

**Games on Power (and the Lack thereof):
Theater of the Oppressed in the Political Science classroom**

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Abstract

Theater of the oppressed, in a plain (if not unspirited) formulation as a set of games for actors and non-actors meant to prompt a reflection on power (and the lack thereof), is an extraordinary tool in any political science class. Theater of the oppressed gives instructors means to lead students to know what power is on the basis of their direct experience. In other words, theater of the oppressed let students explore the meaning of conceptual discussions about power using interactions in which they take a role by making those interactions the object of a critical reflection. In a fundamental way, theater of the oppressed allows both students and instructors to overcome the limitations of disembodied forms of knowledge (and, consequently, of disembodied forms of teaching and learning), i.e. conceptualizations dissociated from the experiences they describe, interpret and explain.

Introduction

Theater of the oppressed, in a plain (if not unspirited) formulation as a set of games for actors and non-actors meant to prompt a reflection on power (and the lack thereof), is an extraordinary tool in any political science class. Theater of the oppressed gives instructors means to lead students to know what power is on the basis of their direct experience. In other words, theater of the oppressed let students explore the meaning of conceptual discussions about power using interactions in which they take a role by making those interactions the object of a critical reflection. In a fundamental way, theater of the oppressed allows both students and instructors to overcome the limitations of disembodied forms of knowledge (and, consequently, of disembodied forms of teaching and learning), i.e. conceptualizations dissociated from the experiences they describe, interpret and explain.

In this context, one should add that all forms of disembodied knowledge are oppressive. When knowledge is reified as a true description of reality, when it is severed from the context in which it emerged, transplanted to another, and then given to beginners as a sort of revelation or creed, then that knowledge becomes a vehicle of oppression, not a means for enlightenment. Indeed, such seems to be the case when students have to swallow knowledge on the account of its internal consistency and its supposed ability to make sense of data other people collected. If it is apparent neither what students can do with that knowledge nor the role of students as creators of new knowledge, then the teaching-learning experience ceases to spark the flame of self-discovery and freedom, and of true knowledge. Not in vain theater of the oppressed evokes and develops the themes of the pedagogy of the oppressed. Theater of the oppressed can be a means to overcome oppressive pedagogical methods that serve poorly the purpose of making students engage in an inquiry into the fundamental questions of politics.

In this paper, first I would like to elaborate a little bit more on the oppressive nature of disembodied knowledge. In a second place, I will describe theater of the oppressed and its liberating power in the classroom. Finally, in a third section, I will present some preliminary results of my experience using theater of the oppressed as a means of re-embodiment knowledge in a class on international politics.

1. (Dis)embodied knowledge / (dis)embodied teaching-learning experience

We are all familiar with methodological quarrels in social sciences. Many of those quarrels revolve around the validity of our knowledge. Does our knowledge reflect underlying structures of real phenomena that we can capture in general models? Or, on the contrary, is our knowledge always contingent upon the perspective of the knower, i.e. liable to give a fragmented and politically loaded picture due to the knower's preconceptions and interests? Put it this way, there seems not to be anything left but a

choice between a nomothetic science and a partisan social critique. Unrelentingly, in our discipline, many adhere to the former option. Many indeed do it with the conviction that the scientific method would fade away if we ever conceded that at the core of our well-established propositions there is just a web of metaphors.

Is this fear well founded? I do not think so. The scientific method does not have to fall prey to a metaphorical spider that secretes only poetry. We have merely to come to terms with the fact that the language in which we articulate our propositions carries already a perspective. In other words, we merely have to acknowledge that the underlying structure that we posit in our analyses, by means of basic metaphors, is always contingent upon the purpose of understanding and explaining a social practice and that such a purpose brings with it all the baggage of our preconceptions and presumptions. Apparently, this modesty could be well-embedded in our scientific practice: formal models that depict social agents as rational are just heuristic devices with which we generate hypotheses; our statistical models are nothing but means to quantify our uncertainty, etc. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The apodictic tone with which many pieces of research are written is just reminiscent of a nomothetic standpoint. On a more fundamental level, those pieces of research are a reflection of a disembodied approach to knowledge that has equally disembodiment, disempowering, oppressive effects in the context of the teaching-learning experience.

