

# Power and Social Exchange\*

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*This article examines the basic social science concepts of "power" and "social exchange" in order to determine the possibility and desirability of integrating them. It is argued that: (1) all exchange relationships can be described in terms of conventional power concepts without twisting the common-sense notions that underlie such concepts; (2) most—but not necessarily all—power relationships can be described in terms of exchange terminology; (3) there are some advantages to conceiving of power in this way; (4) recent social exchange theorists have neither illuminated nor recognized most of these advantages. After a preliminary examination of the concepts of "power" and "exchange," the discussion focuses on the analytical and conceptual problems associated with volition, exchange media, asymmetry, sanctions, and authority.*

Conflict studies, power analysis, and social exchange theory are three overlapping yet distinguishable bodies of social science literature. The purpose of this article is to examine some of the areas of overlap in order to determine whether conceptual integration is feasible and/or desirable. I will focus primarily on power and social exchange, but the implications for the study of conflict are significant. A recent study, for example, criticized conflict analysts for neglecting power and proceeded to combine conflict, power, and social exchange theory into a single model (Korpi, 1974). Also, since most power analyses treat conflict as a necessary condition of power (Nagel, 1975, p. 154), such studies may be viewed as a special type of conflict research.

Improved understanding of the feasibility and/or desirability of conceptually integrating power analysis and social exchange theory should aid in choosing overall social science research strategies. Dahrendorf (1958, p. 127) has argued that at least two basic social science models are needed because "society has two faces of equal reality: one of stability, harmony, and consensus and one of change, conflict, and constraint." Similarly, Eckstein (1973, p. 1161) argues that "there are two fundamental sciences of society: that dealing with symmetrical social relationships and that dealing with asymmetric ones in social units—'economics' and 'politics.'" There are two basic models of social interaction, however, that may

combine cooperative and conflictual approaches.<sup>1</sup> Harsanyi (1969, p. 515) claims that modern game theory has demonstrated that "the same theoretical model can handle both conflict and cooperation without any difficulty." The question here is whether social exchange theory can also be used to explain both faces of social reality. The adequacy of such "explanations" has important implications for deciding how one stands on the questions raised by Eckstein and Dahrendorf.

How useful are exchange models in analyzing power relations? According to Homans (1974, p. v), the word "power" does not even appear in the original edition of his landmark study of social exchange, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961). The title and the contents of Blau's *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964) clearly imply that exchange and power constitute two different realms of human relations. Curry and Wade (1968, p. 118) have noted that critics of exchange models often claim that power "cannot be conceived of in exchange terms by definition since no exchange occurs in a power relationship—there are only 'winners' (the powerful) and 'losers' (the powerless) and no two-way distribution of rewards and costs." The question of whether and how exchange models can be used to enhance our understanding of power has no generally agreed-upon answer.

It will be argued that: (1) all exchange relationships can be described in terms of conventional power concepts without twisting the common-sense notions that underlie such concepts; (2) most—but not necessarily all—

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Masters has called my attention to ethology as a possible third approach that treats both cooperation and conflict in social interaction (Masters, forthcoming).

power relationships can be described in terms of exchange terminology; (3) there are some advantages to conceiving of power in this way; (4) recent social exchange theorists have neither illuminated nor recognized most of these advantages. After a preliminary examination of the concepts of exchange and power, the discussion will focus on the analytical and conceptual problems associated with volition, exchange media, asymmetry, sanctions, and authority.

### Exchange Models and Power Concepts

Robert Dahl has suggested that "power terms in modern social science refer to subsets of relations among social units such that the behaviors of one or more units . . . depend in some circumstances on the behavior of other units" (1968, p. 407). The intuitive idea or common-sense notion behind power terminology has been described by Dahl (1957) in terms of A getting B to do something he would not otherwise have done. Is this notion adequate to describe an exchange relationship?

Suppose A's goal is to get B to sell a loaf of bread. Walking into B's store, A has several options in choosing what kind of influence attempt to make. A can pull out a gun and say, "Sell me the bread or else." He can get down on his knees and beseech B to sell him the bread. He can offer B a million dollars if B will sell him the bread. Each of these strategies has some chance of success, but each also involves some costs. The best way for A to balance costs and benefits is probably going to entail checking the price tag and offering B the amount of money printed on the tag. A walks out of the store with the bread, having succeeded in getting B to do something that B would not have done in the absence of A's influence attempt. An influence attempt has succeeded; an exchange has occurred. Given Dahl's broad concept of power, exchange relations are simply subsets of power relations (Baldwin, 1971a, pp. 581-92).

Can power relations be described in terms of exchange concepts? When nation A gives nation B foreign aid in return for support in the United Nations, we may say that nation A has used foreign aid to influence nation B's behavior in the United Nations (assuming that the foreign aid actually made a difference in nation B's behavior). It would be just as easy, however, to describe nation A as having *exchanged* foreign aid for support in the United Nations. Thus, at least some power (or influence) relations take the form of exchange.

The difficulty arises when one introduces negative sanctions (threats and/or punishments) or environmental manipulation into the power situation. "Your money or your life" can be converted into exchange terminology as follows: "You give me your money, and I will let you keep your life." Some people, however, object to calling such a transaction an "exchange" (Blau, 1964, pp. 115-16; Boulding, 1963, 1965). The phrase "your money or your life" is usually attributed to an unsavory gun-wielding outlaw, which may account for some of its bad press. The phrase is rarely attributed to the physician who has just informed the patient that he will die within a year unless he can afford the expensive operation required to save his life. In such a situation, depicting "your money or your life" as a proposed exchange may not seem quite so objectionable.<sup>2</sup>

Environmental manipulation is another power situation that is difficult to describe as exchange. If A can secretly control the temperature in B's room, A can get B to take off a sweater without B ever knowing about A's influence attempt. Although Dahl's broad concept of power would consider this a power relationship, most people would be reluctant to call it an exchange relationship. There are, then, some power situations that are hard to describe with exchange concepts.

