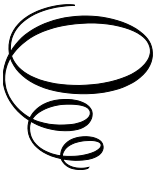
The Psychology of Power and Showing Up Differently in the Climate Crisis

The Psychology of Power and Showing Up Differently in the Climate Crisis

By

Gerard van der Ree

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



The Psychology of Power and Showing Up Differently in the Climate Crisis

By Gerard van der Ree

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-5359-6
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-5360-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The two essays in this book deal with power and the climate crisis. The first highlights power as a social phenomenon that affects the way in which we perceive the world and ourselves. In other words: if we are inhabiting privileged or marginalised positions, this will be reflected in how we see and respond to the world around us. This is why I have called it "the psychology of power". The second essay, in turn, offers a multi-layered understanding of the climate crisis. Going beyond the dominant focus of understanding it as a problem of collective behaviour, it makes the climate crisis visible as a question also involving emotions, worldviews and needs. This may open new pathways for "showing up differently in the climate crisis".

While these are quite different topics, the two essays are connected in their focus on translating abstract questions into everyday life. Both social power and the climate crisis, it will be argued, are not simply "societal problems" of a world "out there". They are also *in* us, part and parcel of who we are in our daily world. How I navigate my own social position and privilege or understand and experience the climate crisis, affects how I relate to them. Recognising this may help me to critically look at how I am doing so, and, if necessary, find alternative ways of showing up in them.

This book comes out of my work as a university teacher. I teach courses in politics and International Relations. Within this academic field, I work around questions around power, coloniality, feminism, and marginality. At the same time, a lot of my teaching involves the climate crisis as well as its political origins and implications. In this sense, the themes of the two essays in this book are rooted in my academic work in political science. However, I also teach courses in social innovation and change-making. Rather than working through theoretical approaches, these courses are combining personal reflection ("what do I care about and why?") with forms of practical activism ("how do I initiate a small change in my everyday life?"). These courses have given me a sense of the way in which questions around the climate crisis and social power are alive among my students. This concerns particularly questions around agency, of how to make a change in everyday life. The two essays in this bundle reflect the ways in which I have brought these two sides, the academic and the practical, together.

In the many dialogues and discussions on social power and the climate crisis that I have been in, I often sensed both a sense of urgency and of frustration. The urgency usually comes from an incredulity and sense of exasperation: how is it possible that we created *this* world? One in which coloniality, marginality, sexism and racism are still part of everyday life? One in which we are, in Greta Thunberg's words, "burning down our own house"?[1] And, immediately following such questions, it asks: "what can we do?". This sense of urgency, however, does not easily translate into action. We do not always have clear pathways of translating our worries into deeds. It is one thing to promote awareness around marginalised groups, reduce consumption, or demand better policies from our governments. But is that all? I sense a need for translating such big questions into our everyday lives. How do I begin engaging with the social power relations in the community I live in? What can I do around the climate crisis in my daily engagements with people?

One of the ways I have come to respond to such questions is to address the ways in which we *know* these problems. It seems to me that the terms in which we ask a question will to a large extent define the kinds of answers we give to it. Re-thinking the question, and posing it in slightly different terms, allows for alternative answers to become available. This is usually not a matter of getting more facts or data, but rather a matter of changing the perspective, or reframing the issue.

This is what I hope these two essays will offer. They will address social power and the climate crisis in slightly different terms than are usually offered in both media and scholarship. When it comes to social power, I will highlight the ways in which it defines our self-understanding and our emotional responses. Directing the gaze "inwards" in this way can offer new starting points for engaging with the theme in daily life. For the case of the climate crisis, in turn, I will direct the attention away from the "behavioural gaze" and highlight the role of emotions, worldviews and deeper needs in it, as a way of developing pathways for everyday action.

The focus of these essays will be to create space between the abstract and philosophical on one hand and concrete action on the other. In a way, I hope to expose the "gap between reality and hope".[2] For me, that in-between is about bringing together new perspectives, personal reflection, and a

[1] Greta Thunberg, speech at the World Economic Forum, 21 January 2019.
[2] Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, International Relations and the Problem of Difference (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

rethinking of who we are in the world. Changing perspective means to put things in a new light, including our own role. This creates possibilities for translating that new perspective into our own worlds. Even though I will offer some examples here and there, the focus will not primarily be on working out concrete examples or projects. Rather, it seeks to facilitate viewing ourselves differently in our own world as a beginning for possible change.

As a teacher, I work with social theory and philosophy. I do not identify as a philosopher, nor do I aspire to be one. Nonetheless, I find that philosophy can be inspiring. It has a capacity for cracking open ways of thinking and providing new intellectual horizons, offering unexplored possibilities. I often find that philosophy and social theory give language to perspectives I have intuited to some degree but have never found words for. Reading the work of thinkers such as Spivak, Arendt, Heidegger, Foucault and Fanon has felt like a kind of home-coming, in the sense that it revealed something to me that was both new and familiar. Through their words, it often seems, I can navigate the world in new terms, even though I am maybe unsure where that will lead me. Donna Haraway puts this beautifully when she describes theory as "a risky game of worlding".[3]

The value of worlding, for me, is in the way it changes our understanding of our own world by reshuffling the "whole" and the "parts". Often, when we learn new things, we place them within the framework of thought that we have grown up with and take for granted. We put our new learnings "in the world", so to say. Worlding, however, offers us a different kind of learning. We cannot place it within the world as we understand it; instead, it demands of us to reconceptualise that world itself. It forces us to rethink the "whole". In light of the new whole, all the parts that were already there gain a different meaning. While every "thing" remains the same, everything is different. We have gained new access to the world around us. By changing our way of looking, we have come to see it in a new light.

