

# INTRODUCTION

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## I

The title of this anthology, *Rethinking Power*, provides a key to understanding the context of the essays that are contained within it. As *rethinkings* of power, they presuppose a background of dissatisfaction with previously developed "thinkings of power." Their attempt to develop a theory of power is conditioned by a common recognition of the failure of those previous theories.

In attempting to rethink power, these essays agree that thinking about power is crucial for critical social thought and philosophy. They recognize the significance of power in the lives of human beings in contemporary society. Although the precise effects of power remain a subject of debate, these essays all acknowledge power as one of the fundamental realities of human social existence, a reality that explains the oppressive and demeaning nature of the conditions of human life. Power remains an important concept for explaining those conditions and for thinking of possible means of ameliorating them.

In addition, these essays all are critical of the failure of previous accounts of power to fully comprehend the role of power in the shaping of human life. The charge is that previous theories of power have failed to accord sufficient importance to power as a theoretical concept. As a result, these essays share a common desire to develop a theory that will accord power its rightful place among social phenomena.

Finally, these essays all situate the development of a more adequate theory of power within the general project of improving the lives of human beings. In this sense, they are examples of *critical* social thought and philosophy. They place the theoretical activity of devel-

oping a more adequate account of power and its effect in the social world within the more general practical context of overcoming the oppressive and demeaning circumstances that characterize much of human life today.

But no sooner do I point to a fundamental agreement among the contributions to this volume, than I immediately must correct the impression that these essays are written from a single theoretical perspective. For despite the general agreement among them, they come at the issue of power with fundamentally different commitments and methodologies.

The disparity that lurks beneath the appearance of unity among the essays in this volume reflects the fact that there is no single dominant paradigm in social theory today. With the decline of positivism and its specifically social theoretic counterpart, behavioralism, various other research programs have emerged as competitors in the struggle to succeed positivism.

Various factors led to the decline of positivism, the dominant paradigm in Anglo-American social theory during the 1950s and 1960s. Some were internal to positivism itself. The fundamental idea of positivism in social theory was to model social theory upon the physical sciences. The inadequacy of the account of scientific theorizing upon which this project depended, however, has generally been recognized, as both Ball and Isaac argue in their essays. As a result, even those theorists who accept the scientific status of social theory have been led to reject the particular form in which the positivists had cast it.

There are also many external factors that contributed to the demise of positivism. The recognition that gender and race had illegitimately been ignored by social theory led to the search for a mode of discourse that could incorporate such concerns. In addition, the reception within Anglo-American academia of poststructuralist French thought brought about a fracturing of the assumptions about the nature of social theory. In particular, poststructuralism challenged the idea that social theory should derive its own methodology from that of the natural sciences. As a result, social theorists no longer felt their own discursive possibilities limited by standards of validity imported from elsewhere.

Another important factor was the decline of Marxism as the dominant mode of critical social discourse. By stressing the centrality of class conflicts and economic factors to all social phenomena, Marxism exerted a unifying tendency upon divergent modes of critical discourse. The criticisms of Marxism by both feminism and poststructuralism

resulted in a decline in its influence. Feminists asserted that the prioritizing of class over gender resulted in a one-sidedness in Marxist social thought. Poststructuralists, on the other hand, rejected the idea of a single overarching theory or 'metanarrative,' thus calling into question the fundamental stress of Marxism upon the economic.

Understanding the broader intellectual context within which these essays are situated allows us to see why, despite an agreement that an adequate conception of power is urgently needed, they develop their arguments so differently. Because they adhere to different theoretical paradigms that are struggling for ascendancy, the essays in this volume adopt different modes of discourse despite their focus upon a common object of study.

In order to see how these different theoretical commitments are reflected in the essays in this volume, consider the issue of whether it is appropriate to adopt a mode of discourse derived from natural science in addressing the issue of power. A number of the essays are united in their assessment of previous accounts of power as adhering to a view that social theory is amenable to scientization along the lines of behavioral sciences. However, their solutions to this commonly perceived problem move in fundamentally different directions. Some seek to develop theories that adhere to a more adequate philosophy of science, while others reject the language of science *tout court*, seeking to develop a different type of language necessary for social theory.

