

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **A Resource-Based Learning Approach**

### **Power and Politics**

#### **Unit P3: Theories of Power (2)**

**Conflict Theories of Power.****1. Weberian Theories of Power.**

In terms of the way in which we can understand Weber's concept of power:

- a. There is only ever a fixed amount of power in any society - those who are powerful are powerful at the expense of others (this is called a "constant-sum" or "zero-sum" theory of power).
- b. The powerful use their power at the expense of others - to further their own sectional interests.

Thus, on the above basis, conflict is both inevitable and occurs between:

- a. Those who possess power and those who do not (the powerful attempt to use their power to consolidate / expand their relatively privileged social positions, whilst the less powerful attempt to take power from those with more power).
- b. Since power is seen as a quality of social relationships, it follows that it is also a quality of the ability to control social resources (wealth production and accumulation, income, status, education and so forth). In this sense, the more resources a group / class is able to control, the more powerful it becomes relative to other groups / classes.

In the above respect, the ability to control the institutions of the State, for example, is significant, since this ability confers power across all sections of a society. In addition, power is also cumulative, in the sense that the more resources a group controls, the greater their level of power at the expense of others and, consequently, the greater their chances of accumulating more power.

**Explain in your own words:****a. A "zero sum" theory of power.****b. How this differs from a "variable sum" theory of power.**

Where Weberian theorists differ from Marxist conflict theorists is in terms of their ideas about the sources of power in any society. If power derives from the control of resources, such resources can be economic, political or ideological - a group, for example, can be ideologically powerful without necessarily being economically powerful (men, for example, tend to be more ideologically powerful than women, yet not all men are economically powerful).

Power is not seen as a "once and for all" phenomenon (either you have power or you do not). In this respect, there can be degrees of power.

For example, although Capital is generally more powerful than Labour in a structural sense, since Capitalists own and control a powerful social resource - the means of economic production), Labour can organize politically to place effective limitations upon the way in which Capital is able to exercise its economic power.

## 2. Marxist Conflict Theories of Power.

Marxism is a complex system of social theorizing that involves a number of different theoretical perspectives and, whilst I will examine a couple of these perspectives in reasonable detail in a moment (namely, "Instrumental Marxism" and "Structuralist Marxism"), I want firstly to outline some of the basic features of any Marxist analysis of the nature and distribution of power in (Capitalist) society.

- a. Power is seen to be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small minority of people in Capitalist societies.
- b. Power is used to further the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless. The powerful seek to maintain their privileged position at the expense of the powerless.
- c. Conflict occurs because of the different objective interests of an economically powerful section of society (the Ruling Class) and an economically powerless section of society (the Working Class).  
  
"Objective interests", in this respect, relate to the ownership and control of the means of production - the objective interests of the ruling class are to maintain their ownership and control for their benefit, whilst the objective interests of the working class are seen to be their seizure of the means of production for the benefit of all.
- d. The ultimate source of all power in any society is the ownership and control of the means of economic production.

From ownership springs the ability to exercise political and ideological power. This follows because the economic institution is considered to be the most necessary institution in any society - if you can control the production and distribution of something that everyone needs, then this becomes a source of power that can be translated into political power. In turn, political power (control of the institutions of the State) means that you can effectively transmit ideological messages favourable to your interests.

### How does the above differ from Weber's concept of power?

Power in any society is ultimately seen to be based upon coercion (the threat of force), but its everyday expression is one of authority - the ideological rationalization of inequality, for example. We can express the relationship between economic power and all other forms of power symbolically, in the following way:

POLITICAL and IDEOLOGICAL SUPERSTRUCTURE

(The State etc)

The means of production

ECONOMIC BASE or INFRASTRUCTURE

The social superstructure is, therefore, supported by the economic infrastructure, such that changes in the former will not produce changes in the latter (for example, changes in the education system cannot produce changes in the class structure).

Changes in the economic infrastructure, on the other hand, will automatically produce changes in the superstructure (the change from a Feudal to a Capitalist mode of production, for example, will produce a variety of associated political and ideological changes - such as, for example, the introduction of democratic ideas and practices).