This worlding sensitivity is what I intend to bring forth in this book. My hope is that, in a way, the abstract ideas and ways of thinking in this book will help the reader to engage with the world differently. I hope it will offer new horizons, ways of approaching things and sensitivities towards the world that can be unpacked in a practical way in everyday life. At the same time, I am aware that this approach comes at a price. Philosophy and social

[3] Donna Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, Making Kin in the Chthulucene, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

theory have their own logics, sensitivities, ways of debating and rules. They are usually made for intellectual audiences for intellectual purposes, and not primarily designed to translate into everyday action. I will not be able to (nor want to) do justice to many of the nuances, debates, and sensitivities that they were developed for. This is the price of translation, so to say. The references and sources will serve as an entry-point for those who are interested in unpacking the ideas I present here in more depth.

The big and the small

Connecting big questions of our times with everyday life is an ongoing puzzle for me. In part, this is because in the light of the greatness of issues such as the climate crisis or global inequality, my personal life often seems quite irrelevant. Unless I become some kind of superhero or global leader, it is difficult to see the relevance of my actions at the macro level. And at the same time, I struggle to translate the "big" into the "small" of my everyday life. How do I translate my worries around injustices into my daily actions? If I cannot "solve" the climate crisis in my own world, and can only do my share in reducing consumption, what else is there to do for me?

Pondering these questions, I have become increasingly aware that the difference between "big" and "small" is not just a matter of scale. Seeing problems in a global way or in an everyday context comes with very different ways of looking. Each perspective comes with its own way of interpretation, so to say, making quite a difference in how we perceive, weigh, and respond to what we are looking at.

In philosophy of science these two perspectives are sometimes referred to as "explaining" and "understanding".[4] Both explaining and understanding are legitimate ways of looking and of doing scholarship. But they do very different things. Explaining is approaching things "from above", as if we are looking at them from a distance. When discussing the climate crisis, for instance, we often take up a perspective as if we are looking at the planet earth from far away. From that viewpoint, what becomes visible are complex systems of atmospheric and oceanic patterns, that can be studied in terms of their inputs (causes) and outputs (effects). The perspective we take, far away from earth, allows us to get an overview, a broader perspective, through which we can see the "big picture" unhindered by the messiness of all the local variations, details, and contexts. As the word

[4]Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, Explaining and Understanding in International Relations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 1-10.

explaining already suggests, we flatten a complex reality (we make it "plain") and put it in front of us (ex-) so that we can get a full overview.

Understanding is quite a different way of knowing things. Instead of creating clarity by "standing above" things, it approaches them from within, as if we are "standing under" them. It forces us to make sense of things without having the full picture. Often that takes the form of an interpretative (*hermeneutic*) cycle: we approach a complicated or new situation through our first guesses or prejudices about what it is, then get proven wrong in some regards, readjust our interpretation, and try again.[5] This means that for understanding, it matters *who we are*: all of us have our own ways of sense-making, based on our experiences and ways of thinking. Our sense-making is never complete or finished: we can always go an extra round in our interpretative cycles.

Because of these differences, explaining and understanding are sometimes hierarchised as "better" and "less good" ways of knowing. Explaining often gets to be associated with objectivity and scientific methods and credited with the ability to produce knowledge that is useful for statistics and policy making. Understanding, in turn, often gets associated with subjectivity and the arts, and seen as of less clear value for public life.[6]

Fundamentally speaking, however, there is no good reason for hierarchising explaining and understanding in such a way. They are two different ways of knowing, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.[7] Explaining is very helpful in making complex issues comprehensible, and to identify causes and effects in the process. This makes it a useful form of knowledge in statistics, management, and policymaking. However, it also leaves out a lot. Explaining does not deal well with the meaning of things, with how things are experienced locally, what of it matters to people, with how things feel. As a popular saying (often attributed to Stalin) goes: "one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic". Looking at things from a distance and from far away, what gets lost is the value of what is at stake.

Understanding, in turn, can never give a complete picture or detached overview. But what it *can* do, is to reveal what things mean. It can highlight the ways in which events are interpreted, how people are motivated, what

[5] Adam Adatto Sandel, The Place of Prejudice: A Case for Reasoning within the World. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014), 161-173.
[6] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations (Boulder: Routledge, 2011), 9.
[7] Hollis and Smith, Explaining and Understanding International Relations, 197-216.

their worldviews are, how they feel in the process. Rather than a clear picture, understanding offers empathy and an inside view on the different perspectives that are at play. While less useful for statistical purposes, it can be powerful for discovering what drives and motivates people in everyday life settings, to uncover deeper meanings and unforeseen aspects.

When approaching big questions of our times, such as the climate crisis or power injustices, through the modes of explaining and understanding, the differences between these two ways of knowing become easy to see. Through explaining we arrive at an overview of what the problem is, what causes it, and, possibly, how to solve it. Even though there are always details that can be worked out further, in general the image is roughly complete. Who *we* are, and where we are coming from, is irrelevant for explaining. Often, it offers data and pathways for responding to the question at hand at the macro-level, through policymaking, marketing strategies or other means.

Through understanding, on the other hand, we gain different kinds of insights. Rather than a big, detached picture, we get a sense of the meanings, emotions and social responses that the question evokes. We can also gain a deeper insight in underlying dynamics: paradigms of thought, worldviews and social understandings that have generated the issue. Finally, we can also get a sense of people's needs, drives and motivations in their local context. This knowledge is usually local, incomplete and mixed with our own interpretations. It would be a mistake to extrapolate it in an attempt to come to a "full picture". But it offers something else: an opportunity to engage with the question at a deeper level within our own life worlds and communities, based on a deeper understanding of what is alive there.