Although exchange relations can be considered a subset of power relations, the social exchange theorists have not provided a satisfactory account of how power relations work. Blau (1964, pp. 4, 6, 88-89) recognizes two concepts of social exchange, one broad, the other narrow. Although the broad one would subsume power, Blau rejects it, first, because he fears his theory will become tautological, and second, because "nothing is gained" by trying to force actions such as power relations into a

<sup>2</sup>Time may also be a critical factor in explaining people's reluctance to view "your money or your life" as an exchange. The typical mugging occurs so quickly that the "muggee" does not have time to adjust his or her value expectation baseline (see Baldwin, 1971b, p. 23; and Blau, 1964, p. 116) to the new situation. Thus, the mugger's offer of life does not seem especially generous. In airline hijackings or concentration camps, however, there is time for the new probability of losing one's life to be built into one's value expectation baseline. Once this occurs, "your money or your life" is more likely to be viewed as a genuine exchange. It is not uncommon to hear stories of victims thanking guards or hijackers for allowing them to keep their lives.

conceptual framework of exchange.<sup>3</sup> Blau (1964, pp. 115–42) also recognizes two concepts of power, one broad enough to include exchange, the other narrow enough to exclude it.

Broadly defined, power refers to all kinds of influence between persons or groups, including those exercised in exchange transactions, where one induces others to accede to his wishes by rewarding them for doing so. . . . Although the customer technically imposes his will upon the jeweler when he makes him surrender a diamond ring by paying for it, this situation clearly should not be confused with that of the gangster who forces the jeweler to hand over the ring at the point of a gun (Blau, 1964, pp. 115–16).

Blau thus admits the “technical” possibility of depicting exchange as a power relationship but implies that doing so would confuse the distinction between customers and gangsters. It is quite possible, however, to use a broad concept of social power while preserving the distinction between influence attempts based on positive sanctions (actual or promised rewards) and influence attempts based on negative sanctions (actual or threatened punishments) (Dahl, 1968; Baldwin, 1971b). Blau opts for a narrow definition of power that completely rules out positive sanctions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, instead of synthesizing the concepts of exchange and power, Blau accentuates the cleavage between the two concepts.

In Homans’ revised edition of *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1974), he devotes a whole chapter to “power and authority” (pp. 70–93). For Homans, power relations are a subset of exchange relations in which one person “gets less” out of the exchange than the other.<sup>5</sup> Homans defines power broadly, how-

ever, so as to include both positive and negative sanctions. Thus threats and punishments can be exchanged either for rewards or for other threats and punishments. Homans (1974, pp. 79–81) analyzes the “your money or your life” situation as an exchange and brings out *both* the similarities and differences between coercive exchange and noncoercive exchange. Even though there are drawbacks to Homans’ concept of power, which I shall address later, his broad concept of power and his attempt to integrate the concepts of power and exchange are steps toward a synthesis.

To summarize, if one uses the broad concept of power associated with Dahl (1968), exchange relations appear to be subsets of power relations. For Blau (1964), however, exchange and power are separate and distinct realms; neither is a subset of the other. For Homans (1974), power relations are subsets of exchange relations. Obviously, the exchange theorists use a narrower concept of power than Dahl does. It is interesting to note that neither Blau (1964) nor Homans (1974) cites Dahl (1957, 1968) or Lasswell and Kaplan (1950). Having introduced the general problem of integrating power concepts into exchange models, I shall next examine several special topics related to such an undertaking.

### Volition

“Power,” in Max Weber’s classic definition (1947, p. 152), “is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.” The words “despite resistance” are often interpreted as precluding depiction of power as a kind of exchange. Exchange, it is argued, is voluntary, while power involves A getting B to act “against his [B’s] will.” Thus, power relations are characterized by conflict, while exchange relations are characterized by cooperation.

Three questions may be asked about dichotomizing power and conflict on the one hand and exchange and cooperation on the other: (1) Is it useful for social analysis? (2) What does it mean? (3) Is conflict present in a routine commercial transaction? If one conceives of most social situations as mixtures of conflict and cooperation, with pure conflict and pure cooperation as polar types rarely found in the real world, then the conflict/cooperation dichotomy is not likely to appeal. Harsanyi (1969, p. 515), Schelling (1960), and Masters (forthcoming) have argued in favor of

<sup>3</sup>Blau simply asserts that “nothing is gained”; he does not prove it. Likewise, March (1966, p. 65–67) acknowledges the possibility of using exchange models to explain power but asserts that we probably would not want to do so.

<sup>4</sup>Chadwick-Jones (1976, pp. 281, 294, 299–300) claims that “reward power” is Blau’s main concern. This is a questionable interpretation of Blau, however, since Blau (1964, p. 117) explicitly defines power in terms of negative sanctions and even says that “inducing a person to render a service by rewarding him for doing so does not involve exercising power over him. . . .” (p. 141). Exchange (based on positive sanctions) and power (based on negative sanctions) are separate and distinct realms for Blau (see Baldwin, 1971b).

<sup>5</sup>We shall take up the question of what it means to “get less” from the exchange at a later point.

models that incorporate both conflictual and cooperative elements. Power without cooperation and exchange without conflict are not prototypical cases, but rather bizarre extremes rarely encountered in real life. Schelling (1960) has shown that even war, often thought to be an example of pure conflict, has significant cooperative dimensions.

We might also ask what it means to describe B as acting involuntarily or "against his will." If one were to ask whether someone would like to work eight hours a day on an assembly line, it is doubtful that any answer whatsoever would be forthcoming until the reward (wage) was specified or implied. I know very few college professors who would say "yes" if the wages were three dollars per hour, but I know very few who would say "no" if the wages were a million dollars per hour. The point is, of course, that B can make no meaningful assessment of his "will" without taking opportunity costs into account—and neither can the social scientist who wants to explain B's response to A's influence attempt. To describe a power relationship in terms of A getting B to do something against his will is to obscure the heart of the power process, i.e., A's manipulation of the incentives (or opportunity costs) that B associates with various courses of action (Harsanyi, 1962). It is precisely B's "will" that A is trying to change. The apothegm that "every man has his price" is no doubt false, but it represents an analytical perspective that is more useful to the student of power than the perspective that depicts people as "acting against their wills" (cf. Oppenheim, 1961; Blau, 1964, pp. 91–92).