Similarly, although many essays are predicated on a belief that previous theories of power failed to detect power in all the different spheres of social relationships in which it actually is a factor, where and how they develop this insight differs radically. Bowles and Gintis, for example, in turning to the economy, rely on previous conceptions of power in order to show that the language of neoclassical economics has covered up its presence in the social realm. Airaksinen, Hartsock, and Gottlieb, on the other hand, attempt to demonstrate the presence of power in the sphere of sexuality by developing new vocabularies that allow that presence to emerge.

Some of the essays in this volume accept the idea that power is a constraint on the lives of human beings—an idea that previous theories of power had accepted—but seek to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how such constraints are imposed. In their view, the failing of previous theories was their lack of sophistication. Others move in a fundamentally different direction by seeking to develop a positive notion of power, one that does not see power as fundamentally oppressive. In their view, the previous attempts at un-

derstanding power were hampered by their fixation on power as oppressive and coercive, thus missing the positive and empowering aspects of power.

So although all of these essays are *rethinkings* of power, they demonstrate the radically different manners in which such rethinkings are taking place. In responding to the failures of previous theories, these essays move in different directions, employing different modes of discourse, even as they all seek to advance our thinking about power.

## II

One of the tasks that the reader of this volume faces is that of assessing the validity of the different analyses of power offered by the various essays. Having a sense of the complex structure of power relationships as they exist within contemporary society is a prerequisite for doing so. In order to aid the reader in this task, I will describe the presence of overlapping and contradictory power relationships as portrayed in a short episode that James Agee uses to open his classic study of tenant farmers in Alabama, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I will also demonstrate how complex a social phenomenon power is, thereby enabling the reader to see the need for the sorts of analyses of power as are contained within the essays in this volume.

Agee opens the main body of his book with an account of how he and Walker Evans—the photographer who accompanied him and whose photographs form the other half of the book—were taken by two white landlords to hear their African-American tenant farmers sing. Agee is unhappy about the disruption that this performance causes in the lives of these tenants on a Sunday morning: “They had been summoned to sing for Walker and for me, to show us what nigger music is like (though we had done all we felt we were able to spare them and ourselves this summons) . . . ” [28–29] Once the singing has begun, however, Agee is deeply moved:

It was as I had expected . . . in the style I have heard on records by Mitchell’s Christian Singers, jagged, tortured, stony, accented as if by hammers and cold-chisels, full of a nearly paralyzing vitality and iteration of rhythm, the harmonies constantly splitting the nerves; so that of western music the nearest approach to its austerity is in the first two centuries of polyphony. But here it was entirely instinctual; it tore itself like a dance of sped plants out of three young men who stood sunk to their throats in land. . . [29]

After being asked by their landlord, the African-Americans sing a second song for Agee and Evans, a slow one that is full of feeling. Again, Agee is deeply moved and his language now seeks to match that song in its evocative power:

The tenor lifted out his voice alone in a long, plorative line that hung like fire on heaven, or whistle's echo, sinking, sunken, along descents of a modality I had not heard before, and sank along the arms and breast of the bass as might a body sunken from a cross. . . . [29–30]

At the end of this powerful rendition by the share-croppers, Agee reports ironically, "The landlord objected that that was too much howling and too much religion on end and how about something with some life to it, they knew what he meant, and then they could go" [30]. The African-Americans have some difficulty, Agee tells us, complying with this demand, but they do so, and sing their third and final song. At the end, Agee comments:

Meanwhile, and during all this singing, I had been sick in the knowledge that they felt they were here at our command, mine and Walker's, and that I could communicate nothing otherwise; and now, in a perversion of self-torture, I played my part through. I gave their leader fifty cents . . . and he thanked me for them in a dead voice, not looking me in the eye, and they went away, putting their white hats on their heads as they walked into the sunlight. [31]

This episode reveals both the extent of and limitations to Agee's awareness of the moral complexity of his and Evans' intrusion into the lives of the tenant farmers about whom he is writing. After all, one of the flaws of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is that, by focusing on three white tenant families, it fails to accord racism its rightful place among the sources that demean the lives of Southern tenant farmers. Despite his initial focus upon the lives of these African-American tenant farmers (and a black couple in a subsequent episode), Agee does not return to a consideration of the situation of African-Americans ever again in the book.<sup>2</sup> By using the suffering of the African-Americans as a means of entry into his "proper" concern—the situation of tenant farmers in the South—Agee neglects the importance of race to an understanding of tenantry.