But, why is it that knowledge is embodied? In few words, the more basic categories with which we describe our world reflect the spatial constraints that circumscribe the repertoire of our actions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). We define –in a stronger language *we enact* (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991)– the world in which we interact with other people and, more generally, with objects from the vantage point of our body. Objects are, with respect to us, up or down. They are big or heavy, warm or cold, close or separated. We can see them or not, move towards them, exert physical force on them or feel their force on us, and so on. The most remarkable consequence of this embodied, physical experience is that it provides the key to organize our experience in our social domain. Thus, to be happy is to be up; an important day is a big day; difficulties are a heavy burden; affection is warmth; intimacy is closeness; to know is to see; etc.

From this basic level, we can move on and unravel complex webs of metaphors. For example, at the core of our moral reasoning various metaphors serve as a basic frame of reference. One of the most fundamental metaphors with which we reason in the moral domain holds that morality is a kind of accounting. This basic metaphor becomes unfolded in various types: morality as reciprocity, as retribution, as restitution, as distribution, and so on. We can go on to describe the metaphors that underlie theories such as rational choice theory and reveal its connection to metaphors of morality. We will find that one of the most important ones are that well-being is wealth, that such wealth is a compound of values, and that those values are all comparable and subject to an optimizing reasoning.

As such, there is nothing objectionable about reasoning by means of conceptualizing phenomena in a metaphorical way. We cannot do without them. Our bodily perception gives us the key to our mental conception. The matter is that we easily allow ourselves to be thought by our metaphors rather than thinking with them. We go about thinking as if we ignored the vast array of metaphors that give us conflicting conceptualizations of the domains they map. A case in point is the way in which we represent the self in a metaphorical way. One instance is the picture of the self as an object amenable to control (*I'm in full control of myself; I lost myself*). Another is the self as a location (*are you out of your mind?*). Another one is the subject and its self as a pair represented with the help of a set of roles, such as a parent and a child or a master and a servant (*I should nurture myself; I'm the master of myself*). Finally, there are metaphors of the self at odds with each other: the metaphor of multiple selves or of an essential self. We may begin our reasoning by positing one frame of reference and then, unadvertedly, we allow that frame drag our attention beyond the point where that frame was appropriate. We then forget that such a frame is just a piece, no matter how large it can be, of a much greater jigsaw puzzle. This is said not to deny that we can know anything but to recall that our knowledge is embedded in a set of representations that makes that knowledge incomplete, always fallible, and in need of constant revision.

On this account, we cannot be contented with following some decision-making analyses to their utmost implications, setting aside the issue that they rely on a lopsided representation of our well-being (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). In some contexts, wealth is an adequate proxy of well-being, but not in others. When our well-being hinges upon activities that have a value in themselves, the metaphor of well-being as wealth gives a distorted representation of the issues at hand. To undo the reification rendered by analyses that rely on metaphors that remain below the radar, we must bring them back to the front of our conceptual work. In a fundamental way, this reflective process consists in re-embodiment: we must relocate ourselves in the context that led us to rely on a figurative map of the domain where take place the events that we interpret or explain. Then, we should adjust those figurative maps in light of what was missed, what those maps left out. This work usually takes the shape of putting into question knowledge structures that are disembodied.

In the realm of international politics, a prototypical example of a disembodied knowledge is realism. Realism is a theory that postulates that the most fundamental facts concerning the international system are that it is anarchical and pervaded by uncertainty; and that such system is populated by states that always act oriented towards maximizing their goals (i.e. they are rational), that rely primarily on their politico-military might, and whose overarching concern is their security (Mearsheimer). The validity of these assumptions is held to be universal. Their normative implications, which are multiple, are usually kept implicit as a piece of advice that we would ignore only at our own peril. Allegedly, this theory of international relations teaches how the world works and what we should do to survive in it. A student is, with respect to this body of knowledge, a recipient. The role of the instructor is to pour that knowledge into her/his students. In Paulo Freire's ([1968]1970) words, the student becomes a bank account. What the instructor has to do is merely to make some deposits.

