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THE BACKGROUND POWER
IN SEARLE'S SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

abstract

This essay aims to provide an analysis of Searle's concept of Background power and of its role in his social ontology. It is divided in three parts. The first part is a short introduction on the concept of Background and the relations between it and the concept of Background power. In the second part, I furnish an analysis of the so-called exactness constraint and the intentional constraint on same. In the third part, I make three observations on the theory of Background power.

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0. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to analyze the concept of *Background power* and its role in John R. Searle's social ontology.

The essay is divided in three parts. The *first part* is a short introduction on the concept of *Background* and the relations between the concept of *Background* and the concept of *Background power*. In the *second part*, I analyze the exactness constraint and the intentional constraint in *Background power*. In the *third part*, I formulate three remarks on theory of *Background power*.

Introduction

1. The Background and the Background Power

As stated by Searle, a *Background* is "a set of non-representational mental capacities that enable all representing to take place" (Searle 1989, 143).

The category of *Background* is extremely relevant in different fields of Searle's philosophical enquiry: philosophy of language; philosophy of mind and social ontology. According to my analysis, Searle uses the concept of *Background* to answer at least three different questions:

(i) What are the necessary conditions for understanding a sentence?[1]
(ii) What are the necessary conditions of an intentional state?[2]
(iii) What are the necessary conditions of a social phenomena?[3]

In *Making the Social World* (2010) the *Background* helps to answer a fourth question:

(iv) How can society exercise power over people?

Background is considered by Searle the source of a special deontic power: the *Background power*.

The *Background power* is defined by Searle, as follows:

> *A power in society that is not codified, [that] is seldom explicit, and may even be largely unconscious*
> *(Searle 2010, 155).*

The concept of *Background power* is inspired by Foucault's discussion of

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1   Searle (1978).
2   Searle (1989).
3   Searle (1995).

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Bio-power[4]. Searle affirms that the category of *Bio-power* has a weak point because it includes phenomena that cannot be explained by the general definition of power shared by Foucault itself: "power exists only as exercised by some on others" (Foucault 2000, 340).

1.1. Background: A Heterogeneous Set Of Abilities

Searle uses the word "*Background*" to refer to a (really heterogeneous) set of abilities.

Background includes both skills and knowledge that are presupposed in most of the actions we perform. Even if you are not necessarily conscious of having these abilities and this knowledge, they are necessary to perform the simplest everyday activity (for instance: drink beer from the bottle, walk, do karate or ski)[5].

What has *Background* in common with *power*? Both *Background* and *power* are *abilities.* In fact Searle describes *power* as "the *ability* to get people to do something whether they want to or not". According to Searle, some of the abilities incorporated in *Background* are *powers.* For instance, people have the "*Background power*" of influencing other people's way of dressing.

1.2. A New Role of Rules in Background Power
1.2.1. Which Role do Rules Play in the Background Theory?

In *Intentionality* Searle affirms:

> *Consider what it is like to learn how to ski. The beginning skier is given a set of verbal instructions as to what is supposed to do: "lean forward", "bend the ankles", "keep the weight on the downhill ski [...] as the skier gets better he does not internalize the rules better, but rather the rules become progressively irrelevant. [...] The repeated practice enables the body to take over and the rules to recede into the Background (Searle 1989, 150).*

The advanced skier does not think about rules of skiing, he just skis. Nevertheless he follows the rules of skiing, he "acts on the rule" (Searle 1989, 150).

1.2.2. Which Role do Rules Play in The Background Power Theory?

The role of the rules changes in the *Background power theory.* As stated by Searle:

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4   According to Michel Foucault (1978, 140), bio-power [bio-pouvoir] is "an explosion of numerous and diverse
techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations".

5   Ryle (2000).

> *The Background [...] contains among other things, a set of norms of behavior. If someone violates the norms of the community, various sorts of sanctions can be imposed on the violator (Searle 2010, 155).*

According to Searle the *Background* includes several norms about:

(i) what is regarded as an *appropriate* dress;
(ii) what is regarded as *permissible* sexual behavior;
(iii) what is regarded as an *appropriate* thing to say;
(iv) what is regarded as a *permissible* political and moral opinion[6].

The person who exercises *Background ability* (for instance, the skier) acts on the rule.
On the other hand, the person who exercises *Background power* gets *someone else* to "act on the rule".

2. Intentional Constraint and Exactness Constraint in Background Power

According to Searle's social ontology two necessary conditions must be satisfied for discourse on power (and on *Background power*) to be meaningful:

(i) the intentional constraint;

(ii) the exactness constraint.

2.1. Intentional Constraint

The first necessary condition for *power* is the *intentional constraint,* i.e. according to Searle if there is no intentionality there is no exercise of *power*[7].
Searle thinks that the intentional content of the *Background power* is "we conform"[8].

