for studies of contemporary organizations in which control increasingly occurs through subtle forms of regulation rather than direct supervision. Scholars found that the circuits of power framework provided a means of explaining why apparently rational technological innovations frequently encounter resistance. Rather than treating resistance

as irrational or technically deficient, the framework highlights how competing interests, organizational identities, and existing systems of control shape the institutionalization and use of technology (Jaspersen et al., 2002; Silva & Backhouse, 2003). This contribution significantly broadened understandings of technology implementation by emphasizing political dynamics often overlooked in technical analyses.

Beyond information systems, the model has had considerable influence on studies of organizational change and strategic management. Davenport and Leitch (2005), in work on research policy, used the framework to examine how strategic ambiguity could operate as a facilitative circuit of power. Their research demonstrated that power is not always exercised through rigid control but may also involve creating conditions that enable actors to exercise discretion and innovation. This application highlighted the framework's flexibility and its capacity to explain both constraining and enabling forms of power. Edwards and Moschetti's (2021) paper on policy changes in international organizations likewise applied the framework. Vaara and colleagues (2005) researched how language can be an organizational technology of power.

Another significant contribution has been the framework's integration of multiple traditions within power research. Prior to the publication of *Frameworks of Power*, theories of power were frequently developed within distinct intellectual traditions that emphasized different mechanisms of power, including decision-making, resource dependence, structural domination, and disciplinary control, often with limited integration across perspectives (Dahl, 1957; Foucault, 1977; Lukes, 1974). The circuits model instead demonstrated that different conceptions of power illuminate different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Episodic circuits reflect traditional decision-making perspectives; dispositional circuits capture ideological and normative dimensions; facilitative circuits incorporate disciplinary and technological forms of control. The framework therefore operates as a meta-theoretical synthesis rather than a rival paradigm. I think that it was this interdisciplinary reach, taking in political and social theory as well as political science, sociology, and management and organization studies, that allowed the book to travel well rather than being confined to a specific discourse. It is this integrative quality that has contributed substantially to the model's longevity, I think. Scholars from diverse theoretical backgrounds have been able to employ the framework because it accommodates rather than excludes alternative perspectives.

The framework's influence remains evident in contemporary debates concerning power and organizations. Carter et al. (2024), in dialogue about the second edition, argue that the circuits model remains highly relevant because it directs attention to the inequalities, conflicts, and political processes that shape organizational life. They suggest that many contemporary organizational phenomena cannot be adequately understood without analysing the power relations that underpin

them. In an era characterized by digital platforms, algorithmic governance, and global organizational networks (Zuboff, 2019), organizations increasingly rely on technologies that structure behaviour through data collection, surveillance, performance metrics, and automated decision systems (Zorina et al., 2021). Drawing on the circuits of power framework, Pastuh and Geppert (2020) argue that algorithmic management is best understood not as a neutral technological tool but as an integrated system of power in which software infrastructures, organizational rules, and labour relations interact to shape worker conduct and reinforce control.

Conclusion: the pervasiveness of power and its futures

The legacy of the book, I would like to think, is to accentuate several key points for future research. First, that power is neither a possession nor is it wholly a structure, a matter of dimensions or levels. Second, power relations are processual, relational, dynamic and creative; they have complex and interesting histories that frame discussion down the centuries. Third, power relations can be positive as well as negative (Carter et al., 2024; Cunha et al., 2021). Fourth, a theory of power must simultaneously be a theory of social order and of social change, of reproduction and transformation. Fifth, power relations are everywhere, constitutive of all social relations, which is what has enabled the circuits approach to engage empirically with a large range of substantive topics as well as major theories, such as institutional approaches (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). Substantively, power relations flow everywhere; they inhabit paradoxes (Berti et al., 2026; Cunha et al., 2021; Oliveira & Clegg, 2015), projects (Clegg & Biygautane, 2025; Liu et al., 2022, 2026), hospitals (Major et al., 2025, 2018), international conflicts (Clegg, 2024), the Sydney Opera House (Gaim et al., 2022), Russian authoritarianism (Clegg, 2023), news media (Ninan et al., 2022), stakeholder management (Ninan et al., 2020), professional service firms, such as accounting consultancies (Lawrence, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2016), etc. The pervasiveness of power relations in every aspect of social and organizational life makes power the central concept of the social sciences (Clegg & Haugaard, 2009), a happy coincidence for a career I feel very fortunate to have (mostly) enjoyed.

By conceptualizing power as a dynamic process operating through interconnected episodic, dispositional, and facilitative circuits, the framework transcended traditional distinctions between agency and structure, coercion and consent, and micro and macro levels of analysis. Its integration of diverse theoretical traditions has enabled it to remain relevant across changing intellectual contexts. More than three decades after its initial publication, the circuits of power framework provides a useful analytical lens for understanding power relations, wherever they may be found.

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