This is what this book intends to open up: a way of approaching, thinking through, and engaging with some questions around the climate crisis and social power through the logic of understanding. My hope is that it will inspire action in the sense that it will offer language, insights and new ways of looking that allow for translating the "big" to everyday lives. My purpose is not to set an agenda, but rather to offer ways of thinking and engaging that allow for new, creative, original and meaningful responses in daily life and local communities.

Showing up differently

There are many ways in which we can show up in the world. We can show up as ugly versions of ourselves, or as renditions of the best we have to offer. We can show up in line with what people expect of us, or in tension with

conventions and expectations. We can show up by going with the flow. We can show up by taking a stand. There may not be a "right" or "wrong" way of showing up. But unless we bring some awareness to how we do so, we may find it hard to show up in a way that does justice to who we are and what the world needs.

I find the idea of "showing up" inspiring. I encountered it a couple of years ago on a website called "gesturing towards decolonial futures", which combines artistic, indigenous and academic approaches towards modernity and coloniality.[8] Inspired by their approach, I have come to include the phrase in many of my projects, teachings, and writings. For me, it captures a sensitivity towards how we can begin making a change in the world that I find profoundly compelling.

In my (European, Western, white) culture, change-making typically comes in two flavours. On the one hand, it involves a "project" approach of sorts. Change-makers identify a problem or need that requires a solution, and then go out and try to solve it. This can be done in all kinds of ways: long-term or short-term, technical or social, with or without stakeholder or community engagement, etc. However, it rarely involves the dimension of reflecting meaningfully on who the change-maker is and how they are related to, and part of, the issue they are working with. Typically, self-reflexivity remains relatively superficial, involving questions such as "do I have the tools and skills needed for this project?"

Deep self-reflexivity in change-making processes, on the other hand, is often confined to the realm of self-help or therapeutic processes. Here, a deeper engagement with the question of "who am I" comes with a focus on the self as the object of change. In some ways it can include others (often friends and family) but it does not come with a strong intention to make a change in the world "out there". It primarily focuses on the self. In both ways of change-making we are cutting off something: either we cut off the self in order to engage with the world, or we cut off the world in order to engage with the self.

This way of separating the self and the world may work in certain settings, but also has limitations. It tends to ignore the ways in which "who we are" is being shaped by the world around us. If we live in a society that induces high level of stress, anxiety and uncertainty, there is something amiss if we respond to that by only looking inside of ourselves in terms of self-help or

[8] See: https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/preparing-for-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it/

therapy. And reversely, separating the self from the world ignores the role of socialisation and positionality in how we respond to the questions of our times. Our social position has a lot of influence on how we interpret the world around us. If, for instance, I am white in a white-dominated society, it will influence how I perceive racism – even if I identify as anti-racist. Not having a life-long experience of being confronted with everyday racist behaviour will create blind spots of how it functions and is experienced. If I do not take that into consideration, I may end up reinforcing, unwittingly, the problem I try to solve. I cannot pretend that who I am is separate from – or neutral towards – the world around me.

For me, "showing up differently" captures the overlap between self and other in making a change in the world. It suggests that we always already show up in the world, with all its problems, whether we want to or not. We are not passive observers of big processes such as the climate crisis, inequality, the rise of technology or political polarisation. We are already actively present in all of them. On the one hand, we are participating in our social systems through our daily behaviour. As feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe points out, just a daily activity such as buying a kilo of bananas in the supermarket already makes me a participant in global chains of trade, environmental degradation, gender politics, and inequality.[9] I am showing up in all of those, even if my intention is merely to feed my family. On the other hand, who I am is not independent from the systems and structures that I inhabit. My gender, social class, ethnicity, ability are not just attributes of who I am: they are identities, coming with their own perceptions, norms and values. Such identities and norms are not necessarily clear to us. Like the spectacles on our noses, they reveal the world in certain terms, but become invisible in the process. I may not be aware of them exactly because they are so close to me. If I am not taking that into account, I will likely reproduce the values, norms, and perceptions, that I want to fight.

To give an example: capitalism is not something that is somewhere "out there" in the world: it is part of who I am, how I identify (as a consumer, employee) and how I act (by consuming goods and services or selling my labour). Being a consumer is more than buying things. It comes with identity. As a consumer, I can feel entitled of having a right of "good value for my money", "consumer choice", and so on. It may also come with a value system of what counts as "being a good consumer", for instance through finding pride in bargain-hunting or having a sustainable lifestyle. All of

[9] Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 212-249.

these are values produced by the capitalist system, and I may have internalised them without being aware of it. Some other values that are being promoted by capitalism are efficiency, ease, comfort, technology and simple solutions.[10] If I attempt to address the problems of capitalism in the most efficient, comfortable, easy and technologically advanced way possible, I may end up reinforcing the problem I am trying to fight. In other words: if I do not recognise how we show up in the world already, my attempts to make a change in the world may well end up contradicting the values that I am attempting to promote.

Another way of thinking about showing up in the world is by engaging with what we consider to be "normal". As trauma expert and addiction physician Gabor Maté points out in "the myth of normal", Western culture is characterised by consistently high levels of stress, mental unhealth, obesity, alcohol and drug dependence, social isolation, and so on. As Maté puts it, we inhabit a "toxic culture", in which "chronic illness – mental or physical – is to a large extent a *function* or *feature* of the way things are and not a *glitch*; a consequence of how we live, and not an aberration".[11] Yet somehow public discourse seems to insist that this state of affairs is normal, that society is neutral, and that people who suffer from (mental) health issues are to be viewed as exceptions. For Maté, much of our medical system ends up defining being "normal" as functioning well in a toxic environment.

