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The Power Paradox

AMRITA NARLIKAR

Empowerment of the weak and the poor is a long-standing concern for both rulers and the ruled. It assumes even greater importance in today's economically hard times. The issue has relevance for developed and developing countries alike, and for the rich and the poor within them. But while it is commonly assumed that the powerless are—by definition—disempowered, this essay identifies a surprising phenomenon: The supposedly debilitating conditions of poverty, weakness, and victimhood have themselves come to be used to secure a bargaining advantage in domestic politics and in international relations.

This “Power Paradox” is unprecedented, the result of a unique confluence of conditions that derive from globalization. And while the power of powerlessness could potentially have a transformative impact on world politics, its normative implications are not so straightforward. This is because it is not just the poor themselves who are beginning to recognize the potential of the Power Paradox. Diverse interests, including the rich, are learning that to frame one's demands in terms of powerlessness and victimhood constitutes a winning strategy. As this trend becomes more central in different aspects of our everyday lives, we will all have to work hard to ensure that measures supposedly targeted at empowering the poor do not, in fact, end up leaving all parties worse off—including the genuinely poor and powerless.

VICTORIOUS VICTIMS

Writing in 1962, the economist Mancur Olson identified a curious tendency in political life,

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which he called “the ‘exploitation’ of the great by the small.” This tendency derived from the ability of the small to free-ride, while larger players incurred a disproportionate share of the burden of providing public goods. The weak, the poor, and those assumed to be powerless have learned new ways to wield unprecedented power today. Paradoxically, their power derives from their claim to powerlessness. Political correctness and well-meaning attempts to correct past power asymmetries have together resulted in a commitment—across different types of political and legal systems—to accept a presumption of victimhood for any claimant who frames his or her demands in terms of powerlessness.

In some instances, this benefit of victimhood is a necessary condition for securing justice of any kind. But in other instances, odd reversals of power ensue. Rich and powerful defendants, at least in “trials” via the media and public opinion (and frequently in legal trials too), have the onus placed on them to prove themselves innocent (contrary to the principle of “innocent until proven guilty”). A trade unionization of politics is increasingly evident: Social movements can wreak havoc on national stability, and poor countries can hold up international negotiations for decades. Herein lies the Power Paradox: Powerlessness has emerged as a double-edged sword in the politics of the everyday and also in the high politics of international relations.

Examples abound. In a pupil-teacher relationship in a classroom setting, any accusation by a “powerless” pupil against a “powerful” teacher is taken more seriously than the other way around. This persists despite some remarkable statistics: For instance, British data reveal that one out of four members of school staff has been falsely accused of wrongdoing by pupils. A woman accusing a man of gender discrimination in the

workplace has her case treated with urgency; were a man to press similar charges, it is unlikely that his case would draw the same level of sympathy or urgency.

The presumption of relative powerlessness in the relationship is precisely what makes these complainants more powerful. A cup of coffee that is labeled Fair Trade attracts a large and growing group of self-proclaimed “ethical consumers,” even though the coffee is higher priced and the benefits of the Fair Trade movement (for the poor farmer and for the system as a whole) have been contested by economists of different ideological persuasions. In today’s world, powerlessness sells.

In many nations, we see a similar presumption of victimhood conferred on those who identify themselves as politically, economically, or socially weak, and a greater legitimacy conferred on policies intended to benefit these groups. Take the case of India, where the underperforming agricultural sector has remained almost impermeable to reform, and where industrial growth has also been difficult to harness. A key reason for the bottlenecks in both sectors lies in numerous laws targeted to assist poor farmers and industrial workers. Agricultural subsidies and tax exemptions have resulted in high levels of corruption that benefit rich businessmen and middlemen, while the intended beneficiaries—poor farmers—continue to live in abject poverty.

Similarly, Indian labor laws aimed at protecting industrial workers have proved the bane of domestic employers as well as foreign investors, sometimes to the point that factory owners prefer to rely on more expensive methods of mechanization (rather than hire new workers who would be very difficult to fire), despite India’s abundance of labor. By contrast, the services sector offers little scope for the application of pro-poor labor laws, given that the labor force in this sector is made up of English-speaking, educated, middle-class Indians. The missing pro-poor discourse has perhaps helped to make India’s services sector an engine for the country’s growth, whereas the opposite is true in the agrarian and industrial sectors.

