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► **To cite this version:**

Symphorien Ongolo, Max Krott. Conclusion - Perspectives in Analysing Power Dynamics in Postcolonial Societies. Power dynamics in African forests, 1, Routledge, pp.250 - 256, 2023, 9781003363101. <10.4324/9781003363101-13>. <hal-04992890>

HAL Id: hal-04992890

<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04992890v1>

Submitted on 16 Mar 2025

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Conclusion

Perspectives in Analysing Power Dynamics in Postcolonial Societies

Symphorien Ongolo and Max Krott

This book provides a comprehensive overview on power dynamics in African forests by linking some of those realities to contemporary challenges related to the politics of global sustainability. As such, the book brings together 11 chapters focusing on many aspects of the power relations that alter, determine or transform the governance of forestland resources at different levels in Africa. In many cases, contributing authors point out the prevalence of a domination-marginalization relationship from the colonial to contemporary period in African postcolonial countries. However, this major trend co-exists with more complex and ambiguous power dynamics in autocratic regimes in which the weak or marginalized actors are sometimes able to resist the domination of the powerful actors.

Power as a dynamic relationship

Building from varied theoretical and empirical-based works, power is understood in this book on the one hand as the coercive capability of one actor to affect the practices or the behaviour of another by employing force. On the other hand, power refers to the ability of a disciplining authority or action to change the ideas of people through a persuasive or dissuasive use of knowledge and information without any apparent coercion. While the first builds from Max Weber's works (Weber 1978), the second is rooted more on Michel Foucault's approach (Foucault 1978). In both cases, power has become a fundamental concept largely employed in political science from theoretical to empirical-based research. The book provides an original contribution in this respect by focusing on specific dimensions of actors' power dynamics in the governance of forestlands in areas of limited statehood as in Africa.

As such, it is broadly accepted that power is a complex phenomenon and interaction process of influence. In addition to classical approaches in analysing power from a domination perspective including through a focus on colonial power, a couple of chapters of this book bring contrasting views by focusing on the capacity of an apparently marginalized actor to resist domination in the line of James C. Scott's works on the arts of resistance. In other words, these chapters scrutinize what happen when domination strategies meet infringement tactics, especially in postcolonial contexts. As such, it is important to point out that power

DOI: 10.4324/9781003363101-13

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relations remain a dynamic and potentially reversible relationship in which actors' positions can change over time depending on variations in mutual exercise of influence between involved actors. As highlighted by Crozier & Friedberg (1977: 65), "power is a relation, not an attribute of actors".

A brief overview of core elements of power

The actor-centred power approach offers a solid empirical-based analytical background on how to examine power issues in natural resources governance based on three fundamental pillars: coercion, (dis-)incentive and dominant information (Krott et al. 2014).

Coercion can be defined as a circumstance in which an actor alters the behaviour of another actor by a direct use or a threat to use force (Gunderson 1979). In principle a potentate (dominant) actor that bases its power on coercion, will constrain the subordinate (weak or marginalized) actor to act in a certain way without an intrinsic consent of the latter. In practice, this situation may imply the use of physical and mental violence, police brutality, judicial harassment as well as other authoritarian measures.

Incentive/disincentive consists of a process that motivates an actor to do something or to adopt a given behaviour because of an anticipated reward (Laffont & Martimort 2009). By contrast, disincentive refers to any action of an economic agent (actor A) aimed at dissuading another agent (actor B) to do something or to act in a manner that may be disadvantageous for actor A. In principle, incentive and disincentive are based on the alteration or (re)orientation of actors' behaviour by the allocation or privation of specific advantages. In practice, this may imply the provision of access or the threat of non-access to non-tangible favours or material resources. An example of the use and misuse of incentive in natural resources governance is provided by Karsenty and Ongolo (2012) on the political economy of deforestation.

Information: any power relationship contains a certain degree of information asymmetry between the dominated actor and the subordinate (Castells 2007). In short, information refers to a set of knowledge or facts about specific issues, processes or actors. Depending on the objectives and actors' interests at stake, information can take the form of selected knowledge including within the scientific domain (Böcher & Krott 2016), used as a fundamental element in education and construction of discourse (Popkewitz & Brenman 1997) including in the forest governance domain (Arts & Buizer 2009; Brockhaus & Angelsen 2012). The production and use of information (through different forms of knowledge) or its transmission (through education and discourse) for strategic purposes may include hidden tactics or asymmetries between actors, involvement of tiers-parties aimed at certifying information reliability (e.g. environmental labelling), marginalization of competing information, media pressure, etc. In some cases, it is often not possible for an actor to verify the quality or reliability of the information provided by or collected from another actor. Such an asymmetry led to what Krott et al. (2014) called 'dominant information'.

