

# POWER IN HEAVY METAL: A POSITIVE EVALUATION

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## Abstract

This study's main objective was to explore the general, philosophical conception of power to see if talking about power in metal is a positive or a negative thing for its culture. It is often claimed that metal is about power. If we define power as domination, as it usually is, then power in metal could be used as yet one more instance of oppression in our societies. However, if we see power as a 'cluster concept' with multiple meanings, then we cannot consistently attribute to metal just one interpretation. So, if we alternatively think of power as resistance and/or empowerment, we can justify metal as an emancipatory experience and a lifestyle.

## Introduction

Something scholars of heavy metal studies, heavy metal fans, and even non-metal fans can agree upon about this music is certainly that it is powerful. But what does having qualities of power mean? For people who don't like metal, it probably means that it is angry music full of negativity that is sonically unpleasant. People who like metal would say they embrace that 'powerful' feeling even if others find it 'negative'. Both interpretations seem plausible, and there is a basis for this tension or ambiguity when talking about power in metal: it's because the term itself, "power", is ambiguous. This is not essentially controversial, but the importance of recognizing this may help us understand not only metal culture, but our identity better. So, even though there is a subjective basis for how a particular piece of music makes us feel, understanding the words we use when describing that feeling will certainly help us in understanding the possibilities of that feeling. I would say this is one of the key roles of philosophy since antiquity: the reasoned articulation, using logic, of our ways of speaking about things. How do we, then, conceive of this "power" that we feel in relation to its exercise?

Questioning and exploring the use of a concept can transform how we experience the phenomena itself, and what meaning it can have for us (in this case, heavy metal). With this paper I intend to show how an analysis of the different senses we mean when we talk about "power" can show how metal, as music and as a lifestyle, can definitely work for any emancipatory ideal. By emancipation I take a general definition for granted. It pertains to the attainment of social justice and freeing the social individual from the complex social, political and economic phenomena that inhibit her fields of participation, deliberation and well-being.

This assumes, against the usual understanding of the concept, that power is not a bad thing, or something that we should fight against (or even if fighting against it makes sense). I don't pretend to give a final word on the issue regarding how best to define power, rather I want to suggest that the concept

does not lend itself to a rigid characterization that determines us towards one sole path in its understanding. This will allow us to say that because power is not essentially negative, conceiving heavy metal as negative because it is about power assumes a one-sided view of what power is.

I will start by glossing over some heavy metal lyrics that I find talk about power in a positive light. Then, I will talk about power as a “cluster concept”, as delineated in Haugaard, in a way that can justify the plurality of meaning that can be assigned to the word that does not trap us in a conception of metal as being an expression of exercising domination through force. This will take me down to a discussion that will take issue with the usual way of understanding power in critical and emancipatory thought, where power is seen as essentially a bad thing that needs to be transcended. What I consider positive about power is that it can become viable ethically for emancipatory ideals like struggles against imperialism, capitalism, homophobia, sexism, patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, and other such systemic evils we face in our day to day.

### **The heaven and hell of power**

What does it mean for metal that it is “powerful”? Hickam and Wallach (2011) cite a situation that may help us answer this. In this anecdote, they are told that because for metal fans the music is a source of power, then metal is meant to appeal to ‘little fascists’ ( p. 265). The reply to such accusation is that metal is not about fighting, but fighting back, to protect oneself from coercion, and to resist (p. 266). This can be a meaning of Manowar’s call to fight in “Fighting the World” (1987). Its not about fighting just for the sake, but in this instance its the image of the “world” that presents an obstacle that has power over us and needs to be resisted. Resisting, of course, implies this obstacle that forces itself on us, and in ordinary discourse we can identify this as an instance of power. To conquer an obstacle also implies power, in our ability to overcome it using specific means. Contrary to the belief of the person in the anecdote, we can speak of power as being something other than domination (control or the imposition of obstacles or states of affairs on someone). As Hickam and Wallach want to emphasize, we can talk of power as resistance, while this resistance can, of course, be thought about as something normatively good (while there are instances where it can definitely be normatively bad).