To a certain extent, it might be thought that I am guilty of a similar failure, for the issue of race is one that is not faced as squarely as it might be in the essays in this volume. The failure is not, however, so much with the essays as with the state of contemporary social theory. There is a need for a more concentrated focus by theorists of power on

the ways in which racism functions as a form of power and oppression. While class and gender have been the focus of the concerns of social theorists involved with the rethinking of power, the implications of race for theories of power has not received an equal amount of attention from social theorists.

With this in mind, let us return to the human social drama that Agee presents us with. There are three different groups of individuals that constitute the actors in this drama: the first group consists of the two educated strangers, the journalist Agee and the photographer Evans, in Alabama to report to a prestigious magazine on the status of sharecroppers; the second consists of the two landlords who take Agee and Evans to see their African-American tenants, somewhat fearful of what these strangers might report; finally, there are the tenants themselves, forced to perform for their bosses on their day of rest. In this seemingly simple setting, the power relations have a multiplicity and layering that is not clearly perceptible at first glance.

The economic dependence of the African-American tenants upon their white landlords is, of course, the power relationship that most immediately strikes the reader. Although this dependency is not the focus of the vignette, the very terms in which the actors are identified give primacy of place to their roles in an economic power relationship. Because their lives unfold within the context of an economic system of tenant farming, the African-American tenants are dependent upon their landlords, who thus have power over them.

But even this obvious power relationship has many nuances that require further elucidation. If one thinks of economic power as an ability to command someone else's labor in the workplace, then it becomes clear that the relationship between the African-American tenants and their white landlords is not simply one of simple economic dependency. The ability of the landlords to "summon" the tenants on a Sunday morning to perform for two strangers indicates that there are noneconomic forms of power in a relationship that many would classify as simply a form of economic oppression or exploitation. The lives of the African-American men are ruled by the whims of their landlords to a far greater extent than their simply having to deliver up to them a portion of their yield.

There are a variety of ways in which one could attempt to explain the more invidious nature of the oppressive power relationship within which these African-American men exist. One strategy would be to deny that the understanding of economic power that I have used in explaining the relationship is an adequate explanation of the economic

system of tenant farming. Another would be to note that the economic power relationship between the African-American tenants and the white landlords coexists with a racial power relationship.

By a racial power relationship, I mean to indicate the ways in which African-Americans are oppressed within American society. In the South during the 1930s, African-Americans had to fear for their lives if they offended the white community in certain ways. Lynchings and terror kept African-Americans fearful of the consequences of their actions. As a result, African-Americans like the share-croppers were racially oppressed, since their racial heritage made them subservient to the whites around them, even if they had no other specific relationship with those whites.

As a result of the coincidence of racial oppression and economic oppression at the same site, Agee's African-Americans are even more powerless than they would be if they were merely subject to the economic oppression of sharecropping or tenant farming. This is because the white landlords are able to rely on assumptions about the proper place and mode of comportment of African-Americans to structure the context of their dealings with their tenants.

Agee's perception of the African-American tenant farmers themselves provides the key to another aspect of the power relations that structure this scene. Agee's text is structured by his desire to convey to the reader his acknowledgment of the power relationship that these African-American tenant farmers embody. Agee portrays himself as tortured by his relationship with these African-American men. His rhetoric establishes their ability to communicate with him and his ability to understand their music, to appreciate its technical and emotional accomplishments, something that is foreign to the crude and jagged landlords. Agee's use of the imagery of the deposition heroicizes the tenants, characterizing them as having a depth and nobility that far surpasses the nature of their supposed masters.