However, as the famous saying goes, "it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society".[12] Regardless of whether we agree or not with the specific focus and details of Maté's analysis, there may be very good reasons to question the way society invites us to show up in it. In what ways do we, in our daily "normal" lives, reproduce the illnesses of our social order? Where can we find beginnings to help ourselves and the people around us find more wholesome ways of relating to ourselves and one another in our everyday lives? This is how I like to think of "showing up

[10] Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002 (1969), 94-137.
[11] Gabor Maté, The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture (New York: Avery, 2022), 2.
[12] This saying is often attributed to religious thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti; however, he never seems to have used this exact quote, but wrote along similar lines, for instance when arguing that: "Is society healthy, that an individual should return to it? Has not society itself helped to make the individual unhealthy? Of course, the unhealthy must be made healthy, that goes without saying; but why should the individual adjust himself to an unhealthy society?". Jiddu Krishnamurti, Commentaries on Living, Third Series, Madras, Krishnamurti Foundation India (1991), 143.

differently": to respond to the cultural wrongs of our times and society by making small but significant changes, both in ourselves (being products of that society) and how we relate to the people around us.

To me, showing up differently is not the same as "doing something nice". We can do good things with the result of feeling good about ourselves or getting rewarded by our environment. Showing up differently, in contrast, often has more of a quality of discomfort to it. It involves some degree of "going against the norm" in a practical, daily setting. That may feel awkward, to us and to people around us, even if after some time people may end up concluding it is a good thing. The discomfort that showing up differently might provoke is not something that can be avoided. Showing up differently is a way of stepping out of the comfort of our shared norms and practices and is therefore likely to provoke a sense of unease. It is an intentional way of stepping out of our 'usual ways' in order to respond to some of the problems we face in the world.

I take showing up differently to be a way of intentionally questioning and resisting some of society's dominant norms. It has a similar quality to what Judith Butler, speaking about gender norms, calls "performative subversions": to mis-perform the roles that society offers us.[13] We are playing all kinds of role in our lives: that of partner, professional, consumer, parent, child, etc. All these roles come with certain characteristics and norms that we should adhere to when we want to be visible as doing things "well". Meeting these norms determines if we become visible as good or bad in our roles. Of course, we have internalised many of these norms: we judge people if they do not uphold them and have feelings of shame and guilt if we do not do so ourselves. Because of that internalisation, they can be hard to see *as norms*. We simply feel good or bad about ourselves depending on how we perform our roles as teachers, students, partners etc.

By intentionally mis-performing roles we may render our internalised norms visible in the public domain. Of course, that is not necessarily the outcome of any form of mis-performance. If we simply do "bad work" it will give very little cause to question the norms that assess the quality of our work. Similarly, parodying a dominant norm can have the effect of reaffirming that norm, in the way that a jester mocking the king can strengthen his authority. However, there are ways of mis-performing roles that have a potential to make visible, question, and destabilise the norms

[13] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. (New York: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), 175-193.

that they hold.[14] One example that comes to mind is the "quiet quitting" trend that has become visible among gen-z workers in the west. The silent refusal to do unpaid overwork certainly makes these young workers visible to older generations as "lazy" and "unprofessional". Yet at the same time it reveals something of the problematic nature of such structural overwork, as well as some of the ways in which social pressure and mental health issues have become accepted as normal in our time. In such a way, mis-performing roles may function as a way of showing up differently.

Of course, showing up differently is only one approach towards making a change in the world. The point of this book is not to promote it as the only, or best way to do so. Nor will it offer a guidebook on how to do so. Rather, it intends to open it up as a possibility for action in our everyday life. Not just action in terms of "doing something", but as a way of connecting the inner and outer, the macro and micro, and the public and private in our everyday lives.

Being and action

How do we decide what to do, and how we want to show up differently? In order to create a beginning of an answer to that question, I want to draw attention to the relationship between being and action. In order to do so, I will draw from the tradition of existentialist phenomenology, and especially the work of German philosophers Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt.

Whereas in everyday parlance we discuss being and action mostly in terms of "what we are" and "what we do", phenomenology brings these together in a way that I find helpful and inspiring for understanding my role in the world. Rather than separating being and action, they become overlapping, in the sense that my being is a form of action and vice versa. This perspective helps me to find my way through the question "what should I *do*?", as phenomenologically that question can be answered by "I should *be*".

For Heidegger, the being of humans is not just a matter of our physical existence. Instead, he calls our being *Dasein*: being-there, highlighting that in human experience, our being always takes place in meaningful situations, and from a perspective. Phenomenologically speaking, our "being-here" is not separable from the world "out there". Having grown up in the world, we are a product of how it has shaped us. Rather than subjects navigating a

[14] Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, 189.

world of unknown objects around us, we understand the things around us in line with how the world has taught us. As Heidegger puts it, Dasein "is its world existentially.[15]

Dasein is not a constant. We are not always equally "there". For Heidegger, our being comes with different qualities and degrees of intensity of how we are in, and respond to, the world around us. Being, he argues in his later, more poetic work, belongs in the "fourfold": on the earth, under the sky, awaiting the divinities, and among fellow mortals.[16] For Heidegger, these are essentially the same: being on the earth also means being under the sky, awaiting the divinities and among fellow mortals. At the same time, they highlight different dimensions of our being.