This is not to say that measuring (or estimating) B's willingness to do X (perceived opportunity costs of doing X) is not important in measuring A's power over B; the point is that B's willingness to do X should not be dichotomized so that B is either "willing" or "unwilling" to do X. Parsons and Smelser (1956, pp. 10, 13) have pointed out that the same logic that underlies the economists' supply and demand schedules also "applies to the performance-sanction relationship in all social interaction." In other words, the likelihood that B will perform X may depend on the sanction (positive or negative) provided by A. Supply and demand schedules may thus be considered as describing a kind of power relationship. To ask whether B is "willing" to do X is like asking whether General Motors is "willing" to provide you with a car. Neither question can be answered satisfactorily until the price is specified or implied.

Some would deny that a routine commercial exchange involves a significant amount of con-

flict. The mutual interest of both buyer and seller in reaching agreement and the mechanics of the price system tend to obscure the conflictual aspects of the situation. From the standpoint of the buyer, the lower the price the better. From the standpoint of the seller, the higher the price the better. The exchange will be consummated only if the highest price the buyer is willing to pay overlaps with the lowest price the seller is willing to accept. The price system enables both A and B to cut the costs of acquiring information about each other's bargaining position. The establishment and promulgation of a "going market price" for a loaf of bread provides each with information about what price is likely to be acceptable to the other. Thus, the observer of a routine purchase of a loaf of bread is likely to see very little evidence of conflict, but this is primarily because the price system facilitates rapid resolution of the conflict and agreement on a "fair price."<sup>6</sup> If the same observer were to witness a routine economic exchange in a nonmarket economy, the evidence of conflict between buyer and seller would be more obvious.

In sum, the problem of volition does not provide an insuperable obstacle to conceiving of power as exchange. Both conflict and cooperation are present in most social situations, and the willingness of B to comply with A's demands is a function of the opportunity costs that B associates with compliance. Since the purpose of A's influence attempt is to change B's perceived opportunity costs of compliance (and/or noncompliance), it is not very helpful to describe A as influencing B by getting B to do something "against his will" or "despite his resistance."

### Media of Exchange

Some see power as distinct from exchange (Blau, 1964); some view power as a kind of exchange (Homans, 1974); and others treat power as a medium of exchange (Parsons, 1963; Deutsch, 1963). Many questions are raised by

<sup>6</sup>For an expanded discussion of the role of conflict in economic exchange that also notes the tendency of the market to disguise the dynamics of the situation, see Boulding (1965). Since the market facilitates "anticipated reactions," it is difficult to observe influence relations in routine commercial transactions. Nagel (1975, p. 145) handles this analytical problem very well by pointing out that "in studying influence, attention should not generally focus upon exact sequences of action and response." Such interactions, he notes, are often present but are not a prerequisite for influence to exist.

such viewpoints, but only two will be addressed here. First, what are the implications of considering power as a medium of exchange akin to money? And second, how is economic exchange different from other kinds of exchange? Since I have presented an extended critique of the "power as money" analogy elsewhere (Baldwin, 1971a), only brief recapitulation is needed here. The most important point to be made is that the standard social science concept of power<sup>7</sup> as a *relation* is incompatible with the "power as money" analogy. Although purchasing power may be conceived of as a kind of power relation, money is more like a power resource or power base. If one thinks it useful to distinguish between power resources and power relations, one should be wary of attempts to depict power as a medium of exchange. Parsons (1963, p. 232) has explicitly complained that Dahl's concept of power makes it logically impossible to treat power as a "mechanism operating to bring about changes in the action of other units." This is true, since Dahl's concept of power refers to a relationship rather than a mechanism. Power defined as a relation refers to the *process* of A getting B to do something B would not otherwise do; but power defined as a medium of exchange refers to one of several *means* by which A can affect B's behavior (Baldwin, 1971a).

<sup>7</sup>Reference to a standard or conventional social science concept of power may strike some readers as presumptuous, since it implies some consensus on power terminology. The frequently heard assertion that there is no such consensus is simply not true. Consensus is a matter of degree and need not imply unanimity. The consensus may be only partial but it certainly does exist. The significant thing is not that Dahl (1968) and Cartwright (1965) found it difficult to summarize and integrate the power literature but that they were able to do it so well. The works by Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), Dahl (1968), and Cartwright (1965) have many differences, but they have enough in common to justify reference to a "standard" or "conventional" approach to the study of power. For example, all three works conceive of influence as a relation rather than a property; all three stress the need to specify scope; and all three allow for both positive and negative sanctions in discussing influence. Future references to the conventional social science concept of power in this article refer to the general conceptual outlook of these three works. It should also be noted that for purposes of this article the terms "influence," "power," and "control" are used interchangeably. Furthermore, all references to A's effect on B's "behavior" in this article should be interpreted to include changes in B's beliefs, attitudes, opinions, expectation, and/or emotions as well as changes in observable behavior (cf. Nagel, 1975, p. 12).

Much of the confusion about treating approval, status, esteem, compliance, reputation, or power as media of exchange (Waldman, 1972; Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961, 1974; Chadwick-Jones, 1976) could be eliminated by clarifying the differences between economic exchange and social or political exchange. If one is referring to direct exchange (pure barter) without a common denominator of value,<sup>8</sup> there are not many differences among the following exchange situations:

One cow for two pigs  
Two sacks of wheat for five days of work  
One favor for another  
Esteem for a favor  
Love for love  
Compliance with a request for approval  
A vote in the United Nations for foreign aid.

In each of these situations the trading partners will have difficulty deciding whether they have made a "fair trade," since they have no standardized measure of value for reference.<sup>9</sup>

Blau (1964, pp. 8, 93-95) distinguishes social exchange from economic exchange in terms of the specificity of the obligations incurred. When B does A a favor, A incurs an obligation to do B a favor sometime in the future. A's feeling of indebtedness to B, however, lacks specificity because there is no generally recognized common denominator of value for comparing the worth of various favors. "In contrast to economic commodities, the benefits involved in social exchange do not have an exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange..." (Blau,

<sup>8</sup>Technically, pure barter implies direct exchange, but need not imply the absence of a standardized measure of value. It is thus possible for the measure-of-value function of money to be performed by something other than that which performs the medium-of-exchange function of money. As a practical matter, however, the two functions are so highly interdependent that it is difficult to imagine pure barter in the presence of a common denominator of value (cf. Baldwin, 1971a; Blau, 1964, pp. 268-69). For purposes of this article, therefore, references to barter situations imply the absence of both exchange media and a standardized accounting unit.