But this means that the manner in which we have so far understood the relationship between the landlord-masters and their tenant farmer-servants misses an important aspect of their relationship. Although there is a clear sense in which the landlords are masters and the tenant farmers servants, Agee's prose conveys the idea that this conception of their relationship is limited. His own Christian beliefs structure his portrayal of the tenant farmer-servants as "first in the kingdom of heaven." Agee perceives the African-American "powerless" tenant farmers as having a depth and nobility—a power—that surpasses that of their economic masters.

The importance of this point is that power relationships do not involve the simple, unidirectional hierarchy that the language of domination or oppression suggests. This point was first made by Hegel in his famous dialectic of lordship and bondage, for which he was duly subjected to ridicule by many philosophers. His insight remains true nonetheless: an understanding of oppression as consisting of a master who profits from the labor of his servants is simplistic and fails to provide an adequate characterization of the relationship between masters and their servants. A theory of power needs to recognize that those who are oppressed have different means of eluding the control of their masters that can even, in certain contexts, function as the basis for overthrowing them.

Despite the tendency to focus upon the relationship between the tenant farmers and the landlords as the central power relationship in this scene, it is important not to ignore the power relationship between Agee and Evans and the landlords. While there is nothing that Agee and Evans can do that will directly affect the life circumstances of either the landlords or their tenants, the landlords do recognize that Agee and Evans have power over them, even though they are not sure how or whether it will be manifested. Because of Agee's and Evans' ability to document the situation of the tenant farmers to the public as well as the government, the writer and the photographer have power over the landlords that makes the landlords view them with some disquiet and distrust. The landlords recognize that the public scrutiny to which Agee and Evans can subject them gives the writer and photographer power over them.

This power clearly shapes the interactions that Agee records. We should not, however, skip over the complexity of the phenomenon that this calls to our attention. The power Agee and Evans have over the landlords is the result of their ability to mobilize public opinion on behalf of the tenants, a power that the landlords recognize and fear. This power consists of a set of expectations on the part of the landlords about what might happen if Agee and Evans were to do certain things. The power that Agee and Evans have is constituted by the landlords' anticipation of actions that other people might undertake—people who are not directly present on the scene and are not known to any of the actual actors in the drama—as a result of the publication of Agee's and Evans' work.

We therefore must confront the fact that power has a more complicated mode of social existence than many theorists admit. Power is—at least some of the time and, as I argue in my contribution, much



more frequently than is generally acknowledged—a factor in a social situation because of human beings' expectations about what might happen to them. Power can be a significant factor in social relationships even when it exists as a set of complex anticipated reactions to the assumed actions of remote social agents.

So even in an apparently simple incident like that narrated by Agee, power manifests itself as a complex social presence that exists in an intricate network of overlapping and contradictory relations. The task for a theory of power is to provide a conception of power that does justice to its tangled empirical reality while at the same time providing the social theorist with a precise tool for criticizing social practices and institutions. In particular, theories of power must explain the immersion of human beings in nets of power relations that constrain their possibilities while simultaneously uncovering the means by which human beings have the ability to resist and challenge those relations.

### III

This volume collects a series of important contributions to the recent rethinking of power. Although they all reject received modes of thinking about power, they strike out in various directions in their attempts to develop understandings of power that are more adequate to contemporary social life.

The first contribution sets the stage for the reflections gathered in this volume by contrasting two different conceptions of power. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty imagines a dialogue on the nature of power between two characters, Buff and Rebuff. Buff is both a skeptic and a nominalist who argues that the standard social theoretical use of the concept of power depends upon an outmoded metaphysical framework. Rebuff, on the other hand, is a social theorist who comes to the analysis of power with a set of conceptual distinctions that she believes are sufficient to make sense of power. She claims that Buff's failure to attend to these crucial distinctions has led her to the skeptical position of denying the usefulness of power as an analytic tool for social theory.

Rorty not only succeeds in showing the need for a number of important distinctions in conceptualizing power, but by using the dialogue form, she also illustrates the contested nature of the concept of power itself. She demonstrates that theorists' defense of their own conceptions of power depend upon their interests and beliefs. Although she ends with an optimistic reconciliation between Buff and Rebuff,

her dialogue exemplifies the basic dilemma of whether or not it is possible to reach such a consensus in theorizing power.

