Power in the social relations model

Definition of Power:

I know we had decided not to settle on a specific definition, but I left feeling somewhat unclear as to what our general definition of power is that we are working with. We decided that power is in all things. What does that mean exactly? Here is my attempt to answer that.

Power is the ability to affect change. Therefore power is productive. Power is never unidirectional in that it it is never coming from just one source and applied to another. Instead power is the accumulative effect of various actors’ power working together (an actor is a source of power, which could be a person, an institution, a value, perception etc). In this regard I see power as a sort of negotiation process. Each actor has a certain degree of power which they bring to the interaction. During the interaction the various powers affect eachother, and the outcome is not simply the most powerful acting upon the least powerful but rather an outcome where each power has contributed. A key factor of the interaction, however, is that more dominant sources of power will have more negotiating clout.

This process is dynamic and the degree of the effects of power that each actor achieves is influenced by the degree of power going into the interaction, by the process itself, by surrounding social relations, and broader context. I see power as existing on a continuum. Actors never have no power, but rather varying degrees to which that power can have effects. The degree to which that power can achieve effects is dependent on contextual factors. Here we segway into Moses suggestion that power relations and social relations are co-existent, double-conditioned, and influenced by larger factors.

To take a step back, this definition of power is therefore quite different from power as the ability to make someone do what they do not want to do. Based on this definition power does not always come up against resistance. It can achieve positive affects such as helping someone (including oneself) to do something that they do want to do, which does not conflict with other interests. The reason it did not occur in the past was because the effects of that actors power were not strong enough to have an effect (to be brought up at the negotiating table).

Here is an example that explores the ways in which these forms of power can play out in a rural community.

A plot of land has been left abandoned for years because it was regarded as "not valuable" by those who typically have the 'power' to transform property - commercial land speculators, government officials. The land title to this piece of land has gone back to the state because the owner died several years ago and her children moved to the city over 50 years ago and have shown no interest in the land. For many years a few local residents have thought that it would be a great place to have a community garden. Their voices however have never been loud enough to organize themselves and take action in order to have the property rezoned into public space. (Associative relations exist around a common interest, however in comparison to bureaucratic structure they do not feel they can make a difference).

After much discussion however they decide to try and take action. (Through a reorganization of the social relations within the group, rather than having varying degrees of dispersed power, each individuals power is combined in such a way that they feel they could affect a change). They start by writing an editorial to the local paper. They then go and see a few of the local councillors. Through this process they find out that there are several other people in the neighbourhood that would also like to have a plot in a community garden. The group then decides to bring the issue up at one of the local council meetings. (The reorganization within the group has increased their power within the community and has now been able to bring the issue to the negotiating table).
The power relations within the associative group have therefore increased with respect to that of the bureaucratic relations. Some local businesses show up at the meeting. One business that is fairly close to the proposed garden spot feels that it will be good for business as it will make the area look nicer, and will potentially attract more customers. The local hardware store is also in favour because it may increase its seedlings and garden tool sales in the spring, and also because it is a good show of support to the community. (Now associative, and market interests are working together in order to increase the overall effects of their power, or their ability to affect change).

Meanwhile (just to add a bit more dynamism to the situation), a few other residents in the neighbourhood also had their eye on that piece of property: the person whose land is adjacent to it has thought for years that it might be nice to expand his personal garden into that space; local teenagers have dreamed of one day setting up a skate park there; and an elderly woman uses that space to walk her dog. None of these people however ever felt that they had enough power to actually carry through with their plans and/or to protect their use/projected use of the land when the community group came forward with their idea.

At the meeting the local councillors decide that it is a great idea and that they will rezone the area as public garden space. However the town council decides that they will be in charge of the garden, even though some of the members of the associative group feel that they should take care of it. The council creates a committee that will determine the logistics of setting up and maintaining the garden. They do however assure the group that they will be consulted in the process. (Bureaucratic, associative, and market power relations have come together and affected change which was in each group's interests. However in the issue of property tenure and land rezoning the government maintains the largest degree of power, and therefore has the ability to retain control over the piece of land).

This definition of power therefore differs from Weber's definition of power. Between those people present at the council meeting, the use of power is productive but not oppressive, and there is no need for enforcement (it is not necessarily a result of the use of power). However between the elderly lady who walks her dog, the neighbour, or the youth, it is possible that enforcement may play a role. Enforcement in this case could however include again the positive, productive, and non-oppressive use of power, such as offering the neighbour a plot in the garden, making friends with the elderly lady, and organizing to provide the youth with another space. Legitimacy, the other key aspect of Weber's definition of power, takes on an important role only at certain stages. Legitimacy played a role when the group was trying to raise support for the idea within the community but did not play a role when the group of people interested in creating a garden were reorganizing themselves in ways that allowed them to feel they could make a difference (reorganizing their power within the group). Each member was already convinced that the garden was a good (legitimate) idea, and they simply need to (re)organize themselves.

The following is another example at trying to explore how power relations are at work in communities. …
Here is one more example where I try to explore how power relations within the community are affected by sources of change outside of the community.

At each stage the embedded and pre-existing power relations allow for the change and effect to occur. Those changes in turn create an atmosphere where new power relations can be configured. For example the US government already had a very large degree of power, including the ability to affect policies in other countries through its decisions. This allowed them to close the border when the BSE case appeared. However closing the border has a whole other series of effects which created new power relations. This included increasing the effects of power held in public perception which brought and maintained the issue at the forefront in public policy. It also affected power relations between farmers and the...
market (the farmers ability to influence the market decreased) and farmers and public policy (farmers ability to influence public policy increased). Meanwhile the power which meat packers lobby groups held before the incident allowed for them to lobby the government for support during the crisis. However because of the government’s decision to offer support to the farmers via meat packing plants, power relations between the packing plants and the farmers was affected – meat packing plants overall power increased with respect to the farmers. More recently an abuse of that power by the packing plants and action taken by the government may increase the farmers power with respect to the plants.

Concluding questions:

1) Does our model account for individuals and interactions between individuals that include power relations but that fall outside of the four types of social relations?

2) How does the four types of social relations take into account effects of power from things like public perception, or political decisions? In the case of the BSE crisis, public perception surrounding the increased public awareness about the issue allowed for farmer’s voices to be heard which increased the effects of power they were able to achieve, whether through lobbying the government, or through affecting people’s purchases of Canadian beef. The increase in power had an effect on bureaucratic and market relations, but how do we account for the interaction between public perception and the farmers - in other words where does the public at large fit into our social relations? Where does politics (the relationship between political decisions and social relations) fit into our model?