For Marxists, power does not begin and end with the power to make decisions; power involves all three of Lukes' dimensions:

Ownership of the means of production creates, by definition, a class who share the same basic structural position and who, in turn, have an interest in ensuring that their economic ownership is maintained.

Once an economically dominant class develops, it seeks to consolidate its economic power by political and ideological means. As we have seen in the earlier section on the State, the rise of capitalism led to the creation of a new social class (the bourgeoisie) and the development of democratic political forms as a means of exercising power. Once the political cohesion of the bourgeoisie develops (over many years initially), this class effectively seeks to "capture" the machinery of the State and to shape them to its own interests and ends.

The State, in this respect, is never "neutral"; on the contrary, it becomes the capitalist (or bourgeois) State - an institution that protects the interests of the bourgeoisie over all other classes. As Marx and Engels expressed it:

"The State becomes the committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".

### **Explain the meaning of the above idea.**

Two variants on this basic Marxist position that we might usefully look at are:

#### **1. Instrumental Marxism.**

For an Instrumental Marxist like Ralph Milliband ("The State in Capitalist Society"), the State becomes the "instrument" or "tool" through which ruling class domination of society is maintained and strengthened.

The State is dominated by elite representatives of the bourgeoisie who, if they are not owners in their own right, share the same basic social background and values as all other members of the bourgeoisie. Political elites, therefore, act in the interests of a ruling class because their power and decision-making is dependent upon the co-operation of an economic elite.

Milliband addresses the third dimension of power insofar as he argues that the mass of the (economically powerless) population are ideologically co-opted into the philosophy of capitalism - even though it runs counter to their objective class interests. In this respect, power is basically coercive (in the last resort), but presented to the majority as authority (through advertising, the media, education, experience in the workplace and so forth).

In this respect, strategic power struggles / conflicts only take place within the context of a structural status quo - any conflict that threatens to challenge this status quo is met by force...

## 2. Structuralist Marxism.

Whilst Milliband sees the State as an instrument of ruling class domination, Nicos Poulantzas ("Classes in Contemporary Capitalism") sees it in terms of a:

"Factor of cohesion in a social formation" [his term for "society"].

The difference, in this respect, is that the State is not seen as something separate from the ruling class but something that is both integral and vital to its interests. Thus, from a Structuralist Marxist position, Poulantzas argues that the State, as part of the superstructure, will "automatically" serve the interests of the ruling class - a Capitalist system of economic production without a capitalist State is, for Poulantzas, untenable.

Thus, where Milliband argues that the social backgrounds of individual members of the State elite are significant, Poulantzas argues that this is largely irrelevant since, in order to achieve a position of power it can be taken for granted that individuals will be thoroughly steeped in the norms, values and beliefs of a ruling class.

In this sense, it doesn't really matter who is in a position of power (what their original class position was) because they cannot achieve political power without the co-operation of a ruling class.

Briefly explain, in terms of Marxist Conflict theories of power, why Milliband sees the common class background of individuals as significant whilst Poulantzas sees this idea as relatively insignificant.

In addition, Poulantzas argues that, since ideological domination is best served when the powerless do not appreciate / realize that they are being exploited, it is not necessary for an economically powerful class to rule politically "in person" (although, of course, their representatives must rule in the interests of the bourgeoisie). On the contrary, the greater the appearance of a separation between economic power and political power the better. In this respect, the State has the appearance of "relative autonomy" from the ruling class (that is, it is free from direct influence).

**Why do you think it is important that an economically powerful class might not want to be seen to be ruling politically?**

**(Think about the way in which the nature of Capitalist society is presented to the majority of (powerless) individuals).**

In order to rule politically, the ruling class have to have an institution (the State) that accords their interests a prime position, whilst also:

1. Distancing their power from the majority - giving the (ideological) appearance of political democracy that serves to confer legitimacy upon their economic activities / domination.
2. Reproducing the power of the ruling class by co-opting personnel, ideas and so forth from the rest of society.