Finally, the Power Paradox is also at work in international relations. At the World Trade Organization (WTO), for instance, the Doha Development Agenda (DDA)—the current round of global trade negotiations—places the concerns of the poorest countries at the heart of the talks. Further, by arguing at different points in the negotiations that “no deal is better than this deal,” developing

countries have been able to hold up the bargaining process. The ability of some of the poorest countries to exercise this effective veto power at the WTO is a striking departure from their less influential involvement in the “Rich Man’s Club” of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the WTO’s predecessor. The power of the global South in the DDA derives precisely from its supposed poverty and weakness: Any proposal that does not address its concerns—and somehow facilitate its development, poverty alleviation, or empowerment—will simply not go through.

BARGAINING EDGE

The Power Paradox has at least four sources, which go beyond the important but relatively passive potential of the small to free-ride on the efforts of the large. It involves harnessing the debilitating conditions of poverty, smallness, weakness, and victimhood, and actively turning them into a bargaining advantage. All four sources are fundamentally related to the phenomenon of globalization and its effective shrinking of both time and space, which facilitates political action.

First, and perhaps most important, is an altered normative context, both domestically and internationally. The world that saw the launching of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations in 2000, and recent campaigns such as Make Poverty History and Jubilee 2000, is much more preoccupied with considerations of fairness, equity, and justice than ever before. New social movements (such as the World Social Forum and the Occupy Wall Street protests) magnify the visibility and voice of certain subsets of powerless actors. Individuals, institutions, and cities make consumer choices that they believe should somehow help the local or global poor. Popular culture is also changing: Posh “gentlemen’s clubs,” for instance, find themselves increasingly on the defensive against demands for greater inclusiveness in terms of gender and class. In this normative context, supporting the cause of the powerless is a winning strategy.

Second, closely bound up with the normative context is the role of social media. The ability of social media networks to adopt causes and raise their profiles on a global scale is unprecedented, and perhaps also explains why past revolutions and other movements for social change did not lead to the emergence of a full-blown “power of the powerless” on a sustained basis such as we see

today. When a South Korean farmer committed suicide to protest against the WTO's talks at Cancun in 2003, his death did not generate a reaction anywhere near the level that a much smaller act of protest will spark via Facebook and Twitter today. There are several examples of different types of self-identified "victims" who not only have managed to generate moral support online, but have also had a snowballing effect in the emergence of new complaints against the same "powerful" target, and have even raised funds to escalate the online trial to a litigation.

For better and for worse, the Internet has become a great equalizer: Even the most powerless person can take on the most powerful, and win. And insofar as the "powerless victim" almost always commands greater sympathy than the accused (and insofar as the "powerful" are more likely to be targets of such claims, particularly when accusations are being made by unscrupulous individuals playing the system), the powerful have never before had the decks so systematically stacked against them.

Third, collective action has helped reinforce the Power Paradox. Traditionally, such action took the shape of labor unions and (in Europe) works councils. But by harnessing the opportunities afforded by social media, people are now able to build much bigger and more cohesive transnational coalitions. Limited resources do not act as a constraint on the formation of coalitions to seek redress of real or imagined grievances. Both states and non-state actors have been able to make use of these opportunities, sometimes even forming coalitions between states and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the public health coalition that brought together developing countries and developmentalist NGOs against rich countries and pharmaceutical interests.

Fourth, particularly important in triggering and sustaining the Power Paradox is the emergence of what negotiation analysts refer to as Best Alternatives to Negotiated Agreement (BATNAs) for hitherto powerless actors. In the past, the oppressed and downtrodden had only limited access to forums where they could air their grievances. Today, if an employer denies an individual worker's claim, there are several alternative forums that he or she can turn to: more powerful trade unions, the media, social networks, and so forth. At the

interstate level, too, poor countries have more BATNAs available to them. The rise of the so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) offers low- and middle-income countries new potential markets and sources of aid. The ability of powerless individuals and countries to walk away from a negotiation and shift to a more advantageous forum, thanks to the availability of different BATNAs, gives them a new source of power.