Being "on the earth" is about "being among" the things that are born, grow, give fruit, and die. Being among such things, he argues, is really about setting them free in their own being, instead of subjugating them or withdrawing from them. Being among things is about being *present* to them.[17] Being "under the sky", in turn, refers to our ability to let things "come over" us. Like the weather, seasons and natural events, da-sein comes with an ability to "let happen" the things that are bigger than us, without running away from them. Being under the sky, therefore, is our ability to receive fate.[18] Thirdly, "awaiting the divinities", rather than referring to superstition or religion, is about our relation to the boundaries of our understanding. For Heidegger, our language sets the horizon of what we can understand. The "divinities" stand for the boundaries of that horizon: the edges of what we can grasp but still can relate to. Awaiting the divinities thus refers to our ability to be open to that which is meaningful but escapes comprehension: art, beauty, pain, joy, terror, love etcetera. Finally, our being includes how we relate to other people, our 'fellow mortals'. For Heidegger, human connection is our ability to connect to one another on the basis of being mortal, of being "capable of death *as* death".[19] In facing death – the end of our possibilities – we are forced to embrace the fact that only

[15] Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (Oxford: Blackwell 2001 [1962]), 416.
[16] Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", in Poetry, Language, Thought, edited by Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 147.
[17] Heidegger, Building, Dwelling, Thinking, 148.
[18] Gerard van der Ree, "Building a Home in the World", in Furusato: "Home" at the Nexus of History, Art, Society and Self, edited by Christopher Craig, Enrico Fongaro and Aldo Tollini (Milan: Mimesis International, 2020), 89-113.
[19] Heidegger, Building, Dwelling, Thinking, 148.

we can lead our lives. Only when we connect to one another on the basis of that realisation, Heidegger suggests, are we able to meet others in their being.

What speaks to me in this approach is not only what it *highlights* about our being in the world, but also what it *omits*. In Heidegger's fourfold of earth, sky, divinities and fellow mortals, things like chit-chat, work life, strategic thinking, consumption, and logistics are conspicuously absent. Heidegger does not suggest that such things do not exist or have no meaning. They are part of human life. However, they are not part of our *being* at an existential level. Our Dasein, our being-there, comes to the fore when we are on the earth, under the sky, awaiting the divinities and among our fellow mortals. In our social world, which often absorbs us so much, it can easily withdraw and get lost.

I find this interpretation of being beautiful and helpful. Even for those to whom Heidegger's language feels overly poetic, his approach could possibly still be helpful for unpacking who we are in the world. Connecting to what makes us the most present and existentially alive (instead of what may be expected of us or is valued by our culture) may be a powerful starting point for engaging with the world.

This account of being can well be conjoined with Hannah Arendt's approach towards action. Arendt, writing from similar-yet-different phenomenological sensitivities as her former mentor Heidegger, highlights action from an different existential angle. In "The Human Condition" she contrasts action to labour and work. Labour, she argues, is what we do to stay alive: producing food, organising a place to sleep, etcetera. It represents the condition of *life itself*. Work refers to the things that we make that last and get something of a life of their own: art, institutions, knowledge, etcetera. The condition of work, for Arendt, is *worldliness*. Action, finally, refers to the way all of us insert ourselves in the world in our own way. Given that all of us are different, it is therefore a human condition of *plurality*.[20]

For Arendt, the meaning of action does not lie in the things that we *do*. Instead, she argues, action is about revealing ourselves to one another.[21] Action occurs when we show, in word or deed, something of ourselves and what makes us unique as human beings. It has a quality of nakedness to it, in the sense that by showing ourselves we shed the safety of following social

[20] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 8.
[21] Arendt, The Human Condition, 176.

conventions and expectations, and risk becoming visible in a way that stands out. Exactly through that vulnerability, action invites (but does not guarantee) a human response, a form of recognition, based on plurality and otherness. This is why Arendt defines the condition of action as one of plurality: it is where people meet in their existential uniqueness.

Action also has a quality of offering new beginnings. For Arendt our uniqueness is not something that we are merely born with. As humans, we have the capacity to initiate something new, to bring about change, and to begin something fresh. In this sense we are not just born once but have the capacity to be born time and again.[22] This "natality", as she labels it, is not restricted to artistic or intellectual geniuses. It is something that we all have. Action, as revealing something of our existential uniqueness, inserts something of our originality into the world. We do not have to invent it or make it up. It is already who we are.

To be clear: action does not imply the rejection of the dominant norms, rules, or conventions in society. It is not a critique of society. Instead, it refers to our capacity to *relate ourselves to* our social order, rather than to be absorbed by it. By recognising that living in a society comes with socialisation, but that we are never fully determined by that socialisation, we can honour our existential uniqueness as human beings and create a "space of appearance" where we can connect to one another from there.

It seems to me that many people tend to be more preoccupied with work than with action. There may be good reasons for that – the world is certainly in need of good work in all kinds of registers. Nevertheless, that should not take away the attention from action. How we insert ourselves into the world, how we reveal ourselves – how we show up – is not a nice "extra" that we may or not add on top of the work we do. As Arendt argues, action, not work, is what shapes and maintains the quality of our shared world. A mass society without action is one in which group dynamics, instrumental reason, and alienation will prevail. Action – revealing ourselves to one another – is a way of connecting humans to one another outside of those logics, in a "space of appearance". For Arendt, that is the foundation for any meaningful account of politics. Without action, there cannot be encounter; without encounter, politics loses its ground.[23]

Rethinking being and action through the lenses of Heidegger and Arendt helps me to find my response to the world. If I want to engage with the "big"

[22] Arendt, The Human Condition, 177.
[23] Arendt, The Human Condition, 198-209.

in the "small" of my everyday life, or if I want to "show up differently", I do not have to search for something "out there" to start. I can actually begin on the other side: on what is alive in *me*. I might gain access to that by moving closer towards how I relate to what grows and dies, what overcomes me, what I cannot fully understand, and in how I relate to others when confronted with death or finality. Of course, if the Heideggerian vocabulary does not suit me, I can see if I can work out alternative terms that touch a similar vein. Regardless of the exact words that I use, the idea is that how I connect at the deepest level of things becomes visible beyond the social conventions and norms of my culture.