What kind of a subject needs to resist, and resist what? They say: “The strong bonds and inclusive nature of heavy metal fans might be because the music and culture themselves have historically been misunderstood and marginalized. From FM radio to academe, heavy metal can be likened to a “black sheep”, if not a *persona non grata*” (p. 260). The heavy metal subject can then be seen as essentially non-conformist. This non-conformism does not amount merely to an antisocial attitude of removing oneself from the world. On the contrary, in heavy metal lyrics we can see that the genre values an attitude of being an active agent. This agent can tap into a feeling of power that cannot be reduced to the “little fascist” attitude, but can have a positive role in human interaction. A few examples of metal lyrics can help us identify this.

In the Hammerfall song "The Dragon Lies Bleeding" (1997), we have the image of "the Dragon", which we can interpret as representative of something that imposes a particular state of affairs and needs conquering. The dragon slayer would also participate of that ‘power and glory’ as her prize for the killing of the dragon. The power obtained may be relational, implied in “glory”, since it depends on others taking a participation in what is deemed valuable or what

merits commendation. This is the situated power in Wartenberg (1990), which depends on the actions and beliefs of other agents for it to be effective. This power, which is systemic, also depends on the agent obtaining it through a feat (in this case, slaying the dragon), and certainly grants the agent options for action. So here seeing dispositional power and systemic power as a strict, incommensurable dichotomy becomes problematic. More on this on the next section, but for now we can establish that power can take the familiar shape of a relation, yet also a disposition that brings about a state of affairs that is desired by the actor, similar to Hobbes's conception of power as that which benefits the agent (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 17).

Some songs don't beat around the bush and are simply named after that concept we have been discussing. Take for example the song 'Power' by Helloween. While not the most obvious example of a heavy metal song that displays raw energy and throws it right at you, it certainly has that feeling common in "power metal of being upbeat and fun", yet passionate for an over the top singalong. During the chorus we hear the lines "We've got the power, we are divine...We are the ones to cover the throne". There is an optimistic appeal to this power, as something that enables one to push boundaries away. Once again we see power as a force for action, to bring about a desired state of affairs. There is definitely a sense of empowerment, an uplifting sort sense that goes well with what we have been talking about. The value of reaching a goal, and having the means to procure it, is part of this aspect of power. We could also talk of control even in this situation. By control we do not only mean control others against their will, but we can say A or B is "in control of themselves", or in "control of the situation". Both these utterances make reference to resisting both external and internal forces that may choke the agent's capacity for action.

We find this positive language in the rhetoric of liberation and resistance. Those resisting are definitely immersed in the power relation. Not only because they resist power, but because they want power for themselves (the power that autonomy can bring, the powers of self-determination, and so on). We see something of this in Foucault's double sided view of power as power (as repression) on one side and resistance on the other (Weberman, 1995, p. 210). Heavy metal plays with this duality. We get a sense of the inevitability of resistance in Kreator's "Civilisation Collapse" (2012). Right at the intro, we get: "Can't you see our people have got no choice but to fight them back?/Can't you see the change of consciousness demands a total attack?". The song explodes and the first verse reads: "Finally they're swarming in/A long forgotten youth/The cause of inequality/A paradise for few/Superior, inferior/A vast insanity/When justice is tyranny". This song, which is a call for violence and rioting, is not a display of force for its own sake, but as a response to a condition that cannot be tolerated anymore. Therefore, it's a counter-force and a resistance.

Similarly in the opening verse of Havok's "Prepare for Attack" (2011), we get a call for subversion: "Rise Up and take Control/Revolution, execution, the solution, can't let it go/Fighting, buting, taking over/Crusing the powers that be". We get a similar call in the chorus of Dantesco's "Morir de Pie" (2005), where a failure to resist and transgress means a loss of freedom, not just for one self, but for future generations. The chorus lyrics translate to: "If you don't want to live on your knees/Willing you are to do battle/And if you don't fight/If you don't want to die/Your children will lose their freedom".

