

One Concern with the Notion of Power as an Element of the Conceptual Framework Guiding the Activities of the Bahá'í Community

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According to authors such as Michael Karlberg¹ and Sona Farid-Arbab, anti-foundationalists (meaning, those affiliated with post-structuralist and postmodernist theories, social constructionism, critical theory, and with those movements or theories considered by those on the Right to be associated with 'identity politics' and with Marxism, such as race theories, feminisms, queer theory, postcolonial theories, decolonial theories etc.) operate with a very problematic concept of power that must be rejected or resisted. According to both Karlberg and Farid-Arbab², power can be defined in negative or positive ways as either 'adversarialism' or 'mutualism' (this is a view derived from Farzam Arbab³ and FUNDAEC). The concepts of 'power over' and 'balance of power' constitute 'adversarialism' while the concepts of 'power to' and 'power with' constitute 'assisted empowerment' and 'mutual empowerment.' 'Power to' denotes power as a capacity in individuals that needs to be nourished or assisted from the outside. 'Power with' manifests itself when people act "in a cooperative or mutualistic manner in the pursuit of a common goal."⁴ (p.58) The key claim here is that 'adversarialism' leads to oppressive structures (this includes both social structures and knowledge structures) while 'mutualism' leads to "emancipatory structures" (again, this refers to both social structures and knowledge structures). (p.105) *The Bahá'í Faith*, Karlberg

¹ Karlberg, Michael. *Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020.

² Farid-Arbab, Sona. *Moral Empowerment: In Quest of a Pedagogy*. Bahá'í Publishing, 2016.

³ Arbab, Farzam. 2008. 'Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion, and Development'. In *The Lab, the Temple, and the Market Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion, and Development*, edited by Sharon Harper, pp.149–238. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10119732>.

⁴ Karlberg, Michael. *Constructing Social Reality. An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*. Association for Bahá'í Studies, 2020.

argues, participates in the establishment of emancipatory structures by fostering a culture of empowerment on mutualistic lines.

There are many ways in which such claims could be vulnerable to the critiques that anti-foundationalists bring. Let us consider one example. One distinguishing characteristic of anti-foundationalist discourses is precisely their take on the concept of power. One argument they advance is that it is inefficient to focus analysis on only the macro levels of power (such as ‘power over’ or ‘balance of power’) if what we are seeking is to challenge existing forms of oppression. Rather, it is at the micro-level of power, in schools, orphanages, youth care homes, hospitals, psychiatric institutions, prisons, and workplaces (or study circles, devotionals, children and junior-youth classes, 19 day feasts, summer-schools and conferences etc. if we are thinking of the Bahá’í community), and in any other institutions that construct and apply notions of normativity (Spiritual Assemblies, Area Teaching Committees, Regional Councils, Auxiliary Boards etc. in relation to the Bahá’í community), that the subjectivity of individuals based on particular forms of power/knowledge is being inscribed.

There are two observations here. The first is that it is through the ‘assisted empowerment’ of institutions that our selves are largely constructed. This happens without us having much say over that process until later in life. The second is that such ‘constructions’ of our subjectivity reproduce existing inequalities and forms of oppression and even create new ones. These forms of oppression associated with ‘mutualism’ are a lot more insidious also because they operate at the interface between our consciousness and subconsciousness. For example, my notion of a White male might have been constructed through a history curriculum which omitted those histories and historical aspects that would have challenged Western hegemony and White supremacy (slavery, colonization, decolonization, neo-colonialism). Or, my Bahá’í

power operates largely unimpeded and most effectively. That this notion is not understood in Bahá'í scholarship and community life (and this is evident even in authors I greatly admire such as Moojan Momen⁶) is a hugely problematic thing for anti-foundationalists who see in this a complete lack of self-reflexivity and an unwarranted attitude of entitlement behind which hide unacknowledged forms of oppression. From their perspective, such a blind spot immediately disqualifies any possible attempts to ascribe to Karlberg's concept of power (and to its conceptual framework) either the status of normative foundational truth or that of normative nonfoundational truth. The concept, they would argue, must either be revised or withdrawn from the conceptual framework. Why? Because in this current form, the notion of mutualism is used to suggest a utopian notion of the Bahá'í community and its institutions and processes, where power does not feature except as love, nourishment, and positive assistance and empowerment. Power, in the traditional sense, they would say, seems to exist only outside and not inside of the Bahá'í community – in terms of how the concept itself has been formulated. Nevertheless, strong centralization, social control, and steering, as well as internal politics and bartering intra and between different administrative bodies are important aspects of Bahá'í community life at different levels, at least for the time being, while experimentation with forms of decentralization and better forms of consultation is also present and likely to be given more scope into the future. If publicly promoted and accepted as a key element of Bahá'í discourse (as it has been), such a notion of power as Karlberg and others have been advancing, the anti-foundationalists would argue, would effectively condition Bahá'ís not to be self-critical about the manner in which power, privilege, disadvantage, inequality and oppression actually operate within their own communities. From such a perspective, therefore, our claims about a new concept of power that successfully

⁶ Momen, Moojan. 2004. 'Power and the Bahá'í Community, by Moojan Momen'. Accessed 14 August 2022. http://irfancolloquia.org/54/momen_power.

transcends past conceptions and brings about a new type of civilization would very much seem to resemble the claims about the emperor's new clothes from the fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen.⁷ As this concept of power is a key element of the conceptual framework, its interrogation concerns both.

⁷ 'The Emperor's New Clothes | Fairy Tales and Other Traditional Stories | Hans Christian Andersen | Lit2Go ETC'. n.d. Accessed 14 August 2022. <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/68/fairy-tales-and-other-traditional-stories/5637/the-emperors-new-clothes/>.