<sup>9</sup>Strictly speaking, a standardized measure of value facilitates judgments as to the fairness of an exchange but is not a logical necessity. It is hypothetically possible to imagine a pure barter market in which every item traded had a "going" or conventional exchange rate in terms of every other item. If 1,000 items were traded in the market, each item would have 999 "going market prices." For markets above a certain size, money may be a practical necessity; but it is not a logical necessity.

1964, p. 94). It is clear that what Blau has in mind is *not* the general case of economic exchange but rather the special case in which a recognized standard of value is operating as a medium of exchange.

Since barter is so rarely encountered in everyday economic exchange, one might ask why it matters which concept of economic exchange Blau uses. The answer is that only by understanding precisely what difference money makes in economic exchange can one understand the role other media of exchange play in noneconomic exchange. The key to understanding social and economic exchange is recognizing that there is one—and only one—important difference between economic exchange in a monetary economy and social or political exchange. That difference is the presence of a generally recognized measure of value that also serves as a highly liquid medium of exchange, i.e., money. It is money that sets economic exchanges apart from other kinds of social interaction.

Blau (1964, pp. 93–95) claims that “social exchange differs in important ways from strictly economic exchange,” but all the differences he identifies can be reduced to one—the absence of a counterpart for money. When Blau notes the unspecified obligations arising from social exchange, he is simply pointing out one of the implications of trade without money. When Blau cites the absence of an “exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange” as “another reason why social obligations are unspecific,” the citation is both misleading and redundant. The absence of “an exact price in terms of a single quantitative medium of exchange” is not an additional reason why social obligations lack specificity; it is the *only* reason.

When Blau (1964, p. 170) portrays the “compliance of others” as a “generalized means of social exchange, similar to money in economic exchange (except that it is far less liquid than money),” he implies that money and compliance have a lot in common but differ in degree of liquidity. It is as if he had said, “John is similar to Bill except for his red hair.” One would conclude from this that John and Bill share many characteristics other than hair color. The difficulty here is that liquidity is not just one of several characteristics of money; it is the essential defining characteristic. Blau (1964, p. 269) admits as much later in the book when he observes that “money differs from other valuables only in the higher degree of its liquidity, that is, the greater ease with which it can be converted into other commodities.” We may now recast Blau’s earlier comparison of

compliance and money as follows: “Compliance of others is similar to money except with regard to the only characteristic that really matters, the degree of liquidity.”

To summarize, the analogy between power and money is rejected as incompatible with the standard social science usage of the term “power.” Economic exchange is not much different from social exchange except in a money economy. Although indirect exchange, i.e., exchange via media of exchange, is both conceptually possible and empirically probable in noneconomic exchange, no media bearing a significant resemblance to money are likely to be found. Instead of *comparing* the media of noneconomic exchange with money—as exchange theorists are prone to do (Chadwick-Jones, 1976, p. 20; Blau, 1964, p. 22; Waldman, 1972, p. 77)—one should emphasize the *contrast* between economic and non-economic media of exchange. In order to examine the opportunities and limitations of exchange models in the study of power, one must recognize that money is a very unusual (one is tempted to say unique) medium of exchange that also serves as a standardized measure of value. In short, economic exchange (in a money economy) is different because money is special. Attempts to obscure the special qualities of money make it difficult to adapt exchange models to the study of power.

### Asymmetry in Power Relations

The most important obstacle to analyzing power in terms of exchange is the concept of power as an asymmetrical human relationship. As noted earlier, Eckstein (1973, p. 1161) even suggests that the distinction between symmetric and asymmetric social relationships delineates “two fundamental sciences of society.” Economics, based on exchange and symmetry, and politics, based on power and asymmetry, are thus relegated to fundamentally different categories of social interaction. Such a distinction discourages attempts to synthesize power analysis and exchange analysis.

Exchange theorists might be expected to oppose the conception of power as asymmetrical, emphasizing instead the reciprocal nature of power relations. Not so. Far from rejecting the asymmetrical concept of power, exchange theorists (Homans, 1974, pp. 70–71, 77, 83; Blau, 1964, pp. 117–18, 312–13; Chadwick-Jones, 1976, pp. 299–300, 355–57; and Ilchman, 1971, pp. 18–19) have embraced it and thereby compounded the difficulties of incorporating the standard social science concept of power into exchange models. These

difficulties concern the ambiguity of the notion of asymmetrical power, the need to specify scope in defining power, and the treatment of costs.

At least four notions of "asymmetry" can be found in discussions of the inherently asymmetrical nature of power, including asymmetry of causation, imbalance of influence, unequal benefits, and uneven distribution of power. Power may be conceived of as a causal relationship, and all causal relationships are asymmetrical in the sense that if event C causes E, E does not cause C (cf. Oppenheim, 1961, p. 104; Dahl, 1968, p. 410; Nagel, 1975, pp. 35-51, 141-53; and Simon, 1957, pp. 5, 11-12, 66). Simon (1957) and March (1955) suggest that power is also asymmetrical in the sense that if A has power over B, B does not have power over A. March (1955, p. 436) claims that "the statement that A *influences* B excludes the possibility that B *influences* A."

There is a big difference, however, between saying that event E caused event C and saying that person A influenced person B. That difference is implied by the term "scope" (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950, pp. 73, 77). Since people perform different activities, it is quite possible—and highly probable—that A's power over B will be limited to certain dimensions of B's behavior. Thus, person A may be influencing person B with respect to X at the same time that person B is influencing person A with respect to Y. It is for this reason that many power theorists consider a statement of an influence relationship that fails to specify scope as virtually meaningless (Dahl, 1976, p. 33; 1968, p. 408; Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950, p. 76; Nagel, 1975, p. 14).