From there, stepping into action does not at all have to have to mean designing and implementing a "project". In fact, it may not become a project at all. Connecting to action as revealing ourselves to one another, I could bring something new to the world just by revealing more of myself in the world. Not through a logic of promoting my ideas or broadcasting my lifestyle, but by intentionally generating interactions that make me, and others, be seen in some form or way. This could start by inserting presence, space for difference, vulnerability and recognition to everyday interactions. Even though that sounds simple, in my experience it is already quite challenging, because typically social norms tend to avoid such deeper connections outside of our closest family and friend relations. Exactly because of that, it could already be a very powerful way to practice showing up differently in a way that does justice to your own being.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POWER

The vocabulary of power has become widespread in recent years. At least in my little corner of the world, it has become commonplace to use terms like "inclusivity", "marginality", "mansplaining", or "unconscious bias". This language has enabled many communities to gain a voice and helped forth transformative processes. Most of the time it does so by highlighting *critique* as a way of deconstructing the current order of things, or to propose new policies or social norms. There has been much less attention to the question of *what it is like* to inhabit power positions (both of marginality and of privilege) and how to navigate that in our personal lives.

I am interested in the "what is it like?"-aspect of power. Being a white, middle-class, highly educated, middle-aged and mostly able person from Europe, I am an embodiment of privilege and social power. Simultaneously, being genderqueer, and having a history of anxiety, I have experiences of what it means to be in the margins, too. To me, those are not issues that can be fully captured by theoretical discussions on power relations, policy, or social norms. To me, power is also a set of experiences, often contradictory, that I inhabit. If I want to make sense of how power has shaped me, and is influencing the relations I have with others, I also have to grasp it "from within" somehow. If I want to have some ability to change the way my privilege as well as marginality makes me show up in the world every day, I need to get a feel of how I am being shaped by them.

This essay is about power as experienced from within. You can call it a "psychology of power", or a "phenomenology of power". The exact term is not so important. What matters is that for me, power shapes how we see and experience the world. It comes out of the social structures that I inhabit: the world that I have grown up in. Much of it is like the water a fish swims in – hard to notice. But at the same time, it determines quite a bit of how I perceive and navigate the world. If I want to understand power and respond to it, I will have to pay attention to how it shapes me.

I will build up this essay in four steps. First, I will discuss social structure, and its role in power relations. Then I will focus on the psychology of power, and the ways in which marginality and dominance shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world. From there on I will highlight the ways in which

psychology translates into public narratives around superiority and inferiority. And finally, I will address how we can start responding to our own power positions, and make practical first steps towards "showing up differently" in the world.

Social structures

Power does not exist in a vacuum. It functions in an environment that facilitates it. That environment is usually referred to as "social structure". Social structures organise society in informal, tacit ways, beyond the institutions, laws, and rules that we have. Patriarchy is such a social structure, or racism, or social class.

There seems to be no clear consensus on what social structures are, or how they function. Roughly speaking, there are two contesting academic perspectives on them: a liberal and a critical view. The liberal perspective views society mostly as a group of individuals. In principle (and within certain boundaries, such as the law) everybody is free to do as they want. Society is then seen as the sum of individual choices. Individuals make the choices they want, and society is merely the aggregate of all those choices. This bottom-up perspective, which is mainly inspired by the work of Max Weber, is quite popular in Western liberal societies.

The alternative view is more top-down. This perspective, which draws more from Weber's contemporary Émile Durkheim, highlights the way in which individuals unconsciously follow social norms, and are socialised into certain perspectives, demeanours, and patterns of behaviour.[24] In this view, individual choices are (at least partially) influenced by the social norms, values, and structures that we live in. Instead of being "free agents", we are being socialised to seeing the world in certain ways, regardless of whether we are aware of it or not.

To see how these two perspectives play out in practice, take an issue like racism in Western societies. From the bottom-up perspective, racism is only a societal issue insofar as individual people happen to have racist views. There are racist people, and people who are not, and racism is a matter of how many people happen to espouse racist views. If they were gone or

[24] Martin Hollis, The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 248.

would change their mind, racism would disappear. It does not have a "life of its own".

From the top-down perspective, however, the picture is quite different. Here, it is not so helpful to make a distinction between "racist" and "non-racist" individuals. Instead, racism is a social structure of collective norms, values, and worldview that all members of society have been to some degree socialised into. All members of such a society have been socialised into that worldview to some extent, whether they like it or not. Even if I identify as firmly anti-racist, I still may have been socialised to understand certain racist ways of thinking as "normal". This may not come in the form of hate speech or a discourse about white superiority, but probably in much more subtle forms such as unconsciously associating people of colour with backwardness, crime, or violence. In other words: I can be racist even if I am anti-racist, because the racism I have been socialised into does not only take the form of an explicit ideology, but also of an implicit set of biases that I may not even be aware of. From the top-down perspective, racism is not a problem of individuals, but of a social structure. Taking the "racist people" out does not solve things, because *all people* are part of the structure; we need to actively address the ways we have been socialised so that we can change our culture.