One would say that realism is not altogether crippling. There is always room for novel applications of the theory, analogical extensions, and so on. However, for the most part, the theory remains impervious to a review of its assumptions. Realists say nothing about the gender bias on which their definition of security is based and are seemingly blind to the ways in which their narrow definition of state interests actually reflects how those interests became shaped in past interactions. Realism seems impervious to intersubjective understandings that set constraints to strategic action in the realm of international politics. Feminism and constructivism have the merit of having cast light upon the hidden premises of realism. Rather than taking its claims to general validity at face value, feminism and constructivism have revealed the extent to which realism actually embodies the metaphors of a fearful-avoidant male subject –the most common one, the Hobbesian state-of-nature/state-of-war (Tickner)–.

I claim here that a re-embodying theoretical inquiry demands a re-embodying teaching-learning experience. My point of departure is that our knowledge is embedded in a web of metaphors and that those metaphors in turn reflect bodily ways by which we engage ourselves in the world. What follows then is that we have to come back to the realm of basic bodily interactions that serve as referent of the ways in which we conceptualize power. There our students will find means to unravel and spin, on their own, multiple threads of knowledge. Let me put this differently. Our most primal bodily engagement with our world, as well as the metaphors that we build because of that bodily engagement, are the scaffold with which we climb to the top of our theoretical constructions. Once we got there, we ask students to share with us the view of what we see, unaware of how we used a bodily, metaphorical scaffold to get on our theoretical pinnacle. If, on the contrary, we make students become aware of that bodily, metaphorical scaffold, then we will enable them to re-create the knowledge experience and eventually climb to pinnacles of their own making. This reflection should ring true among many of us who put into question mystifying renditions of political processes and structures. A critique to reified descriptions of the political world, such as the description realism makes, would be well served by a retour to immediate bodily experiences of power (and the lack thereof).

2. Theater of the Oppressed in the classroom: re-embodying our inquiry on power

Let me now show how Theater of the Oppressed entered into this picture. Augusto Boal ([1974]2000) conceived of Theater of the Oppressed as a means to make ordinary people become aware of the socially constructed character of the oppression they experienced and to prompt people, on the basis of this realization, to bring about changes in their lives. From the outset, Theater of the Oppressed is a theater politically committed: committed to revolution, to a social revolution and to a revolution in theater. This revolution takes the shape of involving ordinary people from beginning to end in the making of theater. To start with, in one of its most basic forms, the *Forum Theater*, the direct experience of oppression is used as a script. However, the people themselves,

involved in the theatrical performance, set the script. Its making is not in the hands of a professional playwright who interprets what ordinary people experience. Nor is the acting in the hands of professional performers. At most, a facilitator, called by Boal “the joker”, contributes to make all the points of view heard and included. Thus, rather than being passive spectators, in the Theater of the Oppressed ordinary people become spect-actors. Finally, the process of making the script and enacting it always opens up a repertoire of alternative courses of action concerning how to change the oppressive conditions under which people live.

Forum theater is not the only way to put into motion dramatic representations to prompt people to reflect on oppressive conditions and act on them. Another one is called *Invisible Theater*. Almost in a fashion analogous to the experiments that Garfinkel (1967) and other ethnomethodologists carried out during the 1960s, Boal asked actors (not necessarily professionals, indeed many times ordinary people) to break a social routine in ways that call the attention of by-standers. This disruption is intended to make those by-standers reflect on the oppressive nature of the “common” way of doing things. One example of this *Invisible Theater* was the case of a man and a female companion who went to a women’s store to buy clothes for the former. Another “actor” suggested that such behavior was perverted. That way, the “actors” initiated a discussion concerning what people are allowed (or not) to do.

Both *Forum Theater* and *Invisible Theater* are “final” stages: the culmination of the transformation of spectators into actors and of oppressed individuals into agents of social change. The first stage is the one that most directly interests us here for the immediate purpose of teaching-learning political science. Boal realized that the alluded transformation could never be accomplished unless ordinary people started first reclaiming their own body, i.e. getting to know their bodies, their possibilities and limitations for expression and, above all, the *social distortion* of their bodies and the possibilities of rehabilitating them (Boal, [1974]2000). In other words, without having read Lakoff and Johnson, what Boal did was to make people go back to their bodily experience. He wants people to do that to decipher the meaning of oppression and to find possible ways of overcome it. For this purpose, Boal designed numerous exercises that, without difficulty, help to elicit a reflection on how we become empowered or disempowered, what it is to have power, what it is to be powerless, what power is, etc. The basic repertoire of exercises Boal worked with during the 1970s (Boal, [1974]2000) was subsequently enriched and enlarged and they are now known as *games for actors and non-actors* (Boal, 2002). Theater students who got involved in Theater of the Oppressed contributed lately to expand this repertoire. In the next section, I will describe a sub-set of those games that I chose to use in an introductory class on International Politics.