It is not the purpose of this discussion to deny either the causal nature of power or the asymmetrical nature of causation. It is to point out that attempts to discuss the implications of causal asymmetry for power analysis often lead to confusion because of failure to give sufficient attention to the specification of scope. Causal asymmetry does not preclude the existence of symmetrical reciprocal influence relationships in the real world. As Nagel (1975, p. 146) has observed, "it is important to distinguish the asymmetry of . . . social relations from the asymmetry of variables in a model. Only the latter is a defining characteristic of power."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>In my opinion, efforts to equate causal asymmetry with power asymmetry have been counterproductive to the extent that they have obscured one of Lasswell and Kaplan's most fundamental points—the

A second notion of inherent power asymmetry conceives of power as a situation in which A has more power over B than B has over A (Wrong, 1968, p. 673; Eckstein, 1973, p. 1146; Blau, 1964, pp. 117-18). Mutual influence of equal strength, according to Blau (1964, pp. 117-18), indicates lack of power. This notion of power necessitates comparison between A's power over B and B's power over A, thus implying that the scopes are comparable. Even seemingly comparable scopes, however, are likely to present problems for the power analyst. Soviet-American nuclear deterrence is often thought of as mutual influence. Even granting that these are roughly comparable scopes, there is something anomalous about describing this situation as characterized by an absence of power. Conventional social science usage would describe Soviet-American nuclear deterrence as two separate and relatively successful influence attempts. Two advantages of conventional usage are, first, that comparing scopes is optional rather than required and, second, that interdependence can be differentiated from independence. Many social scientists find it useful to distinguish between situations characterized by mutual influence among actors (interdependence) and situations characterized by a lack of influence among actors (independence).

Suppose A has the power to get B to play the piano (using positive and/or negative sanctions), while B has the power to get A to rake the yard (using positive and/or negative sanctions). Which one has more power? The notion of power as an imbalance of power between A and B requires an answer, but the conventional concept of power does not. If there were a generally agreed upon common denominator to which forms of power could be reduced, comparing different scopes would be easy; but no such standardized measuring rod for power exists (cf. Dahl and Lindblom, 1953, pp.

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need to treat power as a triadic relationship (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950, p. 76). Simon (1957, p. 63) portrayed his work as "footnotes" to the work of Lasswell and Kaplan and attributed the notion of power asymmetry to them. This was unfortunate, since Lasswell and Kaplan were sensitive to reciprocity and symmetry in power relations and believed that power should not "be conceived as a unilateral relationship" (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950, p. 201). Subsequent references to the "asymmetrical notion of power" in this article refer to the "imbalance-of-influence" sense of this term unless another meaning is specified. For a thorough discussion of causal asymmetry and power asymmetry, see Nagel (1975).

228–29; Dahl, 1976, pp. 32–36; Baldwin, 1971a). It is precisely because of the absence of close counterparts to money in noneconomic social interaction that scope must be specified in defining influence relationships.

The criticism of the asymmetrical notion of power presented here should be distinguished from that of Wrong (1968). Wrong objects to Blau's contention that power relations are always asymmetrical on the grounds that many power situations are characterized by reciprocal influence with regard to different scopes. Although Wrong (1968, pp. 673–74) admits that "asymmetry exists in each individual act-response sequence," he observes that "the actors continually alternate the roles of power holder and power subject in the total course of their interaction" so that a pattern may emerge in which one actor controls the other with respect to particular spheres of conduct, "while the other actor is regularly dominant in other areas of situated activity." Thus, Wrong posits a social situation in which each individual power relationship is asymmetrical (in that "the power holder exercises greater control over the behavior of the power subject than the reverse"), but in which A's ability to get B to play the piano is "balanced" by B's ability to get A to rake the yard.<sup>11</sup>

Wrong rightly criticizes Blau's failure to account for different scopes, but he stops short of objecting to the asymmetrical concept of power. In the absence of a common denominator of power values (i.e., a functional equiva-

lent for money) for comparing different scopes, it is difficult to accept the notion of "individual act-response sequences" as asymmetrical. What standardized measuring rod are we to use in comparing A's control over B with B's control over A? When the United States tried to make North Vietnam give up its activities in South Vietnam, how successful was its influence attempt? Although the conventional concept of power permits a straightforward—but not necessarily easy—answer to this question, the "asymmetry imbalance" concept of power requires a comparison between the U.S. attempt to influence North Vietnam and the North Vietnamese attempt to get the Americans to go home. In other words, one is supposed to compare getting a country to give up claims to what it perceives as its own land and people (White, 1970) with getting a foreign power to stop intervening in one's country. Although others may describe differently the scopes of the American and North Vietnamese influence attempts, the point is that the two nations were engaged in fundamentally different kinds of influence attempts. Even those who deny the significance of the "territorial imperative" ought to admit the difference between aggression and resistance to aggression (cf. White, 1970; Ardrey, 1966; Lorenz, 1966), between making an influence attempt and resisting one.

In sum, there are two good reasons for rejecting the notion of power that implies a necessary imbalance of influence between A and B. First, it requires a comparison between influence attempts with different scopes in the absence of a generally agreed-upon criterion for making such comparisons. And second, the common-sense intuitive notion of power is captured at least as well by the concept of power developed by Dahl and others.

Homans' (1974, pp. 70–83) concept of asymmetrical power falls on the borderline between the "imbalance" notion and a third category based on unequal benefits; it thus deserves separate treatment. Homans begins by defining power as asymmetrical in the sense that the behavior of one of the parties to an exchange "changes in some sense more than the behavior of the other." Homans uses the example of an exchange of advice for approval,<sup>12</sup> thus raising the question of how to compare a change in approval with a change in

<sup>11</sup>Wrong (1968, p. 674) uses the term "intercursive power" to refer to "relations between persons or groups in which the control of one person or group over the other with reference to a particular scope is balanced by the control of the other in a different scope." Nagel (1975, pp. 142–44) points out that such situations can be analyzed in terms of separate and distinct influence attempts by each party. In such situations A and B control *different* outcomes vis-à-vis each other. There are, of course, other situations in which A and B share power over a single outcome (Nagel, 1975, pp. 144–46). Thus, part of the difficulty in conceiving of routine commercial transactions as power relationships stems from the inclusion of both intercursive and shared power over a single outcome in such situations. The price (or exchange rate) is a single outcome over which the buyer and seller share power. Intercursive power, however, is also involved since the buyer is trying to obtain goods and/or services, while the seller is trying to obtain money. A full description of the power dimensions of a commercial transaction would have to include both kinds of power. "Buying a car" and "buying a car at a good price" are not necessarily (or even usually) the same thing—one has to work harder at the second than at the first.