Terence Ball is also interested in the conflicts involving the concept of power within the work of social theorists and philosophers. In a sweeping survey of recent developments in theorizing power, Ball maps out the different directions that recent rethinkings of power have taken. He begins by discussing the dominant, behaviorist conception of power within Anglo-American social science, arguing that this view of power is based upon a "causal construal of power" that ignores the communicative aspect of human interactions. Ball goes on to categorize more recent investigations of power as falling into three distinct models, each of which moves beyond the confines of the behaviorist model: the communicative, realist, and deconstructionist models. After discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these models, Ball concludes by adopting a pluralistic attitude, claiming that we are not yet in a position to judge one model superior to the others.

Jeffrey C. Isaac defends the validity of the realist model of power in his contribution. Like Ball, Isaac rejects the behaviorist-influenced theories of power that have dominated much Anglo-American social thought. Isaac traces the shortcomings of these theories to their use of an inadequate empiricist philosophy of science, one that focuses upon the description of regularities rather than upon understanding the "real nature of things." He develops his realist theory of power on the basis of a more adequate philosophy of science, one that is "both essentialist and metaphysical" in that it posits entities as the bearers of causal properties or powers. By treating human beings as bearers of powers, Isaac is able to develop a notion of power that he believes will accord power its rightful status within social theory as a "structural determinant" of human behavior. By seeing power as a structural factor in such social relationships as that between a student and a teacher, the realist theory makes power an inherent feature of human social life.

For Wolfgang Balzer, the primary question concerning power is metatheoretical. Balzer is interested in defending research into the concept of power as a legitimate path for social scientific research. He does so by comparing my recent attempt to conceptualize power with game theory. His suggestion is that we should see these as two competing paradigms in social theory.

Balzer claims that game theory and power theory are different methods for analyzing social interactions. In order to make his case, he develops formal models of both game theory and power theory, models that clarify the assumptions made by the two competing theo-

ries. By displaying the assumptions of these two theories in this explicit manner, Balzer is able to show exactly where they conflict with one another. Employing recent ideas from the philosophy of science, he is able to show that attempts to conceptualize power are a legitimate path for social scientific research.

My own contribution to this volume puts forward a model that conceptualizes the presence of power in a social relationship as the result of a broad social field. I call this the “situated model of power” in order to indicate the role that the broader social context plays in the constitution of power relationships. Previous models of power, by focusing upon the two central actors in a power relationship, failed to understand the importance of a broader social context to the creation of a power relationship. The situated model of power corrects this failing, using the concept of a social alignment to indicate the role of the social context in constituting power relations. After developing the basic elements of this model of power, I turn to a variety of power relationships in contemporary society in order to show how the situated model of power illuminates their nature.

Timo Airaksinen’s essay moves in a different direction by emphasizing the rhetorical component in domination. Many theorists conceive of domination as simply a brute fact, a form of social relationship that is instituted once the attempt to cooperate has failed. After exploring a variety of forms of domination, Airaksinen argues that there is a rhetoric of domination, i.e., that a domination relationship takes place by means of a particular conceptual understanding shared by the dominating and dominated agents. In particular, Airaksinen looks at various attempts by both the dominating and the dominated to describe their respective situations, arguing that, while the dominant always try to mask the domination in a rhetorical appeal, the dominated have the ability to reveal what the dominator wishes to conceal. Drawing on the writings of the Marquis de Sade, Airaksinen shows the problematic nature of such appeals, arguing there is no neutral audience to whom the dominated may appeal in an attempt to undo their domination. In making his argument, Airaksinen notes certain similarities between his work and that of Michel Foucault.

The next two contributions focus directly upon Foucault’s work. In a number of daring and innovative studies, Foucault argued that philosophers and social theorists had misunderstood the nature of power. According to Foucault, such theorists had conceived of power according to a “juridical” model in which power was localized as the possession of the strong and then used to repress and control the

weak. In contrast to this view of power, Foucault argues that power is both "relational" and "capillary," something that permeates every aspect of the social world. There are no agents who are simply the possessors of power and who can use it to dominate others. Rather, power is itself something that permeates all social relationships and that constitutes all human beings. Foucault developed this way of thinking about power by showing how this type of power came into existence in modern Europe. Many theorists think that Foucault's writings have revealed important new ways to think about power's presence in the social world.