An important feature of the whole process is the role of the facilitator. The facilitator introduces participants to the games in which they take part. In the classroom, such a facilitator is the instructor and the participants the students. The instructor’s institutional role may interfere with its new role, causing some students to refrain from a free bodily engagement, due to their apprehension towards authority figures. Misgivings of this sort can be removed from the outset. The facilitator should make clear that no one

is forced to participate in the group dynamics. This validation of a non-engaging presence is held to be part of a consequence of what Theater of the Oppressed is for: no one should be oppressed, not even for the purpose of removing oppression.

With the exception of the first game to which I will refer later on, in all games participants are asked not to speak. To regain their bodies, participants must stop the continual interference of their thinking habits. By remaining silent, participants focus more intensely on the game they engage in and become acutely aware of what they do with their bodies. In Boal's (2002) words, participants take part in a *physical dialogue*: they make their bodies speak. Words would shortcut that dialogue, leading participants to resort to their preconceptions without having explored a new realm of meaning literally embodied in their actions.

After each game, the facilitator should invite participants to elaborate on the significance of their physical experience: to describe the way they acted and to share what insights they gained. If necessary, at any point the facilitator should intervene whenever other participants' comments or behavior put into question the experience of any participant. The group is thus encouraged to take into account each participant's elaboration. This validation process helps undo oppressive structures and dynamics within the group and contributes to enlarge each participant's perspective in regards the multifarious shape of their engagement in the games.

3. Physical dialogues about power (and the lack thereof)

Power is a ubiquitous concept in political science. In international politics, realism made interests and power the keys to decipher the meaning of state actions. Indeed, in a synthetic formulation, realism defines international politics as the pursuit of state's interests in terms of power. In one of its seminal formulations (Morgenthau, 1946), realism incorporated the concept of a *balance of power*, elaborated by European historians and diplomats, as a cornerstone of the analysis of the international system dynamics. One can go on and on surveying the centrality of power in studies of international politics.

For the purpose of understanding what power is, one can invoke various definitions that underscore its relational aspect, i.e. the fact that it is contingent upon the way parties exert power on each other and the way they become susceptible to such exertion (Weber; Dahl; Giddens; Foucault). However, more often than not power is reified as an attribute or as an object over which political agents, including states, strive to achieve or control (as if *acquiring power* were a synonym of *acquiring an estate*). Various games for actors and non-actors, from the repertoire of the Theatre of the Oppressed, contribute to overcome such reification. The games I use in the classroom prompt students to become aware that not only power is embedded in a relation but also that power is constituted by the ways participants impose or negotiate meaning of and in the interaction. A common feature of these games is that students can achieve the realization that power is not something that someone holds or possesses. In these games

power is the contingent outcome of the immediate validation of one's own preconceptions no matter how positive or negative they can be, i.e. empowering or disempowering, as well as the friction and resistance to such validation as experienced by participants. In games for actors and non-actors, students find that power is a mutual exertion of assertiveness and either persuasion, acquiescence, or resistance; that it is a display of intention that is always in need of interpretation. Moreover, I have found that students explore on their own, at their own pace, and consequently with a wide degree of variation, a wide gamut of connotations and meanings that they associated with the experience of power (or the lack thereof).

I will describe briefly how I have used Theater of the Oppressed in the classroom. Then I will present, in a detailed fashion, each game and the most common reflection students made on it. During the first week of class, in fall 2006 and in spring 2007, in an introductory class on international politics, I told students that we would engage in an inquiry about power relevant for the purpose of the class, based on exercises that are part of a repertoire of the Theater of the Oppressed. In spring 2007, I told students that they had to write an essay in which they had to define power. In fall 2006, I left the writing of such essay as an extra-credit option and added that they could explore analogies between interactions at the individual and at the state level. The advantage of asking students to write an essay right away is that they can recall central elements of their experience more easily. However, I found that the realizations that students achieved about power dynamics in some of those games had a lasting effect. Even in the case of essays written well after the introductory sessions, i.e. those written in fall 2006, students were able to recollect subtle details that they deemed as defining elements of their experience of power. In this case, the only significant loss was that very few students referred to some games. Besides, for the most part, there abound commonalities between the reflections made by the two classes I have taught.