<sup>12</sup>This example is used often by Homans. It refers to an experienced office worker's willingness to give helpful advice to less experienced fellow workers and their willingness to give gratitude and admiration in return.



advice in the absence of a common denominator of value. Since the difficulties of comparing different scopes have already been discussed, there is no need to belabor this point.

Homans then shifts the focus of his discussion of power from the amount of behavior change to the "net reward" each party derives from the exchange. The "general condition that establishes interpersonal power," according to Homans, is that one party "gets less out of the exchange" than the other. Although one might think that the person "getting less" from the exchange is the weaker, this is not what Homans has in mind. Instead, he states—or restates—the "principle of least interest," in which "the person who is perceived by the other as the less interested, the more indifferent, to the exchange is apt to have the greater power." This principle, of course, has been discussed by Thibaut and Kelly (1959, p. 103) and Schelling (1960), and many would consider it a useful empirical observation about certain kinds of bargaining situations. For Homans, however, it is not merely a useful insight, it is "the one essential characteristic of power." He thus defines power as follows:

When A's net reward—compared, that is, with his alternatives—in taking action that will reward B is less, at least as perceived by B, than B's net reward in taking action that will reward A, and B as a result changes his behavior in a way favorable to A, then A has exerted power over B.

In addition to the cumbersome wording, there are at least two difficulties with this definition. First, the role of B's perceptions is not clear. If B's perceptions of A's relative indifference are crucial, why even mention the real situation? If B's perceptions are what matter, why does Homans (1974, p. 85) insist that "it is necessary to know the payoffs for both parties, not just for one of them?" A second difficulty is the possibility that interpersonal comparisons of subjective value are implied by the need to compare A's reward with B's. Although Homans (1974, p. 74) explicitly denies that this problem exists, his explanation begs several questions. For example, Homans argues that objective indicators of net rewards can be found but then admits that such indicators can be manipulated by each party so as to mislead the other. Furthermore, Homans' argument that the actual participants in the power transaction can avoid direct interpersonal value comparisons is beside the point. The prohibition on such comparisons is a methodological constraint on social scientists, not on other people. In our everyday lives we can and

do make methodologically unsound value comparisons all the time.

In addition to causal asymmetry, "imbalance" asymmetry, and "unequal benefit" asymmetry, some would say that power asymmetry resides in the uneven distribution of power resources. In every society some people have more power than others, and there is an implication of asymmetry in that fact. This concept is mentioned here only to show how appealing the idea of power as inherently asymmetrical can be. When someone observes that power is asymmetrical, everyone may nod; but they do not necessarily agree on the meaning of the message.

Thus far, objections to the concept of power as inherently asymmetrical have stemmed primarily from the relative absence of counterparts to money in social exchange and the consequent need to specify scope in defining and measuring power. Nagel (1968, pp. 135–37), however, has suggested still another objection, based on the *costs* of making influence attempts. Nagel points out that many influence situations require A to reward, punish, threaten, promise, furnish information, and/or monitor in order to get B to do X. Since "these behaviors of A are caused by B's reluctance to do X (or, more generally, by the improbability of B's doing X spontaneously)," Nagel suggests, "they indicate the scope of B's power over A."<sup>13</sup> Thus, when the opportunity costs of A's influence attempt are taken into account, the inherently asymmetrical concept of power is further called into question.

Consider two examples that Eckstein (1973, p. 1150) claims are "clearly asymmetric"—"the power of a criminal over his victim or the slow driver over the queues in his wake." If A must commit a criminal act in order to get B to do X, A has modified his behavior in what is likely to be a significant and costly way. Likewise, the slow driver can make those behind him late for work, but only by driving so slowly that he risks making himself late also. In such situations A influences B to do X, but B's reluctance to do X also affects A's behavior. If power costs

<sup>13</sup>In a later work, Nagel (1975, p. 141 n.) modifies his position, arguing that "the effects a weaker actor may have upon a stronger cannot generally be construed as power because they are not necessarily the consequence of the weaker actor's preferences." For purposes of this discussion, however, the fact that such effects are sometimes a consequence of the weaker actor's preferences is sufficient to call into question the notion of power as inherently asymmetrical in the "imbalance" sense.

are considered, such situations are not so "clearly asymmetric" as they appear to be.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, several notions of power as inherently asymmetrical have been examined. The causal asymmetry notion is valid but can be confusing when it is applied to power relations. The "imbalance" notion and the "unequal benefits" notion, however, have serious drawbacks. The concept of power developed by Dahl, Lasswell and Kaplan, and others involves causal asymmetry but allows for both symmetric and asymmetric power relationships. Since exchange relations connote reciprocity and the possibility—but not the necessity—of symmetry, the "imbalance" and "unequal benefits" notions of power as inherently asymmetrical are not well suited for inclusion in exchange models.<sup>15</sup>

### Positive vs. Negative Sanctions

The distinction between positive and negative sanctions has been an important obstacle to incorporating a broad concept of power into social exchange models. Exchange is often depicted as mutually rewarding and beneficial, while power relations are often portrayed as based on negative sanctions and detrimental to the object of the influence attempt. A fundamental difference between Blau (1964) and Homans (1974) on this point should be noted. On the one hand, Blau (1964, pp. 91–92, 115–17) defines exchange in terms of positive sanctions and power in terms of negative sanctions. Homans (1974, p. 83), on the other hand, objects to such a view:

Who shall say that a man who offers others good pay to do his bidding, and they jump at the chance, has not exerted power over them? The trouble is that in the everyday thinking of many of us we do not consider power to be really power unless it is accompanied by orders,

<sup>14</sup>On the importance of power costs, see Nagel (1968); Harsanyi (1962); Deutsch (1963, pp. 110–16); and Baldwin (1971c). Deutsch (1963, p. 115) quotes Booker T. Washington: "The only way the white man in the South can keep the Negro in the ditch is to stay in the ditch with him."