But even resistance doesn't need to be a normatively positive thing, just as things like control and domination do not necessarily need to be linked to a negative evaluation. The power to be resisted may be something we consider good or bad, but it is resistance nonetheless. The ambiguity of the term power itself creates this, and in so far as heavy metal is about power, this ambiguity will pertain to it as well. The important thing, however, is to recognize this tension between the different senses of power and thus there is something to be said about metal as a "source of power".

To take a specific issue as illustration on the point of this duality, talking about male domination as power is not just talking about the power of men over women, but also the power of women in resisting, fighting back, and being heard. In this sense, feminism is not just fighting against power (the obstacle of male domination), but also using its own power in that fight. To me, it's important to stress that women can have power and can feel anger, can fight, and can (and should) resist, because it tells us that power is not necessarily a bad thing. A socio-political system that uses its power to repress, for example, misogyny, its not something we would disagree with. This repression shouldn't necessarily mean the obvious kind: raids, repression of protesters and the taking of opposition prisoners by the state. It can be something so small as somebody in a social space being censored for saying openly hateful things towards women.

With this clarification, we see that power as a positive thing still references that very concept, and its not a deviation from it. To say that heavy metal is about power is not to say it is about domination and control, but about a cry to resist. Both these discourses, however, are neutral in terms of the political spectrum, as a wide range of creeds can take up this language, revolutionaries and reactionaries alike. Let's look closely at power as a concept with a plurality of meanings in order to better grasp our usage of the term.

### **A 'cluster' concept**

In the philosophical debate, the grammatical use of the word has been usually divided in two camps: as power-over and power-to, with these two forms having more of a resemblance than is usually acknowledged. The logic of the proposed dichotomy comes from the difference between talking about power as domination or control on the one hand, and power as an ability on the other hand (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 18). The problem with taking this dichotomy uncritically is to see these two uses as so unrelated as to think they refer to concepts that exclude each other. Power-over cannot be understood without power-to, since without the ability or capacity to dominate others, there is not power-over to be talked about. In this way, "dispositional power feeds into systemic power" (Haugaard, 2010, p. 434). This blurs a clear distinction between both forms. In the case of systemic power, which depends on social structures (Luke's third dimension of power) and not simply on A manipulating or controlling B, that structure still enables A to act a certain way, in other words, to have certain dispositions and abilities the agent wouldn't have in a different structural arrangement.

We mean quite a few things when we talk about power in everyday life. These meanings have, as pointed out by Haugaard (2010), a "family resemblance". By this he means that power is a "cluster concept", where all of its possible definitions, like domination, dispositional power, systemic power, empowerment, power-to, power-with, and so on, are equally valid in their usage, such usage depending on the language games at work. While not having

something clearly in common, all members of the family are still part of a plurality of meanings, so nobody can claim to have the “true definition” of power. In contrast to Haugaard, Lukes (2005), in his classic essay, later expanded in an important second edition, thinks that power is an “essentially contested concept”, the meaning of which we may agree on while still disagreeing where it resides. Contrary to Haugaard, Lukes believes there is a proper definition of power (his own), but that its ‘contestedness’ depends on where people allocate power. He may agree with Haugaard, however, in acknowledging that our different uses of power do not have necessarily anything in common. He illustrates it in an interesting passage:

It is not self-evident what talk of horse power and nuclear power, of the power of grace and the power of punishment, of power struggles and the power of a group to ‘act in concert’, of the balance and the separation of powers, of the ‘power of the powerless’ and the corruptions of absolute power all have in common. (p. 62)

He goes on to make a reference to Said (1986) about our motive for wanting to define power being different from the image we actually get of it. Nevertheless, I believe these different notions of power have something in common even if, as well said by Lukes, it is not self-evident, although we can definitely find these sources in the way we talk about power. Haugaard’s criticism of Luke’s “essential contestedness” is that every term, not just power, can potentially fall into the contested camp in evaluative contexts where they become commendatory. Words like ‘Christian’ and ‘democracy’ have become commendatory in that they have become ‘hurray words’ “with little substantive meaning” (p. 423). Because of this, saying power is ‘essentially contested’ tells us very little in understanding its varied use. The normative evaluation of power, where it is seen as a negative thing in both Lukes and Foucault is a consequence of confusing a normative language game with an analytic one (p. 427).