2.2. Exactness Constraint

The second necessary condition for *power* is the *exactness constraint.* That is, according to Searle:

> *One should be able to say who exactly has power over exactly whom to get them to do exactly what*
> *(Searle 2010, 155).*

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6   Searle (2010, 155).
7   Searle (2010, 155).
8   Searle (2010, 158).

Potentially, according to Searle, "anybody can exercise the power over anybody". A really particular aspect of the *Background power* theory is that the same person can potentially be the one *who has power* and the one *over whom is exercised the power.*

3.
Three Remarks on the Theory of Background Power

Intentional constraint and *exactness constraint* were imposed by Searle to redefine the concept of "power" in order to avoid the limits of the *Bio-power theory.* In other words, Searle imposes *intentional constraint* and *exactness constraint* to avoid Foucaultian undifferentiated and quasi-magical hypostasis of an all-pervasive force. Despite this fact, the application of these constraints can reveal some limits of the *Background power* theory. In § 3. I will analyze three counterfactual situations and I will point out some limitations of the theory of *Background power.* Finally I will make three remarks on this theory.

3.1. Background Power in a "Flying-Sandwich Situation"

Searle says that the intentional content of *Background power* is "we conform". In this sense we have at least two options:

(i) we conform to Background rules that prescribe to behave in a particular way;
(ii) we conform to Background rules that prescribe to sanction in a particular way a particular behavior.

To show this fact more clearly I will analyze an episode of Franck McCourt's autobiographical novel *Teacher Man: A Memoir* (2005).
The episode can be described both as a violation of a *Background rule* that prescribes *a particular* behavior and as a violation of a *Background rule* that prescribes *how to sanction a particular behavior*[9].
There is a teacher, Mr. McCourt, in a Bronx school, starting his first day of teaching. Before anything else, he is confronted with the problem of a flying sandwich. It starts when a boy named Petey calls out, "anyone wan'a baloney sandwich?" and a critic schoolmate, Andy, answers "You kiddin? Your

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9   Ross (2004, 208) says, "the real content of a norm is a directive to the judge as to the conditions under which he shall order a physical force against a person [...] while the instruction to private individual is a derived and figurative legal norm deduced from it".

mom must hate you, givin'you sandwiches like that". Here is the full report of what happens next from Mr. McCourt's point of view:

> *Petey threw his brown-paper sandwich bag at the critic, Andy, and the class cheered - 'Fight, fight' - they said – 'Fight, fight' - [...] I came from behind of my desk and made the first sound of my teaching career: 'Hey!' Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations [...]. Should I say Hey, Petey, get up here and pick up that sandwich, or else? Should I pick it up myself and throw it into the wastepaper basket [...]? I picked it up and slid it from its wrapping [and] I ate the sandwich. It was my first act of classroom management. [...] I could see the admiration in their eyes. Petey said, 'Yo teacher, that's my sandwich you et'. Class told him: 'Shaddap. Can't you see the teacher is eating' (McCourt 2005, 16).*

First interpretation of this episode. Petey created a "flying sandwich situation", he violated the *Background* rule:

> A student should not throw baloney sandwiches during a lesson.

Second interpretation. Mr. McCourt followed the *Background rule* that prescribes *to sanction a particular behavior*:

> Somebody should sanction the student who throws baloney sandwiches during a lesson.

Nevertheless, Mr. McCourt sanctioned Petey by eating his baloney sandwich. He sanctioned Petey in a wrong way because he did not sanction him in accordance with the *Background rules*. In fact, Mr. McCourt punished Petey and achieved admiration and respect from his students despite the fact that he violated the *Background rule* that is connected with him status of teacher:

> A teacher should not punish his students by eating their baloney sandwiches.

Curiously, Mr. McCourt exercised a *power* despite the fact that he violated sanction-stipulating Background rules. In fact, even if he punished his student in the wrong way, he got his students to do what he wanted: he avoided a fight.

3.2. Background Power of an Involuntary Laugher

One does not know how Searle would fit the following phenomenon into his theory. According to Searle *Background power* can be exercised through an informal sanction. But the informal sanction can sometimes be involuntary. Therefore in some cases we sanction whether we want to or not. For instance, the laughing of an involuntary laugher can be perceived as a sanction by somebody that violates a background rule. Despite this fact the involuntary laugher laughs only because that person appears ridiculous to him. He is not conscious that his behavior can be perceived as a sanction by the person who is behaving in a ridiculous way. Despite this fact, the involuntary laugh can have an impact on the person who provoked such hilarity. In fact, he can be motivated by the involuntary laugher to stop behaving in such a strange way. Moreover the involuntary laugher is conditioned by the *Background rules*: actually the behavior (that provokes his laugh) seems to him somewhat strange because it breaks *Background rules.* In this sense the involuntary laugher could be described as an involuntary instrument of the *Background power.*

In my opinion, this instance has the advantage of allowing us to see clearly the difference between *exercising "Background" power on one hand and being "its" instrument on the other.*

3.3. Subjective Will and Exercise of Background Power

Durkheim in *The Rules of Sociological Method* talks about a coercive power very similar to the one called by Searle *Background power.* According to Durkheim:

