

Bad Contemporary Memories: Real Interests and the False Consciousness Fallacy

Steven Lukes argues in Power: A Radical View that agents cognize their interests based on external influences, thus creating a discrepancy between their actualized interests and their “real interests” (Lukes, 2005: 38). Lukes refutes criticism that his “real interests” notion violated the same fallacy as Marx’s notion of “false consciousness” in the second edition of the book (Lukes, 2005: 149). However, his conception of “real interests” does violate the same fallacy as Marx and his refutation fails to escape it. The implications this fallacy has on power analysis can be seen in Lukes’ misunderstanding of the concept of unobservable interests; this misconception does not render all further power analysis moot, as he claims, but renders his attempted analysis of unobservable interests moot, while leaving intact the significance of other analysis methodologies (Lukes, 2005: 150).

Lukes asserts that “the people’s wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests, and, in such cases, relates the latter to what they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice” (Lukes, 2005: 38). A person’s “real interest” is the choice that person would make if given the context of that choice and the capacity to make that choice [see Appendix A] (Lukes, 2005: 154). This problematic assertion was refuted by an “early critic” of PRV, Benton, who claimed, “The judgment [of real interests] that has to be made is how the actor would feel or behave under conditions which do not now hold, and maybe never have, nor ever will hold... [and is therefore] other-ascription of interests, and not self-ascription” (quoted in Lukes, 2005: 147). In other words, Lukes’ critic claims that Lukes is guilty of using the “false consciousness” fallacy made famous by Marx in that an external observer must have knowledge internal to an agent. The false consciousness fallacy implies that, if one were to have knowledge external to a knowledge-controlled system, the knowledge claimed by the observer is either a function of that observer’s knowledge *within* the knowledge-controlled system, or the observer would need to possess a divine or absolute truth impossible to prove.

Lukes refutes the ascription of false consciousness to PRV in that PRV does not describe an “arrogant assertion of a privileged access to *truths* presumed unavailable to others, but rather to a cognitive power of considerable significance and scope: namely, *the power to mislead*” (Lukes, 2005: 149). In other words, the interests of agents “can be interpreted purely ‘subjectively,’ so that what is in my interests is decided by what is important to me,” but those interests are affected by other more powerful agents, which “assumes that people can in fact prefer to lead lives that are against what they may recognize to be their well-being” and therefore interests are a product rather than a source of power (Lukes, 2005: 80-81, 82). In asserting that an agent can “mislead” another agent, Lukes acknowledges that there is a better choice for an agent than the one chosen, and therefore that the interest of the agent can be objectively judged, and thus falls into the fallacy of claiming to know absolute truth.

The fallacy is created by a conception of interests that describes interests as though they were absolute. Lukes asserts that, in changing an interest due to an external persuasion, an agent is betraying his or her original interest. However, interests are desired choices and the desire is derived from the agent’s conception of benefit. In being persuaded, the agent is adopting a new interest derived from an altered conception of benefit. Thus, regardless of the motivation for the change in conception, the agent views the new interest as better than the original. Therefore, interest cannot be said to be imposed on an agent, but manifests itself internally and as such cannot be observed externally.

Lukes criticizes the Marxist approach both because it does not account for “multiple and conflicting interests” and because it “[claims] to have some sort of privileged access, external to the actors” (Lukes, 2005: 145). However, Lukes fails to criticize the third dimension described in

PRV for its “external standpoint” (Lukes, 2005: 146). In fact, he supports the idea that his approach is external to a dominated system:

For the claim that compliance to domination can be secured by the shaping of beliefs and desires must invoke cognitive and evaluative judgments that are distinct from the relevant actual beliefs and desires of the actors alleged to be subject to it. In other words, the very idea of power’s third dimension requires an external standpoint (Lukes, 2005: 146).

However, Lukes again ignores the fact that interests necessarily cannot be judged external to their agents; rather, he supposes that the mere proposal of the idea that external judgment could be necessary is sufficient for being capable of external judgment. That is, “compliance to domination” in Lukes has become similar to “false consciousness” in Marx (Lukes, 2005: 146). The only difference is that Lukes maintains that some agents have relative autonomy, or, as Benton points out, the capacity to choose when more powerful agents do not constrain choice, while maintaining that compliance when there is constraint is against the agent’s objective interest without acknowledging the problem of objective interest used to analyze constraint (quoted in Lukes, 2005: 147).