VOICE AND VETO

The Power Paradox provides a mechanism for the marginalized many to enter the mainstream with a voice and a veto. At first glance, the normative implications of this potentially transformative impact seem positive all around. If the poor and the weak can harness their most fundamental disadvantages and convert them into a bargaining advantage, formerly powerless individuals and states may cease to be rule-taking subjects, and instead acquire a vital form of agency. We may thus have a very compelling and important mechanism at hand to help in the creation of a fairer and more equitable world.

There is no question that the Power Paradox has offered justice to the oppressed within and across states and societies.

Some remarkable power reversals have ensued. Women in India, who were for centuries subject to terrible demands for dowry, some of which would result in bride-burning and "dowry deaths," now have the law firmly on their side. There is a strong presumption of guilt on the side of the powerful party—the husband and his family—and in favor of the woman. In most advanced countries and many developing countries, the mere accusation of sexual harassment leveled by a female student against a male professor is certain to land the man immediately in a long, drawn-out inquiry, almost irrespective of any preliminary checks on the truthfulness of such claims. Most women see this presumption of guilt as a necessary condition that allows them to stand up to their oppressors.

When a trade union complains that an employee has been subjected to maltreatment, the management is almost immediately put on the defensive. Similarly, when developing countries point to their lower per capita incomes and refuse to accept the burden of providing global public

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goods, and thereby hold up a deal on trade or climate change mitigation, developed countries have few rebuttals. This is because these claims, unlike those based explicitly on national interest, are framed in moral terms on behalf of the poor and powerless majority in the global South. Against such framing, normal power relations break down. This is surely a good thing. But adverse consequences also emerge from the Power Paradox in at least two ways.

On the one hand, it is not only the genuinely powerless and the deserving poor (however one defines them) who are aware of this strategy. The rich may use it to re-frame their demands and enrich themselves further, while others who technically fall within the “powerless” bracket may use the Power Paradox unscrupulously to falsely or vindictively abuse the powerful. When trade unions in the developed world demand the imposition of stringent labor standards on the global South, it could be that they are using these demands to undermine the one source of comparative advantage for the poor countries, namely cheap labor. Were such labor standards actually to be implemented, many of the impoverished workers of the South would lose their livelihoods. Relatively rich workers in the North would find themselves considerably better off if cheaper products from the South lost market share by drawing the disdain of “ethical consumerism.”

In the WTO, it is all too easy for rich countries to refuse to make concessions even to the world’s poorest countries by arguing that preferential treatment granted to the general category of Least Developed Countries would be unfair to the few poor countries with which the rich nations already have preferential trade arrangements. By claiming to act in the name of a subset of the poor, the rich countries have conveniently managed to avoid making concessions—and have also been able to hold the welfare of the global poor hostage.

On the other hand, even with the best intentions and no attempts to misuse the system, the Power Paradox can still produce systemically adverse consequences. The WTO’s Doha negotiations are a case in point. We have seen the transformation of the “Rich Man’s Club” into one of the most equitable international organizations, which includes Brazil, India, and China at the conference

table, and also accords considerable voice to the Least Developed Countries.

But in place of consensus-building a cacophony of voices has erupted, and the newfound willingness of the developing world to exercise its veto has resulted in a permanently deadlocked WTO. Developed countries have decided to move the negotiations to alternative regional forums (an intrinsically less efficient way of liberalizing trade than the global route), in which developing countries enjoy neither the support of their allies that they have in the WTO nor the recourse to a strong dispute-settlement mechanism. The Power Paradox has given procedural power to the hitherto powerless, but the resulting outcomes have not left poor countries better off—nor indeed their developed country counterparts.

BLEAK OUTCOMES

The two sets of adverse consequences can reinforce each other. At a human level, the risk of misuse and abuse of the Power Paradox creates a climate of distrust and litigiousness. We live in a world today where male professors feel the need to keep their office doors open when tutoring female students, and where adults think twice before they engage in perfectly ordinary conversations with legal minors. If we take the argument to its logical conclusion, we risk creating a society where everyday economic and political interaction becomes increasingly tense and limited. For instance, the time is perhaps not far off when, rather than give opportunities to empowered minorities and women, enterprises may prefer to avoid employing them in the first place.