In practice, the top-down and bottom-up perspective are not complete binary opposites. Most liberals accept that society comes with some degree of socialisation, and most people that follow a more top-down critical view acknowledge that we have some individual agency and are not completely determined by our socialisation. There are nuances, overlaps, and grey areas. Nevertheless, the distinction remains very present in societal discourses and debates, leading to a lot of confusion. For instance, when people feel attacked in discussions about structural forms of marginalisation and respond with phrases such as "are you calling me a racist?" or "you just hate

men!", they make racism or sexism a matter of individuals (racists, men) rather than of a social structure that all of us are part of.

Even while I accept that both perspectives have some validity to them, they are not neutral towards one another. Which side one takes seems to correlate with the amount of privilege one holds. That is not so strange. If I have a lot of privilege, I will experience the world as an open space for me to do things in. I can do pretty much what I want, and I will encounter very few structures of power, such as glass ceilings or systematic racism. As a result, I will experience society in a liberal, bottom-up way, and likely start seeing the world in those terms. Conversely, if I come from marginal sectors of society, I will likely encounter a lot of structural patterns of exclusion and marginalisation. It will make a lot of sense to me to see the world in terms of top-down social structures.

Forms of power

Just as there are multiple ways of understanding social structure, there exist multiple ways of understanding power. I will highlight those perspectives, roughly overlapping with the bottom-up and top-down views on social structure: coercive and productive power.

The coercive perspective on power is the most dominant and mainstream of the two. It understands power as the ability to force someone to do something. As political scientist Robert Dahl famously put it: "A has power over B to the extent that he [sic] can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do".[25] In this perspective, power is located in the person who wields power and is exerted upon the person who is forced to do something. The source of the power can vary: it can come from physical strength, authority, rhetorical power, or money, for instance. In essence power is viewed as a property of the person, institution, or state who wields it, and can be imposed on those who do not have it.

Coercive power can apply to individuals as well as to collectives of people. In a primary school setting, for instance, I can use my physical strength to force you to give me your lunch money. But at the same time economic elites can use their money, social status, and access to political institutions as ways of keeping other groups (the workers, for instance) in marginal positions. Similarly, men, or white people, have often flocked together and

[25] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power", Systems Research and Behavioral Science, No. 3 (1957): 202-3.

wielded their social privilege, access to power institutions such as media, politics, and law, and financial advantage as ways of keeping women and people of colour down. Regardless of whether it is used by individuals or groups, this perspective understands power as something that you "have" or "have not". Power is a property of who you are.[26]

Productive power works differently. Rather than something that you either have or have not, it views power as something that shapes you as well as the culture you live in. It is mostly associated with post-modern scholarship, and in particular with the work of French thinker Michel Foucault. He views power not so much as something that "you do" or is "done to you" (as the coercive view has it), but as something that shapes your view and perspective on yourself and the world. Power, in Foucault's view, produces our subjectivity. It does so by socialising us into an understanding of what is "normal" or "natural". On the basis of an understanding of the "normal" we start viewing marginality (our own or that of others) as a natural state of being. Foucault calls such an order a "truth regime". Truth regimes are sets of practices and ways of knowing through which we establish what counts as true, valuable, meaningful, or what counts as inferior, wrong, irrelevant or unfitting. In Western culture, a dominant truth regime could be science. Science as a truth regime informs us that for public purposes, rational, measurable, calculable, and objective forms of knowledge are meaningful and valuable. As a consequence, the public role of other forms of knowledge, such as tradition, religion, emotion, or intuition, is viewed with suspicion, disdain or fear, and will likely face marginalisation.

Truth regimes create the foundations of what is considered to be "normal". This is typically done by pointing out how problematic the "abnormal" is. This is a social practice that involves everybody: those who profit from it as well as those who suffer under it. As a result, power itself becomes invisible, since most people are socialised into thinking that the current state of affairs is simply the way the world is, and that it should be that way. To give an example: Foucault showed the ways in which in Victorian England medical science naturalised heterosexual monogamy as the only form of "normal" sexuality. It did so, not so much by stating a moral norm ("thou shalt be heterosexual!"), but by pathologising and medicalising homosexuality as a deviance, a perversion, and an illness. In this way homosexuality became "scientifically established" as an aberration from an unacknowledged

[26] Coercive power also has a positive story: that of empowerment or emancipation. Here, the idea is that the distribution of power attributes can be democratised, and marginal groups can gain access to more of them.

"normal".[27] This became something of an established "truth" that most people would not question, as they considered it "normal". In order to fit in, people would increasingly repress any queer sensitivities they had and would come to aspire a visibly heterosexual and "normal" lifestyle. Power was productive, because it not only shaped what you could or could not legitimately do, but also how you saw yourself.

A more contemporary example of productive power can be found in advertising. Advertising exercises power not only by seducing us to buy products, but also by influencing how we view ourselves and the world. It bombards us with images and ideas of who we want to be ("beautiful!"), what we should want to aspire ("the happy/cool/exciting life"!) and how to achieve that ("consume"!). These messages will eventually affect the way we view ourselves and may invite us to dislike the sides of ourselves that do not conform to those images, implanting into us a desire to change ourselves, through consumption, towards the "norm". It will make us want to be "normal" by creating in our heads an idea of what is "normal" that does not actually exist. Productive power does not need to force us to consume; it can suffice with instilling in us a sense of being abnormal and a desire to change that through consumption.[28]

The perspective of productive power offers fewer clear pathways towards emancipation or empowerment than the coercive approach. If how I *see* the world is shaped by power, making a change may require that I reflect on myself and my perspective first. It may need to be revealed to me that there is power at play to begin with. This is why critical thinkers often work through methods of "deconstruction" or "denaturalisation", revealing the ways in which a perceived "normal" order of things is based on power relations.