<sup>15</sup>For more comments on defining power in terms of asymmetry, see Cartwright (1959, pp. 197–98); Oppenheim, 1961, pp. 104–06; Harsanyi (1962); Dahlström (1966); Nagel (1968, pp. 135–37; 1975, pp. 141–53); and Dahl (1976, p. 50). It should be emphasized that no one advocates viewing power as inherently symmetrical. The fruitful alternative to the assumption of asymmetry is the assumption of non-symmetry, which allows for both symmetrical and asymmetrical power relations.

threats, the imposition of wills, and resistance. We believe power to be inherently evil, though sometimes necessary. Yet none of these things is essential to power as we shall define it. Indeed, if we could count up all the examples of the exertion of power, we suspect that we should find the noncoercive form to be far more common than the coercive.

The initial requirements for integration of exchange analysis and power analysis are a concept of power broad enough to subsume positive sanctions and a concept of exchange broad enough to include negative sanctions. Homans (1974), Ilchman and Uphoff (1969), and Waldman (1972) have demonstrated that exchange models can be used to explain social interaction based on threats and/or punishments. Others (Dahl, 1968; Nagel, 1975; Oppenheim, forthcoming; Cartwright, 1965) have shown that power can be defined so as to allow for influence attempts based on positive sanctions. Such a broad concept of power has an important advantage over one based only on negative sanctions—it facilitates description of the full range of policy options available to A in making an influence attempt on B. As Harsanyi (1962, p. 69) has pointed out, this is "one of the main purposes for which social scientists use the concept of A's power over B." I have never come across a serious scholarly argument in favor of confining an examination of A's policy options to those based on negative sanctions. The distinction between positive and negative sanctions is useful (Baldwin, 1971b), but it does not require us to differentiate exchange from power.

### Authority

It is sometimes suggested that authority—or legitimate power—presents especially difficult analytical problems, and much futile debate has focused on the similarities and differences between power and authority. At first glance, authority relations would seem quite different from exchange relations; but closer scrutiny discredits this first impression. Indeed, social exchange theory has made some of its most impressive contributions in discussions of authority and legitimacy (Blau, 1963; Waldman, 1972; Ilchman and Uphoff, 1969). This is not surprising when we consider the sensitivity of all social exchange theorists to the importance of positive sanctions in social life and the importance of such sanctions in determining legitimacy. The adage that "one can do anything with bayonets except sit on them" suggests that negative sanctions are less useful for acquiring legitimacy than are positive sanc-

tions. One rarely builds a high degree of legitimacy by terror, coercion, punishment, threats, intimidation, and harassment.

Analysis of authority in terms of exchange concepts is hardly new. Social contract theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, placed social exchange at the heart of their explanations of political authority. They envisioned the public as giving political leaders obedience and legitimacy in return for effective performance of governmental duties. Moreover, should political leaders prove unable to perform such services, the public has the right to withdraw its allegiance and stop obeying.

Recent social exchange theorists' treatment of authority is remarkably consistent with the traditional social contract explanation. Blau (1963, p. 209), for example, describes authority relations from the perspective of the individual and of the collectivity. From the individual's standpoint, obedience to the law is exchanged for social approval from one's peers; thus, the exchange between the individual and the government is indirect. The collectivity of individuals, however, gives governmental leaders two things—prevailing compliance with lawful orders and a set of social norms that help enforce compliance—in direct exchange for the contribution to the common welfare furnished by political leaders. Thus, individual incentives to obey the law (authoritative commands) are seen as different from the incentives for the collectivity. Waldman (1972, pp. 89–117) places less emphasis on the difference between individual and group perspectives but still views legitimacy as something conferred on governments in exchange for satisfaction of basic desires for security, welfare, and dignity. Waldman (1972, p. 96) argues that his exchange analysis of legitimacy is “not inconsistent with other explanations of the phenomenon” and that it “refines and accounts for the validity of some of the classic explanations of authority.”

Authority relations present no insurmountable analytical problems for exchange theorists. Explanation of authority in terms of exchange is an ancient, honorable, and still viable tradition.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the possibility and/or desirability of conceptual

integration of two key social science terms—power and exchange. The discussion thus far has shown the possibility of using power terminology to describe exchange relations and the possibility of using exchange terminology to describe many kinds of power relations. In the remainder of the discussion I will consider Cartwright's (1965) criticisms of treating power as a kind of exchange and identify the potential *advantages* of such treatment. Proper evaluation, of course, would require identification of *disadvantages* and weighing them against the advantages. The disadvantages of using exchange models to study power, however, will not be considered here. This lacuna is not only due to space limitations but also to the principle of “comparative need,” i.e., it is often implied that the advantages are nonexistent. I suspect that the final accounting will fail to yield a clear-cut answer regarding the wisdom of treating power in terms of exchange models. The concept of power may be more useful in looking at social relations from the standpoint of a single actor. Although this is a legitimate analytical focus for a social scientist, it is not the only legitimate one. The concept of exchange may be more useful when one wants to emphasize the interactive or reciprocal nature of the relationship. Thus, depending on one's analytical purpose, the relative desirability of emphasizing power or exchange may vary.

Cartwright (1965, pp. 16–18) observes that the “concept of exchange provides considerable insight into many aspects of the influence process,” but he sees severe difficulties in attempting to conceive of all influence processes in this way. These difficulties are as follows:

**1. Noncontingent Means.** When A's sanctions are contingent on B's compliance, it is relatively easy to think of the influence process in terms of exchange. However, when A rewards or punishes B in a noncontingent way—by turning up the heat so as to increase the probability that B will remove a sweater or by giving B money so as to increase the probability that B will go to a movie—the exchange analogy is less obvious.

*Comment:* This is a valid criticism, which suggests that some kinds of power relations cannot be described in terms of exchange. It should be noted, however, that failure to account for influence attempts based on noncontingent means is a weakness found in many

<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of the analogy between the economist's concept of “liquidity” and the political scientist's concept of “legitimacy” see Baldwin (1971a).

discussions of power regardless of whether or not they are based on exchange.<sup>17</sup>

**2. No Resource Transfer.** In A's attempt to influence B, "resources" may be consumed, transferred; or no change in ownership may occur.