Lukes’ response to the critique that “real interests” are knowable is that his real interests theory may not be able to define specific “real interests,” but can examine them as a “function of one’s explanatory purpose, framework and methods” (Lukes, 2005: 148). However, using the theory of “real interests” as a framework would depend on evaluating different predetermined “real interest frameworks” in order to determine the best framework in which to analyze a real interest. Therefore, when Lukes analyzes “real interests” as frameworks, he falls into the same fallacy as evaluating “real interests” *per se*. The idea that, even if real interests cannot be known, they can be exemplified as frameworks is a methodology that presupposes that frameworks can be known. However, Lukes attempts to cover this leap of logic by contending that those methodologies that cannot be known do not necessitate nonexistent evaluative interests. That is, simply because an interest cannot be evaluated within a framework does not necessitate that that interest is not “real.” Lukes states, “Of course, even if such attempts to identify it in empirically falsifiable terms fail, that does not mean that the phenomena do not exist, only that we lack the methodological tools and skills for doing so” (Lukes, 2005: 64). In other words, even if Lukes cannot prove the existence of “real interests,” he is not necessarily wrong because the reason there is no evidence is that the tools for evaluating the evidence are not available. Lukes again uses logic similar to the false consciousness fallacy: he presupposes that his knowledge is more true than the knowledge of others.

Arguing that the third dimension of power contains analysis of “real interests” is irrelevant. First, it assumes that an agent’s interests are knowable external to that agent. Lukes believes he escapes this problem by asserting that his evaluation is that of an agent’s cognitions and preferences being shaped by another agent, rather than by a system (Lukes, 2005: 28). That is, he claims not to advocate knowledge of truth outside of what can be known within society, he instead advocates knowledge of truth outside of the agents involved in a cognitive shift – referred to as “misleading” (Lukes, 2005: 149). However, in claiming the ability to ascribe different values to the interests replaced and chosen suggests a values system external to the agents, which again suggests unequal knowledge amongst agents and observers within a relatively equal knowledge structure. Second, as interests are a cognition, they are self-validating. For example, if A *believes* his interests are met, then they are met; whether they are

actually met holds no significance over A who, because he is the agent in question, is the only authority necessary to evaluate the meeting of his interests.

Lukes demonstrates that the one dimensional view of power evaluates interests as they are manifested by behavior, such as political participation (Lukes, 2005: 37). The second dimensional view, he claims, acknowledges that interests may not manifest themselves in behavior, such as interests that do not correspond with political issues (Lukes, 2005: 37). The radical view he takes suggests that interests are subject to the manipulation of other agents (Lukes, 2005: 37). As previously demonstrated, the radical view as it pertains to real interests is obsolete; however, given that there is empirical evidence of power within the first two dimensions of power and other aspects of the third dimension of power, the frameworks are still as relevant as the evidence they produce. Thus, examination of what is knowable is still relevant.

Given that all agents inherently have an equal capacity to know or not know their “real interests” and no agents have a capacity to know the “real interests” of others renders those aspects unknowable. Lukes is incorrect to say that “internalized illusions are entirely compatible with a highly rational and clear-eyed approach to living with them” (Lukes, 2005: 150). In fact, “internalized illusions” about interests cannot be said to be illusions because they are internal cognitions, unknowable externally and no “approach” can be taken to determine a course of “living with them” without falling into this same fallacy. Thus, Lukes is correct in ending his book with the Spinoza quotation because Lukes’ perception of power ignores the fact that “individuals [are] full of their own ideas” and that no conception of power, including Lukes’, can ever “[be] completely successful” (quoted in Lukes, 2005: 151).

Appendix A

The footnote cited on the discussion of “real interests” lists as a source Lukes’ book Individualism. Lukes purports that, in order to understand real interests, autonomy must be further investigated; however, in the chapters he cites, the discussion of autonomy is merely a refutation of other conceptions of autonomy, rather than a definition or prescription for identifying autonomy. Therefore, real interests are only investigated in this paper in terms of the limited definition provided in Power: A Radical View (2005). However, autonomy can contextually be interpreted as the capacity of an agent within the minimal view of freedom (Lukes, 2005: 115).

Reference

Lukes, Steven. 2005. Power: A Radical View. Palgrave Macmillan. New York, NY. First published 1974.