Resisting domination in areas of limited statehood

For most of postcolonial societies, state building remains a hilly or even a tragic socio-political process. In those societies that have fought various styles of oppression (Mbembe 1992) and humiliation (Badie 2019) from colonization to modern imperialism, any external undesired intervention may give rise to an instinct to resist domination. As such, this phenomenon leads to complex power dynamics.

In a dynamic relationship, when the stronger or powerful actor employs dominant strategies to pressure the weak or marginalized actor, the latter can struggle to resist by using a set of infringement tactics (Table 12.1). Literature abounds with studies that observed empirically how actors use power elements for domination in the field of natural resources governance. Very little is known about the ability of dominated actors to face domination, especially in the field of natural resource governance in Africa. By providing conceptual and empirical insights on infringement tactics, this essay aimed at reducing knowledge gaps on the abilities of what James Scott called “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985).

Managing natural resources has often been a breeding ground to observe the many facets of power in the tropics from the colonial period to the contemporary age of globalization. As such, the politics of forestlands in Africa offers a fascinating arena of observation to scrutinize how weapons of the weak struggle to resist domination strategies at different spatial scales and political arenas. James Scott’s works revealed interesting case studies on how local communities – seen as ‘barbarians’ – managed to keep the upper hand over their lands by avoiding being governed by the state in uplands regions in South-East Asia, Zomia (Scott 1985, 1990). Other works also provided similar observations in African contexts by examining the politics of natural resource decentralization (Ribot 2009; Poteete & Ribot 2011).

The notion of a dynamic power that we have used refers to the idea that when an actor (e.g. the subordinate or marginalized entity) faces pressure and domination of another actor (e.g. the potentate or dominant actor), the first can resist and skilfully foster her/his interests by using a set of informal tactics. In everyday life of natural resources governance in Africa, the use of infringements may take the form of a stratagem system. As a trivial example, most of us have often been witness or observer of a situation in which a kid pretends a specific emotion, prompt need, hiding, or incapacity in order not to comply with a parent’s authority, being rewarded or avoiding punishment.

Table 12.1 Key features to analyse power dynamics in areas of limited statehood

<i>Power elements</i>	<i>Key features</i>	
	<i>Domination</i>	<i>Resistance</i>
Coercion	Force, Authority, Surveillance	Opposition, Withdrawal, Extraversion
(Dis)incentive	Reward, Dependency, Penalty	Tardiness, Cheating, Boycott
Information	Knowledge, Education, Discourse	Dogma, Mindless, Inertia

On a more political philosophy perspective, Niccolo Machiavelli is one of the thinkers in politics who greatly influenced power studies with his ground-breaking works on the use of force and cunning by *The Prince* in the Renaissance era. According to Machiavelli, for a government entity or leader who wants to keep control or hegemony over a territory, moral virtues and commitments are set aside. Depending on actors' capacities and the prevailing circumstances as well, actor A (acting as a potentate) can use the force of a lion or the cunning of a fox to ensure that his/her interests prevail. Depending on the power balance, actor B (acting as a subordinate) may decide to use a set of cunning behaviours if he/she does not have sufficient strength. Despite the Machiavelli's critics that contest such a dual view of the 'art of government' which has often been the driver of the reason of state (Skinner 2000), Machiavelli's thought remains a valuable basis to analyse what happens when domination meets resistance. As summarized above (Table 12.1) with regard to the key features of a dynamic power relationship, coercive uses of domination may include a concrete use of force and the threat of force, authority or surveillance. To resist, actors under such a domination pattern may employ a set of infringement tactics that include offensive behaviours (opposition, revolt) or defensive postures (withdrawal, extraversion).

In the same vein, in a classical client-patron or principal-agent interaction, the issue of tardiness is one of the fundamental soft weapons that can be used by an actor (client or agent) not to –fully – provide a service for which this agent has been rewarded for by another actor (patron or principal). By tardiness, we refer to any action of an actor aimed at producing or manipulating delays in order to safeguard their own interests, discouraging a partner or skilfully voicing a lack of motivation. In bureaucratic systems in Africa, for example, tardiness can take the form of administrative slowness, selective amnesia and duplication of procedures by a state bureaucracy trying to ignore or not meet its obligations towards citizens, partners or donors. Cheating has also been one of the weapon tactics of an actor (i.e., recipients, client) that try to skilfully impose their interests in an unequal power relationship vi-à-vis a dominant actor (i.e., donors, patron). The use of cheating in power dynamics refer to an informal behaviour, based on a non-respect of principles or conventional norms, in order to benefit from a power game or to succeed in any other arrangement in which acting honestly could compromise short-term interests. Boycott can be employed as an infringement tactics to resist domination as well. With regards to aid governance for instance, state bureaucracies in Sub-Saharan Africa have often used boycott – in the sense of not taking part or not use external funding – as a protest against aid conditionalities imposed by international donors. In this case, recipient state bureaucracies can skilfully boycott a reforms-for-aid programme through a status quo in implementing agreed policy reforms. Similarly, policy implementation processes of many sectoral policy reform programmes have often suffered from under-spending of available funding by decision-makers in other to protest against complex procedures of cash outflows imposed by donors.