I set a sequence for the games students played in class. The first game "Come my neighbor" allowed students to break the ice –something very important for freshmen– and become aware of common interests. Then, I asked students to play a game Boal calls "Person to Person" in which participants, working in pairs, have to connect parts of their body and maintain those connections in a sequence. After this, I sorted out students in groups of about five and asked them to play a coordination game: "Complete the figure." Students returned to play in pairs, this time making body images of overpowering their partners. In each round, a student tried to outdo what the other did. These games, plus the reflection on them, can take between 50 to 75 minutes.

In the following session, I asked students to work in pairs again. They played a game Boal calls "Colombian hypnosis", in which a leader makes a follower follow her/his hand wherever s/he moves it. Then, students played a game known as "the blind walk" in which a leader takes a follower from her/his hand and moves her/him across the room. The follower must keep her/his eyes closed at all times. Finally, students played a game called "the stick": they had to hold a rod of about 18 inches with the tip of their forefinger and move across the room without letting the rod fall to the ground. The leader

can push the rod in whatever direction making the follower act in accordance. In these three last games, there is always a role switch: leaders became followers and vice versa.

One important aspect of how the games were played is that students were matched in a random fashion. To enhance the effect of having to rely on a non-verbal form of communication, I asked students to walk across the room and “cover the space”: to move to any space they saw unoccupied but always maintaining a constant motion. Then, in a random fashion, I asked them to form groups or to find a partner. Let me now present some of the most common as well as some remarkable reflections that students made on the experience they had in each game.

1. Come my neighbor

In “Come my neighbor,” someone stands out from the group and says “Come my neighbor if you ...” and then refers to a personal characteristic, like, opinion, experience, etc that s/he may have in common with other people in the room. In general, students found themselves in as many disparate groups as many combinations of tastes, beliefs, and life circumstances can be. The groups fluctuated in size to a large degree. There was even an instance in each group in which the initiator was not joined by anyone (the common trait being intolerance to lactose in one case and liking calculus in another). This is always an opportunity for the facilitator to reassure students by raising awareness on the fact that some individuals have traits that make them very singular but that those are not the only trait that makes them who they are.

At first glance, this game raises awareness about diversity. Students did get to know how different they are. However, this game led participants to become aware of the fact that they shared many characteristics with other people they would ever suspect professed the same opinion or had the same taste. In a fundamental way, students had to review the schemes of what groups of people have in common.

A common theme in various reflections on this game is that it involved the exertion of leadership. By standing out, the person calling her/his neighbors became naturally a leader: someone who rallied others on the account of something shared. Some students made the point that such exertion involved a high degree of exposure and vulnerability, something apparent in the event in which no one joined the initiator. However, although less apparent, joiners-to-be had to decide whether they wanted to stand out from the group-to-be and reveal that they did not respond to the initiator’s call. This theme led a student to achieve a profound individual realization. He said he joined various groups as a means of not singling himself out. When he found himself doing this, he decided to take an alternative course of action: to respond sincerely even at the cost of not joining any group. This student wrote in his essay,

When we talk about standing, it’s not all about being heroic – doing something special or unprecedented, it (sic) also about not denying your interest, feelings, opinion even in the face of stiff opposition or solitude. That was when the game became more interesting to me. I became aware of my interests too. I became conscious of the voice within. And throughout the whole game, that is the most pressing definition I came to attach to Power;

Power is the ability to define your own voice, and be able to express it without fear of what might be the consequence. Power is breaking away from limiting assumptions we make about ourselves, or that others make about us.

The stress put on the ability to find one's own voice regardless of the consequences seemingly runs against the picture of power as an exertion in the context of a relation and points more to a subjective quality or attribute. Nonetheless, the other's refusal to acknowledge the subject's voice and her/his ability to deal with such refusal define how powerful the subject can be. Moreover, the stress on breaking away from assumptions put the definition of power in the context of interpretations that a situation that become validated by others, even if only partially. Overall, "Come my neighbor" is one of the best ways to unleash a dynamic of exploration and mutual acknowledgment.