*Comment:* The validity of this criticism is questionable, since resources may be exchanged in subtle ways. Two examples used by Cartwright to illustrate influence without resource transfer are as follows: First, distinguished citizens who "lend their names" to fund-raising organizations are depicted as giving their names but also keeping them. Social exchange theory, however, can describe this situation quite well as a situation in which the distinguished citizens receive enhanced status in return for allowing their names to be used by fund-raising organizations. Second, the supervisor who promises an employee a favor but fails to fulfill the promise is described as keeping possession of the resource. Once again, exchange theory would explain this as an employee having exchanged compliance in return for a promised favor. The subsequent breaking of the promise is beside the point. It is the value of the promise at the moment of exchange that matters, not its later devaluation. Exchange is not necessarily equitable; even those who get gypped are participating in an exchange.<sup>18</sup>

**3. No Commensurate Units of Value.** Even when exchange may plausibly be said to occur, it is often most difficult to describe the exchange in commensurate units of value.

*Comment:* This is true, but it does not constitute a serious weakness in exchange models. The exchange of approval for advice, of compliance for money, or of one favor for another does not require measurement in terms of commensurate units of value—at least not so long as we speak of it as direct exchange (barter). It is only when indirect exchange and the fairness of exchange are discussed that

standardized measures of value begin to matter. One of the exchange theorists' most important insights concerns the way societal norms function as *primitive* measuring rods that make indirect social exchange possible.<sup>19</sup> How do we know how much compliance it is appropriate to give police officers? Social norms embodied in laws tell us. How do you know whether it is "fair" for your neighbor to ask to sleep with your spouse in return for lending you a lawnmower? Social norms tell you. And so on. The lack of commensurate units of value for measuring exchange is not a serious problem<sup>20</sup> for exchange models of power unless they employ the notion of power as inherently asymmetrical in the "power imbalance" sense discussed previously.

Despite his criticism of the attempts to marry exchange and power, Cartwright contends that "it would be premature to conclude that the effort is necessarily doomed to failure." The fact that the effort is not doomed to fail, of course, does not justify the undertaking. Let us look at some of the potential advantages of treating power—at least some kinds of power—as exchange relationships.

Several advantages of treating power as exchange can be identified. Since most exchange theorists have thus far employed an asymmetric concept of power, however, some of these advantages are potential rather than actual. These potential advantages, then, pertain to treating the conventional social science concept of power in an exchange perspective.

First, treating power as exchange would emphasize the relational nature of power, since almost everyone thinks of exchange as relational. Second, emphasis on exchange and the possible reciprocity thereby implied should help students of organization theory in overcoming the often-lamented tendency to view power as vertical, hierarchical, asymmetrical, and unilateral (Cartwright, 1965, p. 2; Palumbo, 1975, p. 353). Third, an exchange perspective on power should inhibit the tendency

<sup>17</sup>Harsanyi's (1962, p. 71) treatment of influence attempts based on noncontingent means is especially useful. He notes, moreover, that he has given this case extra attention because it "is often overlooked in the literature." See also Baldwin (1971d, pp. 476–77).

<sup>18</sup>Cartwright's implication that a broken promise has no value is also unacceptable. Anyone with children knows that the breaking of last week's promise to take them to the movies makes it much harder to break this week's promise to take them. Broken promises can be valuable power resources, and not only for children.

<sup>19</sup>There is no contradiction here with the previous emphasis on the differences between the media of social exchange and money. Both social norms and money serve as media of exchange, but social norms are very primitive while money is very sophisticated. Social norms are like money in the same way that a horse is like a new Cadillac. Both are means of transportation, but what a difference!

<sup>20</sup>In a sense the lack of a standardized measure of value is a "serious problem" for all power analysis. It is not, however, a problem peculiar to exchange analysis.

to view all power relations as exploitative. A zero-sum concept of power, in which A is the "victor" and B is the "victim," is not adequate for describing many kinds of power relationships. Fourth, an exchange orientation should help sensitize power theorists to the important role of costs. This has been a traditional blind spot for students of power (Baldwin, 1971c), but it has been one of the social exchange theorists' strengths that they have made us aware of many of the less obvious costs associated with various human choices (cf. Chadwick-Jones, 1976, pp. 178–80). Fifth, the propensity of power theorists to ignore positive sanctions might be offset by the exchange theorists' emphasis on rewards (Baldwin, 1971b). And sixth, integration of such basic concepts as power and exchange could be a step toward conceptual unification of the social sciences, thus facilitating communication among economists, political scientists, sociologists, and social psychologists.

A final and fundamental point should be of special interest to political scientists. Much contemporary thinking about politics tends to view power relations as conflictual, negative, exploitative, coercive, and unpleasant from the standpoint of the one who is influenced. Exchange relations, however, tend to be depicted as cooperative, positive, beneficial, voluntary, and pleasant. The basic conception of the relation between the people and the state that emerges from such modes of thinking is likely to emphasize autonomous individuals tolerating government as a necessary evil. By contrast, a power-exchange theory of politics, such as that proposed by G. E. G. Catlin (1927, 1930), suggests that much of the resentment, suspicion, and vilification of politics and politicians is unjustified. The political process, Catlin implies, is not nearly so asymmetric as it appears to the ordinary person. Politicians provide valuable services and should not be viewed as parasites who exploit society.

The politician, as political capitalist, assumes responsibility and expends his energies in the labour of government in return for the interest of power. And he does this entirely legitimately insofar as the power he enjoys is the power of moulding policy which accrues to a man who has the intelligence to provide men politically with the social adjustments, securities, and facilities which they want but are unable themselves to procure. The social service of the statesman is at least as high and as much deserving of recompense as that of the financier (Catlin, 1930, pp. 184–85).

The question of what constitutes an "accurate" or "desirable" basic concept of the relation

between the government and the governed is beyond the scope of this article; but if the way we think about power affects the way we conceive of this basic social relation, then the stakes involved in deciding how to treat power and exchange are far greater than first appears. The question of whether one agrees with Eckstein (1973, p. 1159) that exchanges are elements of "dissonance" or "impurity" in the political process or whether one agrees with Dahl (1976, p. 50) that exchanges "are as ubiquitous in political as in economic life" deserves serious consideration by every political scientist.

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