Another important catalogue of domination in areas of limited statehood includes a set of soft cognitive domination strategies including knowledge,

education and discourse. As a noble and objective definition, knowledge refers to the facts available or produced about a particular subject. However, some scholars have pointed out that the politics of scientific knowledge production is often driven by a set of actors' interests (Lentsch & Weingart 2011; Böcher & Krott 2016).

The production, selection and transmission of specific knowledge can be based on or used for normative paradigms, contestable societal priorities, promoting dominant cultures and ideological ideas. Many examples regarding the misuse of knowledge co-exist in literature. This was notably the case with the colonial anthropology studying "indigenous people" in the tropics, environmental scientists who have been promoted a "fortress conservation" without any consideration for forest-dependent people living in the selected forest zone to conserve. More recently, domination in knowledge production is also observed with massive studies which explicitly or unconsciously blame the poorest in the global south for the ecological impacts related to their survival modes (forest degradation, biodiversity loss, household bushmeat consumption, etc.), while avoiding the question of the global inequality and historical root causes of this phenomenon. In reaction, a variety of resistance tactics has been employed at different levels by actors from the developing countries. One of the recurrent ones is dogma, that is to say a belief or a set of agnostic behaviours that people are likely to adopt without questioning the degree of the related veracity. The aim of these dogmatic tactics is often to reject undesired knowledge, and knowledge that may threaten the interests of the most concerned by the facts at stake. Over the last years, the proliferation of "fake news" in the climate change domain, enchantment of traditional practices in human-wildlife interactions despite the growing risks of emerging infectious diseases exacerbated by transnational wildlife trafficking etc., are some examples of how dogma can be used in rejection of scientific knowledge. In the same vein, the excessive valuation of the effectiveness of alternative and traditional medicine for the prevention or treatment of Coronavirus disease during the COVID-19 health crisis revealed how much distrust of medical knowledge and the expensive access to modern medicine in Africa is a fertile ground for dogma about health issues.

Mainstream discourse based on scientific knowledge also represents another soft domination strategy that can raise varied rejections when perceived by marginalized actors as dominant narratives that are disconnected to their interests and societal priorities. In environmental-related domains, the fight against deforestation aimed at preserving "global public goods" (forest ecosystems and their biodiversity), and the promotion of global sustainability goals, for example, are often perceived in the global south, including in Africa, as top-down objectives which are not connected to domestic contexts. In most of the cases, mainstream discourse from external actors promoting policy reforms or any other science-based transformation without a convincing involvement of potential recipient actors can only induce marginal and reversible changes. As soon as the conditions (wave of thematic reforms, economic or socio-political pressure, etc.) that have made the marginal changes possible alter or when the short horizon expectation of the recipients is achieved, the undesired changes can be replaced at any time by inertia.

On the issue of successful policy development and implementation

As explained by Thomas and Grindle (1990), one of the major challenges for policy change in developing countries is more the recurrent failure in implementation stages, rather than development of ‘good’ policies. As such, two main conclusions can be drawn from the multiple conceptual and empirical-based power analyses presented in this book. First, an in-depth understanding of the root causes of policy failures or resistance to policy change should start by a specified power analysis. Such a process should question who the key actors at stake are, how do power processes involving them work and what are the formal or informal interests that (can) motivate those actors to facilitate or sabotage successful policy development and long-term implementation of the related changes in the global south. Second, the multiple power processes arise from actors’ interactions in development policy, including between competing actors, may also offer multiple options or at least a window of opportunity for active and potential efficient policy interventions. The aim of those interventions may consist of solving a problem (e.g. deforestation, wildlife trafficking, etc.) or converge towards a sustainability solution (e.g. sustainable land use). In such a context, engaging simultaneously with many interventions might shift an erratic policy development process as a whole towards a more stable and positive policy change. Nevertheless, it may be more realistic in challenging contexts such as in areas of limited statehood, to start with limited interventions, by keeping in mind that multiple step-by-step efforts can induce multiple modest changes but eventually a big change at the end of the day.

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