Thomas McCarthy assesses the significance of Foucault's work for critical social theory. He begins by arguing that there has been too great an emphasis on the divergences between Foucault's standpoint and that of the Frankfurt School. However, this is only the prelude to McCarthy's central argument, which seeks to show that Foucault's understanding of power and its role in the constitution of the human subject is inadequate for the purposes of a critical social theory. Tracing Foucault's understanding of power from his major works on the prison and sexuality to his later attempt to describe an ethics of the self, McCarthy argues that there is an important transformation in Foucault's understanding of power and its effect on human beings. Whereas Foucault began, according to McCarthy, with a conception of power that made it virtually coextensive with the social—a view that identifies power with domination—he ends up completely sundering power (now understood in the sense of self-creation or "power to") from domination. In both cases, McCarthy argues, the fundamental framework that Foucault employs is inadequate to the complexities of human social life. McCarthy suggests that the work of Jürgen Habermas, the contemporary standard bearer for the Frankfurt School, offers a more adequate model of the ways in which power structures the social world.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also focuses upon Foucault's understanding of power. She does so by comparing his view to both the ideas of Derrida and the novels of Mahasweta. Spivak worries that Foucault's "nominalist" account of power has been too easily taken up by social theorists and assimilated as either a pragmatic epistemology or a feminist political project. By demonstrating affiliations between the positions of Foucault and Derrida, Spivak seeks to show the impossibility of such patronymic appropriations of Foucault's work. In particular, Spivak points to Foucault's understanding of power as based upon relations of force, an understanding that has eluded even his

sympathetic interpreters. Finally, Spivak turns to the writings of the Bengali novelist Mahasweta, arguing that Mahasweta's writing shows that the difficult problem of a colonized society cannot be readily conceptualized within a narrative constructed elsewhere, thus illustrating the importance of the claims made in common by Foucault and Derrida.

Iris Marion Young seeks to make issues of power central to questions of justice in society. The primary concern of contemporary philosophical accounts of justice has been questions of distribution, i.e., the just mode of distributing the benefits of social association. Young thinks that such a focus misses the primary thrust of many new left social movements that have sought to bring about a more just society. Her claim is that such movements are more concerned about power than distribution and that an adequate theory of justice needs to incorporate this fact. Young develops an account of oppression that links issues of justice with those of power. Employing the metaphor of power's multiple faces, Young argues that oppression has five different faces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. By arguing that questions of power are intimately related to questions of justice, Young confronts in a fundamental way the liberal political theorist's blindness to issues of power. She shows that issues of power are among the most fundamental in assessing the validity of human social arrangements.

Just as Young argues that there is a need for philosophical theories of justice to incorporate questions of power, the economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis argue that economists need to develop a theoretical framework that acknowledges the role of power in economic transactions. Relying on an interest-based notion of power, Bowles and Gintis criticize the idea that economic exchange takes place in a power-neutral context. Within neoclassical economics, the wage contract between a worker and an employer has been treated as an instance of a free exchange. Bowles and Gintis argue that such a view of the labor-capital relationship ignores the presence of a power relationship. Specifically, the ability of the capitalist to fire a worker who does not perform at a high-enough level gives rise to a power relationship that neoclassical economists have ignored. As a result of this feature of the labor-capital exchange, Bowles and Gintis call it a "contested exchange," i.e., one whose terms are determined by a power relationship between the two parties.

Howard McGary pursues the relationship between knowledge and power in a somewhat different direction than that taken by Foucault.

McGary is concerned with the power that scientists have in contemporary society because of the assumption that they are the producers of knowledge. He criticizes the idea that such research is pure and thus not liable to restriction for moral reasons. Focusing upon the case of I.Q. and intelligence research—research that has been used to further racial oppression—McGary makes a case for limiting the research of scientists in light of the power that the knowledge they produce can bring. Like the two preceding contributions, McGary's questions the dominant assumption that power can be excluded from a specific domain. His claim is that knowledge is fraught with power and that this needs to be taken account of in our social policies concerning its production.