> *La présence de ce pouvoir se reconnaît à son tour soit à l'existence de quelque sanction déterminée, soit à la résistance que le fait oppose à toute entreprise individuelle qui tend à lui faire violence*[10]*.*

> *The presence of this power may be recognized in its turn either by the existence of some specific sanction or by the resistance offered against every individual effort that tends to violate it.*

According to Durkheim, both the presence of this coercive power and its exercise are independent from any subjective will. This is considered by

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10   Durkheim points out the distinction between being obligated and feeling obligated in *The Rules of Sociological Method* when he says (1966, 10):

Il arrive que nous ignorons le détail des obligations qui nous incombent et que, pour les connaître il nous faut consulter le Code et ses interprètes autorisés.

It happens that we are ignorant of the details of the obligations incumbent upon us, and that in order to acquaint ourselves with them we must consult the   law and its authorized interpreters.

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Durkheim an intrinsic characteristic of the social facts i.e. "every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim 1966, 10). In Durkheim's words:

> *Sans doute, quand je m'y conforme de mon plein gré, cette coercition ne se fait pas ou se fait peu sentir, étant inutile. Mais elle n'en est pas moins un caractère intrinsèque de ces faits, et la preuve, c'est qu'elle s'affirme dès que je tente de résister (Durkheim 1966, 10).*

> *Of course when I fully consent and conform to them [to the social facts], this constraint is felt only slightly, if at all, and is therefore unnecessary. But it is, nonetheless, an intrinsic characteristic of these facts, the proof being that it asserts itself as soon as I attempt to resist it.*

I think there is *a critical point* in the *Background power* theory. When Searle claims "my knowledge that sanctions can be imposed upon me and that I would find those sanctions unacceptable places me in a power relation with those who have the perceived option of imposing the sanctions", he fails to see that sanctions (though informal) can be imposed only over somebody who is *already involved* in a power relation (Searle 2010, 160).
Searle notes that, if he does not wear a dress because he does not like it, no *power* forces him not to wear it. According to him:

> *As long as I don't want to dress in the impermissible way, no power is being exercised over me. But the moment I do want to dress in an impermissible way, and I am constrained not to do so by the perceived threat of the other members of the society, then power is being exercised over me (Searle 2010, 157).*

Let us change the *Background* so that we can see if the will of John Searle will change or not. Let us imagine being in Rome around 509 BC. The taste in clothes of Professor Johannes Hrotgarus Searlus would have probably been radically different. Maybe he would like to wear something very similar to a dress: he would wear maybe a *toga*, that (as stated by Svetonius) in the first period of the Roman Republic was worn by men as well as women.
As we can see in the example, Background rules can influence not only Professor Searle's behavior but also his will and experience. Therefore, people's behavior is not only determined by coercive power but also by a *normative pressure*.

Georg H. von Wright uses the expression "*normative pressure*" to designate some phenomena comparable with the ones described by Searle as *Background powers.* In *Norm and Action* von Wright affirms that *normative pressure* can be independent from the presence of a personal authority, in this sense he talks about "anonymous norms" (von Wright 1963, 9).
In *Freedom and Responsibility,* von Wright defines the expression "*normative pressure*" as follows:

> *Normative pressure is a coercive force, threatening people with something they shun, some form of punishment for non-conformity (von Wright 1980, 47).*

Von Wright describes *normative pressure* as a coercive threatening force. However, sanction and threat are not the only way for influencing people's behavior, in this sense the concept of "threatening force" does not coincide with the one of "*normative pressure*". A *Background normative pressure* can influence our perception of reality, our will, and consequently our behavior. In this case no sanction threat is needed. According to the definition of *power* formulated by John Searle, *Background normative pressure* is not a power because it does not satisfy the exactness constraint, yet the *implicit knowledge* of *Background rules* influences people's behavior.

**4.
Conclusion**

In this paper I tried to point out some limitations of Searle's *Background power theory.*

4.1. Firstly, starting from the distinction between *rules that prescribe to behave in a particular way* and *rules that prescribe to sanction in a particular way a particular behavior,* I tried to point out the vagueness of *intentional constraint* of *Background power.* According to Searle, the intentional content of *Background power* is "we conform"; however it is possible that a subject exercises a power sanctioning the violation of a *Background rule that prescribes a particular behavior* in contrast with the *Background rule that prescribes how to sanction the violation of a Background rule.* More precisely, the example in § 3.1. allows us to see that you can force somebody else to follow a particular *Background rule* (*that prescribes to behave in a particular way*) and that you can exercise a power even if you are violating the *Background rule* (*that prescribes to sanction in a particular way a particular behavior*).

4.2. Secondly, informal sanctions are described by Searle[11] as a form of exercise of power, but the example of the involuntary laugher shows that an

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11   Searle (2010, 158).

informal sanction can be an involuntary behavior.

4.3. Thirdly, *Background rules* influence not only our behavior, but also our perception of reality, and consequently our will.

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