The concept of “family resemblance”, I believe, doesn’t mean these meanings cannot overlap from time to time, as it happens with the blurry distinctions I pointed out above. There are senses of power that while different and not usually used for social contexts, are still relevant in this “family resemblance”, precisely because they imply the acquisition of abilities or of the possibility of further abilities to be acquired (and the interpersonal relations the possession of this abilities may create). In Luke’s examples of terms that are not self-evidently related, we can still understand that horse power, for example, refers to the ability a car has for reaching higher speeds. As an ability, we can talk of many uses of power that Lukes alludes to as not having a self-evident common ground, like when we talk of the ‘power of the gods’, the acquisition of ‘power and glory’, etc. It seems here to mean the quality of having abilities and dispositions that allow for a greater range of options. This way of talking of power harkens back to Plato’s *δύναμις*, which is one of the classical Greek words meaning power, and it is an object’s capacity to affect and be affected (Wartenberg, 1990, p. 20). But we have other Greek words that can be translated as power. Wartenberg reminds us that *δύναμις*, which means power or ability, refers to ‘power-to’, and that Plato uses this word to talk of the power of Being of affecting and to be affected, in other words, to effect change and to suffer it (p.20). Here we see power as dispositional, and may overlap with our conception of force, since to effect a change one has to force a state of being unto another. There are two other Greek words that match our common assumptions about power as force: *κράτος* and *ισχύς*, which can have either of

these two meanings depending on context (Berry 2010). But here the ambiguity of the word, since we usually define domination as ‘A having B do things B wouldn’t otherwise do’, which is certainly an option A has and can act upon if she chooses. In this case, power is not only the ability to do something, but the capacity or possibility of doing it.

For Wartenberg, what gives power its different meanings is the way that power is used. Power-to and power-over would then mean the different ways power is put to use by the agent. Another sense he explores is “transformative power”, which he sees as a positive side of power, contrasting it with power as domination (p.184). The paradigm he uses for transformative power comes from a debate within feminist theory about mothering. The power mothers have over children is not used in a dominating way, but in a way that benefits the child and helps it reach autonomy. So, in this case, power is used in the benefit of the one it is exercised over, because it cannot reach autonomy on its own. This autonomy, of course, supposes empowerment. Also, it supposes the transcendence of the power relation itself (p. 191). This idea is important to me when talking about any kind of power, if we go back to what was said earlier about resistance to power. In the mother-child relationship, or even the teacher-student one, this resistance would be *negative*, since an important aspect of a child’s development (in this case), would be put in jeopardy. In the example given in the last section, about women manifesting power over male domination, this power’s goal is not to dominate men, but rather to transform themselves (their unjust place in society) and to transcend the power relation imposed by men. Yet to do this, another power relation must be created: the one between oppressed and oppressor. Likewise, there is a relationship between the misogynist and the social world that censors misogyny, but why would we consider this a normatively negative or illegitimate thing?

Power as a relation being a positive aspect is something different, and I will discuss it in the following section.

### **Can I play with Foucault?**

In Foucault, power is not a thing possessed, but a relation (Weberman, p. 192). This relation is systemic, and not between A and B. Power ‘shapes’ individuals through the production of truth, and not merely through coercion, domination and repression. It is in this sense “transformative” as well (p.196), however it hides a dark side. Power has a repressive component in this process of normalization (p. 195). The point is, then, that power is not possessed, but it is something that manifests between us (p. 197). Foucault was concerned with not talking about power merely as an ability that is exercised, but as a relation that goes deeper in the whole of society, sometimes without us knowing. Lukes made this observation before Foucault in 1974 with his third dimension of power (systemic power) in the first edition of his book, but Foucault went in another direction, a direction that poses ambiguity in terms of whether power is something that needs to be transcended or if it can be positive.