At the international level, we see parallel moves already taking place: As developing countries have come to exercise greater voice and more effective veto power, multilateral processes have deadlocked and rich countries have preferred to transfer their negotiating efforts to alternative forums. The Power Paradox, while potentially acting as a great equalizer, also risks creating more polarized politics where the divisions between the self-identified powerless and the powerful become even more entrenched.

Three potential scenarios can then result from the increasing use of the Power Paradox, and none of them is positive. Most immediately, we risk the

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creation of a new disenfranchised and disengaged political class of the hitherto rich and powerful. Insofar as this represents the replacement of one form of inequality with another, this cannot be seen as beneficial for the system as a whole (even though it may offer a brief respite to the poor and powerless).

Second, there is a real risk that increased polarization produces the same results as in Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*: The power transitions in different classes of individuals and countries could embroil all parties in time-consuming, resource-intensive, and often wasteful litigation. Further, as learning takes place, there is a good chance that those adept at misusing the system would crowd out the needs of the genuinely powerless and desperately poor (those whom the system was originally designed to help).

Finally, the formerly powerful, despite the decrease in their relative power, would still have enough resources to opt out of the system through various means—via the creation of regional agreements at the international level, and by limiting their engagement with other classes at the individual level. Should this happen, the multiple gains that accrue to people and nations as a result of cooperation would decline. The biggest loss would be to the newly empowered powerless, who would no longer be able to use the Power Paradox due to the disintegration of the system.

TYRANNIES OF THE POWERLESS

From the Victorian Age, with its Dickensian schools where children were caned and its poorhouses where the indigent were treated as criminals, we have come a remarkably long way. The Power Paradox is important because it allows a variety of weaknesses—whether they result from differences in wealth, or social status, or political exclusion—to be overcome. Its beauty lies in the fact that it offers greater agency to the weak and marginalized by cleverly harnessing and exploiting the very sources of their weakness and marginalization. But it is also prone to misuse and abuse. And sometimes, even with the best intentions, it generates unintended consequences that leave all parties worse off. Is there then a way to preserve some of the gains that the Power Paradox has facilitated in terms of the empowerment of

the powerless, while simultaneously limiting the adverse consequences?

A quick fix to a part of the problem of unintended consequences lies in institutional reform. Decision-making rules can be put in place at the WTO, for instance, to overcome the tyrannies of the powerless while preventing a return to the Rich Man's Club. But even the most innovative voting mechanisms will not suffice if these institutional innovations are unaccompanied by a fundamental change in our attitudes, particularly when we consider the relative ease with which the system can be misused.

Ultimately, the most effective safeguard against the abuse of the Power Paradox is to have discerning policy systems in place that can distinguish between different situations, swiftly and effectively. There is a need to establish clear and hard criteria that specify the minimum thresholds for complaints to be considered in the first place. This, in turn, requires a rethinking of the newfound presumptions of powerlessness and victimhood. It would involve acknowledging the inconvenient truth that not all those who present themselves as powerless victims are actually so, nor is it always the case that those who claim to speak on behalf of the powerless actually represent their interests. Claims to powerlessness, poverty, and victimhood cannot be taken at face value, just as the crying baby is not necessarily the one that should get the most milk. Strict penalties need to be put in place for those found misusing the system, reinforcing the higher threshold for appeals. And when powerless policy interventions are considered, a close eye should be kept consistently on their systemic and medium- to long-term effects.

The Power Paradox provides us with stories of action and activism, offering a new twist to Mancur Olson's original insight into the power of the small to exploit the strong through free-riding. Many are inspiring tales of the weak and marginalized finally taking control of their lives. But the Power Paradox also tells us of harmful consequences—potential and real—of well-intended actions and movements gone awry. Counterintuitively, sometimes it pays to be weak, poor, and marginalized, or at least to be perceived as belonging to one or the other category of victimhood. And almost always, it pays to espouse the cause of powerlessness in today's world. ■