2. Person to Person

In "Person to Person", the facilitator asks participants to connect body parts in a sequential way. An example is, "first connect elbow to knee, then hand to foot, and finally head to head". Multiple connections can be suggested. The remarkable feature of this game is that students had to negotiate, in a non-verbal fashion, who was going to bend or stretch out to make the intended connection. Size mattered a lot, but its effect was not univocal. Some students reported that asymmetries of height and/or weight translated into an air of dominance with which the bigger student asked the other to make the least comfortable move to connect the body parts. The other party usually acquiesced out of a desire to prove her/his competence to complete the task. This phenomenon – demonstrating one's own competence– seemed to have pervaded the entire set of dynamics. Nonetheless, a large size also proved to be a disadvantage: to succeed connecting body parts, a bigger student had to concede whenever he realized that the task would be too difficult for his smaller partner. As the use of the pronoun suggests it, only male students found themselves in this predicament.

A body connection "head to chest" immediately triggered reactions concerning what was the appropriate way to proceed in pairs where members had a different gender. In all cases, without any outside coordination, the connection made was female-head to male-chest. Students shared how they realized how even minute aspects of an interaction seem to be scripted, regulated by a social code. In other words, they found social regulations in their bodies.

3. Completing the Figure

After being grouped randomly, students had the task of solving various coordination problems with an increasing degree of difficulty. Recall that students were not allowed to speak. First they had to make a circle, beginning with the tallest and ending with the shortest. Then, they had to remake the circle based on age and on weight. Unlike height, age and weight can be deceiving. Students struggled for a while how to communicate where they were relative to each other. In some cases, leaders emerged: some individuals

centralized the task of asking people their age and double-checking where each one was located.

The following stage in the game was to ask the group to cover the space with the shape of a triangle, a square, and a hexagon. After that, students had to form letters: from some relatively easy ones to make (such as T and E) to those that were more difficult (such as S and W). These tasks cannot be accomplished without a minimal degree of leadership. At first glance, in some groups the emergence of leadership was not an issue. Someone stepped in and started to give others directions. This dynamic was reinforced after the completion of the first task. However, in their essays students went at great length to describe the extent to which some features seemed to have played a role in how the leaders were recognized as such: because of a conjunction of size, race, and gender. Indeed, there were no groups led by a non-white, petite woman. The important point made by the students who raised this point was the identification of those features as social rather than as natural attributes.

Some students attributed leadership emergence to the assertiveness with which some individuals engaged in the task. However, other students pointed to the fact that leaders could go on directing the group to complete the task to the extent that they allowed them to do that. In other words, things would have looked like differently had other students stepped in as leaders.

Finally, in other groups, the emergence of leadership became an issue because of the emergence of leaders with a different sense of how to solve the tasks at hand. The relative easiness with which leadership conflicts were solved was due, according to some of their protagonists, by the importance they attributed to achieving a common goal.

4. Body Image: Overpowering your Partner

This game elicited an interesting reflection on the immediate manifestations of power. In it, participants take turns building a body image that conveys the message that her/his pair is being overpowered. Students responded in each turn undoing the effect of the previous move and/or exerting an even greater effect on their partners. A common thread was the intimidating physicality of the expression. In few cases, students went beyond such physicality and made gestures such as invoking allies to counterbalance the overpowering move of their partners.

Some students observed how easily power shifted from one turn to the other. For the most part, students focused entirely on overpowering her/his partner in each turn without taking into account how their partners' response could annul the effect of their move. During the session, this observation was ensued by a reflection on power dynamics in which students underscored the extent to which the efficacy of a move was contingent upon the response to it. Without a role switch, it is unlikely that students would make this type of observation. At this point, the body expression became a physical dialogue rather than a body monologue, a crucial aspect to develop the idea of power as a relation.

The most surprising note in this game was the move made by a couple of students of making loving gestures. They argued that they overpowered their partners for no one could respond to love and peace in a menacing way. Indeed, in the case of these couples the sequence of turns took a very different direction. This point led students to elaborate on the effectiveness of peace offers and diplomacy as means to establish a rapport and how contingent those offers are on being reciprocated.