Sometimes it seems as if Foucault’s power benefits nobody, so one may have the temptation of not calling it power at all. But, as Weberman points out, power constraints our thought and our actions (p. 202), making us do things we wouldn’t normally do. But then if we can’t escape power, if it doesn’t make sense to even utter that, then power can’t necessarily be a bad thing, unless we took a rather pessimistic view of human existence. There is however, the possibility of liberation, not from power, but from its dark side, repression (p. 211). But, if power is always repressive, it’s always making us do things we

wouldn't normally do, which would assume a dubious and/or confusing view of human nature. What does it mean here to do what we wouldn't otherwise do? When power is dispositional, we can easily grasp this. When it is relational, we can understand how institutions, for example, shape our beliefs, actions and choices. But when power is normalizing, in a way that we can't ever escape it, so that even a just social system would imply power, what does it mean here that it forces us to do what we wouldn't otherwise do? If the system has, for example, free public education, is this something we wouldn't otherwise do?

Let us expand on the thought experiment we have done in the past sections so that we can solve this ambiguity and allow us to talk of relational power as a positive thing.

Let us say that we live in a society that marginalizes homophobic thought. It is part of the normalized individual in that society to see homophobia as immoral and evil. If we take Foucault's all-encompassing view of power, then we must conclude that it is part of the structure of power in this society to negate homophobia. Those who participate in homophobic thought and activities are repressed by the socially normalized. In this case as in any, power represses. This fact would be independent of value judgments, as we would see this repression as good if we hold the respect of sexual diversity as a moral rule. In this society, being homophobic would be unacceptable. Here power does not need to be state repression. The mere mention of homophobia causing a family member to chastise you (like it sadly happens with the debate of homosexuality in many of our own, real life societies), is also an instance of power as normalization of the social space.

It is easy to talk about power as an evil, even a necessary evil, and say that if it weren't there, we wouldn't be coerced into doing certain things. But what if power included universal health care, repression of homophobia, gender equality, etc.? Can we take the Hobbesian stand that we are brutish by nature, and that this type of society makes, against our will, to acknowledge feminine equality and free health care? We can do the experiment with any social evil, like racism, misogyny, etc. Isn't this state of affairs what anyone with emancipatory goals envisions, a social configuration where discrimination and injustice is not tolerated?

## **Conclusion**

I do not mean to subscribe to the problematic view of power as the mere exercise of abilities; my point is that it would be better for understanding heavy metal as powerful if we looked at power as a 'cluster concept' as presented in Haugaard, yet having some residue of a common meaning over all its other meanings. This residue is normatively neutral, but can be interpreted in a negative or positive light. So, I do not pretend to say what power 'is', but rather to say one of the things it is. As a cluster concept, we cannot commit to the idea of there being a single, all-encompassing definition of power. As stated by Hauggard, this does not lead to relativism, since it is not part of a private language, on the contrary, the one who uses the concept in their studies needs to be mindful of the language game she is using and not ascribe to the concept only those elements that come from one part of its meaning. Because of this, I leave open the possibility of there being actual "little fascists" in metal, but surely there are also plenty of them everywhere else.

We have seen that power is a ‘cluster concept’, and that the relations between the different meanings form a sort of family that while not interchangeable, have some sort of parentage. Because of this, we cannot conclude that the negative aspects of power, or of some specific people having power, necessarily means that that is the definitive way to understanding the concept. Because of this, we can talk about how powerful heavy metal’s culture, music and attitude is while not reducing it to a ‘power fantasy’, but instead as a legitimate cry of perseverance against undesired conditions. In this way power can be appropriated for uses that are beneficial to those marginalized and oppressed.

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