Feminist theorists have developed one of the important lines of research in contemporary rethinking of power. Jean Baker Miller's essay, "Women and Power," explores the need for a feminist conception of power. Miller's basic thesis is that theories that describe women as powerless in male-dominated society misrepresent women's lives, experiences, and capabilities. She claims that women have historically been powerful, only that their manner of possessing and exercising power is different than that recognized by traditional theories, themselves largely the product of men. According to Miller, within their traditional roles women have developed their power to empower others in such roles as mothers and teachers. She argues that this is a form of power central to the existence of society, but one that social theorists have failed to accord a significant theoretical role. She begins to develop a conception of this type of power, one that she urges social theorists to adopt.

The final two contributions to this volume extend the exploration of power and gender to the realm of sexuality. While sexuality is a domain in which power has always been exercised, it is one that traditional social theory has treated in remote ways, at best. At least since Freud, however, we have had to acknowledge the fact that sexual practices are an important factor in our understanding of society as a whole.

Nancy C. M. Hartsock's essay is a contribution to the debate among feminist theorists about the nature of sexuality and pornography. Hartsock argues that power plays an important role in the constitution of sexuality. Asserting that what is usually referred to as sexuality is really male sexuality, she explores the association of male sexuality with hostility, violence, and domination. Drawing on the work of Rob-

ert Stoller, Hartsock shows how the dominant understanding of sexuality within our culture makes it impossible for women to experience a form of sexuality that is uniquely their own. As a first step in creating this possibility, she puts forward the concept of *eros* as a more general understanding of the human capacity for union, sensuality, and competence. Hartsock's essay shows that it must be recognized that power permeates even the most intimate and private aspects of our lives.

Roger S. Gottlieb also argues that power structures our lives in ways that previous theorists have ignored. In his essay, Gottlieb focuses upon one of the most serious threats to human existence in this century: the possibility of nuclear war. Gottlieb's thesis is that the possibility of a total destruction of human life stemming from a nuclear war is the result of a particularly masculine understanding of power. While the competitive determination to prove oneself superior to others has been seen as a component of a male identity that attracts men to war as a form of testing, Gottlieb argues that the form of power in modern society has given rise to a new type of desire for war. Positing rationalization, professionalization, and commodification as three aspects of modern power, Gottlieb attributes a desire for war to males whose identities have been constituted by these modern forms of power. He thus sees the possibility of the destruction of human life as stemming from the particular modes of power through which males are constituted in contemporary society and posits the need to understand the role of power in society as a necessary task in averting the danger of nuclear war.

#### IV

In closing, let me return to the African-American sharecroppers standing before Agee and Evans at the demand of the white landowners. I used Agee's description of that episode to demonstrate the difficulties involved in understanding the precise manner in which power structures human social interactions. As Agee's description makes clear, the reality in which he found himself was a complex and differentiated one, one that will not easily yield itself to the analysis of the theorist.

The problem of finding an adequate theoretical vocabulary for describing a scene as rich as the one Agee presents can stand for the quandary of the contemporary social theorist. In recent years, we have had our eyes opened to a complex social reality. The goal of a critical

social theorist is to provide a language that can adequately conceptualize the newly discovered complexity of the presence and workings of power in society.

The essays assembled in this volume provide a good means for beginning the task of understanding the complex, multiple, overlapping, and contradictory forms of power that structure our lives. By focusing on such factors as the context within which a power relation is constituted and the diversity of the faces of oppression, these essays provide an important framework for understanding what power is and how it works.

I have invoked Agee's writing once again to remind the reader that the goal of a theory of power is both to understand the ways in which the lives of human beings are constricted as well as to reflect upon the possibilities for eliminating such constriction. Rather than trying to define reality within a set of rigid categories, these essays reflect the desire to accommodate theory to the richness and complexity of social reality while still maintaining a critical stance. They show a concern for developing a theory that will be socially useful but that will not achieve its utility by illegitimately simplifying the reality it seeks to comprehend. These "rethinkings of power," therefore, have an important role to play in a critical social theory that seeks to give human beings greater control over the circumstances of their own existence.<sup>3</sup>