In this way, one of the prime structural requisites of capitalism - its reproduction over time - can be fulfilled.

In addition, Poulantzas argues that the bourgeoisie also has internal divisions (such as that between Finance (or Banking) Capital and Industrial (or Manufacturing) Capital) and that such divisions are held in check by the State (which acts as a "balancing mechanism" between the various class fractions of the bourgeoisie, ensuring that internal conflicts do not endanger their overall class cohesion and economic domination of society). Poulantzas refers to the role of the State as being one of "relative autonomy" from the ruling class (that is, governments may make decisions that go against the specific, short-term, interests of a ruling class, but, in the long-term, governments make decisions designed to ensure the long-term survival of the Capitalist system (and if this involves making concessions to the working class then such concessions have to be made...)).

Unlike many Marxists and the majority of non-marxist writers, Poulantzas defines the State as encompassing all institutions in society, since all have a political / ideological role to play in society.

**What is the term we give to this view of the State?**

**Evaluation...**

Apart from the squabble between Milliband and Poulantzas (the former characterizing Poulantzas as a "crude structural determinist", whilst the latter characterizes Milliband as a "crude conspiracy theorist"), some other problems include:

- a. To what extent are the various institutions in any society under the political / ideological domination of a ruling class?
- b. How does a ruling class ensure its continued domination if the State is "relatively autonomous" (one answer might be through the ideological manipulation of people through the socialization / educational process).
- c. Poulantzas, in particular, seems to subscribe to a form of "Left-wing Functionalism", whereby any action taken by the State becomes, by definition, functional to a ruling class.

**Explain the term "the relative autonomy of the State".**

**3. Miscellaneous Marxism.**

Although Poulantzas' work owed a great debt to the writings of Antonio Gramsci ("Prison Notebooks", 1936), Gramsci argued that the relationship between the infrastructure and superstructure of society was one of "reciprocity" - the one was able to act upon and influence the other, and vice versa.

In this respect, ruling class power was based upon what Gramsci termed "hegemony" - in crude terms, the basic ability to persuade the mass of the population that the political / moral values of the ruling class were legitimate, that capitalism (with all its imperfections) effectively "produced the goods" (rising standards of living, affluence and so forth) in a way that other economic systems did not. Political / ideological co-optation, therefore, was not based upon manipulation but through persuasion and the way in which the hegemony of the ruling class was established was through the State.

Although acting structurally to maintain the position of dominance of a ruling class, strategic power could be exercised for the benefit of disadvantaged groups, society as a whole and so forth, even if this was at the expense of short-term ruling class interests.

In this respect, Gramsci saw the State as over-seeing the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie and maintaining their cohesion in the face of short-term political considerations. For example, the introduction of a minimum wage:

- a. Is in the interests of the working class
- b. Against the short-term, sectional, interests of the bourgeoisie (since it cuts into their profits).
- c. In the long-term interests of the ruling class by increasing spending power and ensuring long-term profitability.

Thus, for Gramsci, the actions of the executive of the State take place against a complex economic, political and ideological background involving different classes and class fractions. Whilst the State must act in the long-term interests of the ruling class, this may involve short-term political decisions that actually damage or limit the power of various sections of the ruling class.

Abercrombie, Turner and Hill ("The Dominant Ideology Thesis") argue that it is not ideology that ensures the continuation of ruling class hegemony / domination over society as a whole. A dominant class ideology is seen to give cohesion to the ruling class itself, rather than serving as a means of manipulating the population as a whole. In this respect, the masses are kept in check by:

- a. The coercive power of the State (police, army, judiciary, etc.).
- b. "Hidden coercion" in the form of unemployment, poverty, imprisonment and so forth.

Paul Willis' study ("Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs") provides some empirical evidence for this thesis, insofar as he found that the working class boys he studied had not internalized a "ruling class ideology", as such - their expectations from life were simply constrained and crushed by the reality of what they could expect in their lives in terms of employment, poverty and so forth.