5. Colombian hypnosis

In the “Colombian Hypnosis”, someone holds her/his hand 6 inches from her/his pair. The latter must follow the hand wherever it goes. S/he has to crawl, lie down, turn in circles and do whatever may be necessary to follow the hand. In general, students who had to follow the hand found this game very disempowering. They felt at the mercy of their partners. In many ways, what their partners did to them was not merciful at all: if they wanted to see people on their knees, then they did make their pairs go that way. The game has a second stage in which the facilitator asks participants to switch roles. Almost all students reciprocated the behavior they observed in the previous interaction: it was a tit-for-tat. Those who were treated fairly well abstained from pushing their partners to do something unusual and/or uncomfortable and those who felt they were “abused” paid in kind.

“Colombian hypnosis” was the game to which the largest number of students from fall 2006 referred to in their essays. Like those from spring 2007, their reflection revolved around the dynamic of abuse and retaliation and the fairness of a reciprocal response. In this context, students raised the issue of setting limits to power to countervail the tendency of anyone with authority to go beyond what others were willing to take. Those who drew parallels between this game and international relations wrote at great length about the need to set limits to the United States. Theirs was a plea in favor of the international law and international organizations. Their perception of the United States as a hegemon is of an abusive power, pretty much like someone playing “Colombian hypnosis.”

A couple of students raised more subtle issues: the extent to which the discretion and caprice the leaders exerted was contingent upon one, the authority of the professor and, two, the willingness of the followers to continue to play the game. As one student noticed it, had the facilitator/professor demanded to stop the game, students would surely have done so. The assumption seemingly built in the game was that there was not anything that were not *fair play*. However, that assumption depended on another consisting of going as far as the facilitator/professor allowed it to go. Thus, ultimately, any power dynamics were based on the authority of the professor who set the roles in the first place. Another student put the emphasis on the willingness with which the follower responded to the leader. Leadership was totally dependent on that willingness, again an observation that underscores the relational aspect of power.

6. The Blind Walk

In “The Blind Walk”, like in the “Colombian Hypnosis”, students took turns as leaders and followers. This time the follower had to close her/his eyes and let the leader take her/him across the room. This was, literally, a blind walk. This game was the one most referred to in their essays by students in spring 2007. For many, the experience was terrifying. They felt as relinquishing or abdicating any control to someone with whom they had a limited, if not null, acquaintance. In a posterior talk with some students, I explored how the game would change if followers played it setting the pace of the walk. When the follower reacted to the leader’s guidance, then the leader felt prompted to increase pressure on the follower. The leader experienced that s/he had lost most of the control s/he had exerted previously.

Students raised a set of similar issues to the ones they put in the case of the “Colombian Hypnosis”. Many alluded to the fact that they reciprocated the behavior of their pairs in the previous interaction. They also made the point of the importance of setting limits to the exertion of power by those in a leadership position. Along this line, various students made the point that the exertion of power always implies responsibilities and that responsible exertion is the key to its effectiveness. Finally, this game served to bring in the role that trust plays in power dynamics to the discussion. The emergence and maintenance of trust was linked to responsible leadership. This observation may look like a truism, but it actually sprang from what students did in the classroom. They let their leaders move them across the room when they felt those leaders care about them.

The Stick

“The Stick” was the final game students played. They had to hold a rod with the tip of their forefinger and move across the room in the direction set by a leader. In a direct contrast with the previous games, many students experienced this one as a cooperative endeavor. They felt that an effective communication of the leader with the follower and their awareness of the surroundings were key to succeed in this game. Both partners had the experience of being empowered. Switching roles did not have a dramatic impact on the dynamic of the game.

The facilitator can induce confusion on the identity of leaders and followers by requesting role shifts on and on. This confusion can provoke pairs to drop their stick. However, in the case of pairs that achieved a good deal of communication, the effect of the confusion was null. There were even pairs that reported that prior to the induced confusion they had lost track of which player had which role and that their performance was not undermined by that.

I can summarize what realization students had with this game referring to what one of them wrote in her essay. Prior to having played these games, she held that power was undistinguishable from the exertion of force. Games like “the stick” showed her how much power there is in a cooperative endeavor. Her observation is along the track of Hannah Arendt’s definition of power: the ability people have to act in concert. In many ways, playing “the stick” right after “Colombian hypnosis” and “The Blind Walk”

underscores two different experiences of power: one in which one party is empowered at the expense of the other and another in which both parties become empowered by means of working together to achieve a common goal.

Conclusion

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