There is value to both the coercive and the productive perspective to power. But just as with the social structures, that does not mean that they are equal. The coercive perspective certainly is more popular in mainstream circles. But more importantly, the perspective of productive power has come to resonate a lot with groups that have experienced long-term marginalisation, as it seems to explain some of the ways in which marginality can stay even while formally, the system has become more equal. Coercive power has trouble showing how sexism and racism persist even when we have made

[27] Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.
[28] Even though it reverses the direction of the exercise of power, it still retains the idea of power as being coercive in essence.

an end to institutional and economic mechanisms of patriarchy and colonialism. Productive power, instead, speaks to the ways in which power shapes our subconscious perspective and keeps social structures of marginalisation alive, even if there are no formal systems to enforce them.

The psychology of power

Above, we saw that how we experience the world affects the way we view power. The reverse is also true: how we inhabit power influences the way we view ourselves and experience the world. Power positions come with something of a psychology, a way of perceiving things, that underlie many of the misunderstandings and conflicts we have around power.

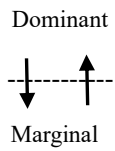
In the western philosophical tradition, the study of power as an experience (the phenomenology of power) was most prominently articulated by 19th century thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche. In the 20th century, their legacy translated into race studies through the work of Du Bois, Spivak and Fanon, and in feminist theory through de Beauvoir and Butler. I will draw from these traditions in a loose way in order to shed some lights on how power is relational, and how it affects our perspectives.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explored power as a relational phenomenon. Using the analogy of slavery, he showed how those who are powerful and those who are powerless depend on one another. In order to be a powerful person, you need to have people to master. And in order to be someone who is without power, for instance a servant, you require the presence of a master. The power of the master requires a servant to be present, and vice versa the powerlessness of the servant requires a master. Power is therefore not located in either the master or the servant, but in their relation. Power, in this view, is a social relation.

Because power is a social relation, it is more than a set of circumstances we happen to be in. Social relations shape our identities - for instance, if I have a child, I will develop an identity as a "parent". Similarly, if I care for people, I can develop the identity of "caregiver". The same happens with power: being in a position of power shapes who I am and how I view the world. For Hegel, the master's self-worth is dependent on the recognition and acknowledgement of superiority received from the servant. Without the recognition of the servant, the master's sense of worth as a master remains unfulfilled. The master's self-consciousness, or identity, is therefore incomplete. Meanwhile, the servant, while being forced to do all the work, grows skills and masters techniques, developing a sense of their capabilities

even despite their marginality. Despite being in a marginalised position, the servant knows their worth.[29] The power positions that we inhabit are more than circumstances – they influence how we view ourselves and the world around us. Power shapes identity.

Moving away from the metaphor of master and servant, I would like to explore this process of identity formation further by translating power relations into two more conceptual positions: dominant and marginal. These are social positions that we inhabit. For instance, being a white person in the Netherlands makes me inhabit a dominant position in society. That dominance does not come from my white body itself, but from the colonial relations that have evolved in the Netherlands between white people and people of colour. Being in such a dominant position will affect how I perceive the world and myself. The same applies to the marginal side. I will develop this as a model, a simple way of exploring the dynamics of the psychology of power.



In this model, the "dominant" is separated from the "marginal", and is placed above it, to indicate its social position. Simultaneously, both dominant and marginal are referring to the other, to indicate the way they are dependent on one another.

It is important to remember that neither side refers to anything intrinsic: there is nothing that makes someone innately dominant or marginal. These are social positions, coming out of a culture that hierarchises people by elevating certain characteristics over others. If I am white in a racist white-dominated society, my power does not come from my skin itself, but from the ways in which whiteness of skin is culturally assigned a value of superiority. My dominance is socially constructed, and not essential to me. And yet at the same time, the whiteness of my skin is essential to the ways social hierarchy is constructed. Referring to the colonial context, Franz Fanon puts it like this: "you are rich because you are white, and you are

[29] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 113.

white because you are rich".[30] Even though my power does not come from my personal attributes themselves ("you are white because you are rich"), my personal attributes are crucial for inhabiting power ("you are rich because you are white"). Positions of power do not come from our natural attributes and are socially constructed; yet at the same time they are socially constructed such that they require our natural attributes for their functioning.

In the sections below, I will unpack the dynamics of dominance and marginality in some more detail, focusing on how inhabiting these positions comes with a way of seeing yourself and the world. Before diving into that analysis, though, I want to address a few of the limits of this approach, especially regarding intersectionality.

Some words on intersectionality

A model like the one above is obviously a simplification of the world. We inhabit complex mixes of positions, roles and relations. If I were to carefully investigate any model, I would discover that it is not an accurate representation of reality. That is not a problem, as the value of the model is not empirical accuracy, but to explain and clarify aspects of how the world works.[31] Take a road map, for instance. As a model of reality, it probably gets 99 per cent of things wrong; but it is a great tool for finding your way. The same goes for this model: it aims to clarify the psychology of power, without doing justice to all nuances that come with social power relations. However, it may be useful to clarify in which ways this model simplifies reality and how to think about the way it relates to the nuances of social power.

Most prominently, we experience power from a range of mixed positions. It makes a difference if you are a white, middle-class queer person or a lower-class queer person of colour. In the latter case you will likely face more exclusion and marginalisation, since you inhabit multiple categories of social marginality. But it is not simply that it is *more*; it is also *different*. The dimensions of marginality interact with one another in ways that make every mix unique. This intersectionality makes it important to not only rely on notions of dominance and marginality, but to look at all experiences from their lived reality. I will attempt to bring some of that nuance by highlighting

[30] Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 40.
[31] Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979), 1-13.