

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Power and Politics

Unit P2: Theories of The State

Introduction

In this set of Notes we need to develop some of the ideas outlined in the previous set of Notes (which was concerned mainly with our ability to both define the concept of **power** and relate it to concepts such as **politics**). In this respect, we need to do two main things:

1. To understand the social origins of power.

In particular, we need to look at the way in which modern and pre-modern societies are organized at the Structural (or "Institutional") level, since we are concerned here to understand the sources of power in any society.

2. To understand sociological theories about the nature and distribution of power.

In this respect, the focus turns towards an understanding of way particular people / groups possess power whilst others do not, coupled with an examination of various theoretical approaches to the understanding of the way in which power is distributed throughout society.

A. The Development of the Modern State.

As I've noted, "power" needs to be seen as the property of various forms of social organization and relationships, rather than as a "thing" in its own right.

This idea is important since it directs our attention to an understanding of the social relationships which **produce, maintain and reproduce** "power relationships". Individuals, social groups and social classes possess power because of the nature of their relationship to one another and, if we are to understand the nature of power, it follows that we need to understand the way societies are organized to express power relationships.

For each of the following areas of social life, think about how people have power over you and outline the way their power is based upon their relationship to you:

- a. **Your family**
- b. **Your school**
- c. **Your employer.**

Thus, in a roundabout sort of way, in order to express the concept of power, we need to understand the **social processes** involved in the creation of social relationships (in particular, their **economic, political and ideological** basis), since it is only through an understanding of the **structural organization** of different societies that we can come to an understanding of the **nature and distribution of power**.

One way to begin is to look at the historical development of "The State" (a generic or "family" concept that expresses the way in which political activity is organized within some form of formal social framework).

The concept of "The State" is normally taken to mean a range of social institutions that both specify and regulate all forms of organized political activity. Such institutions might include systems of government, civil service, legal systems, armed forces, civilian police forces and so forth. The institutions that make-up the State are also taken, by some sociologists (especially Marxist Conflict theorists) to include such things as the welfare services, education, health services and the like.

Some contemporary or **Neo-Marxists** (such as Nicos Poulantzas ("The State In Capitalist Society")) include **all institutions** that perform some sort of **ideological purpose** (such as the family group) in this definition.

In this respect, as with concepts of religion, it is possible to outline two possible general definitions of the State, namely an "**exclusive**" definition and an "**inclusive**" definition.

An "**exclusive**" definition of the State would, as you might expect, restrict analysis to those political institutions whose purpose is to regulate the political process in society (through government, the legal system, armed forces and so forth).

- d. As a general rule of thumb, "**pluralist**" sociologists (that is, those who characterize modern Britain, for example, in terms of a number of competing social groups who have varying levels of power at different times - Functionalist sociologists, for example) tend to adopt this kind of definition.

An "**inclusive**" definition, on the other hand, would widen the analysis to include any institution in society that performed an ideological purpose that served to support the political and economic status quo (this, as we have seen, would include institutions such as the family, mass media and the like).

- e. Marxist sociologists (those who characterize industrialized Capitalist societies as being dominated by a ruling class), on the other hand, tend to adopt a rather more inclusive view of the State.

Briefly explain how the definition of the State that you hold might affect the way in which you choose to analyse this institution.

Whatever definition we may adopt (which will, of course, be methodologically significant), we can for the moment think about the State as involving:

1. An organized political apparatus:

For example, this might include Government institutions (Royal Courts, parliaments, Congress and the like) and some form of Civil Service to administer this political organization.

2. Some form of fixed, recognizable, territorial boundary:

For example, "Nation States" such as Britain, France, Argentina and so forth.

3. Some form of legal institution / framework (courts, police and so forth) that is more or less autonomous (that is, operating separately) from day-to-day politics.

You should note that whilst this is the case (to some extent) in democratic societies, this is not always so in non-democratic societies.

4. The ability to use organized force to both protect and / or enhance its interests.

This will normally involve some form of armed forces (army, navy, air force) made-up of professional and / or volunteer / conscripted forces.

Although we tend to think about the State as a normal part of our everyday lives (which is certainly the case in a country such as England), it is clear that, historically, the State is not necessarily an inevitable feature of social organization.

Anthropologists have noted that for the greater part of human history "**stateless societies**" have been the norm. Small-scale, technologically-underdeveloped, hunter-gatherer, societies have / had little concept of the kind of highly developed, specialized, political / governmental organization that we take for granted. In this respect, it is only in the past few hundred years that the "State" (as we might recognize it) has evolved as an integral part of human social development.

**In what ways does the State exercise power over you?
For example, forcing you to attend school.**

One way of understanding the development of the modern State might be a view in terms of a **continuum**:

At one extreme are **Stateless societies** (sometimes called "**acephalous**" - which means "headless, having no Chief") and at the other extreme are well-developed, mature, **Nation States**. Diagrammatically, we can express this idea thus:

Stateless ("acephalous") societies ————— **Nation States**

Between these two extremes there may be any number of different types of political organization (some of which are closer the Stateless society and some of which are closer to the Nation State type. What I want to do now, therefore, is to outline some of the main characteristics of four basic types of political organization, namely:

- a. **Stateless societies.**
- b. **Statelike societies.**
- c. **Traditional State societies.**
- d. **Modern State societies (Nation States).**

1. Stateless societies:

This type of society is characterized by relatively informal mechanisms of government (by which is meant the way that decisions are made, disputes resolved and so forth). The main form of social / political organization tends to be the family unit and disputes tend to be resolved in a variety of "informal" ways (such as negotiation, war, the splitting-away of dissident groups and the like). Such societies have four basic defining characteristics:

- a. A relative lack of technological development.
- b. They are almost always relatively small-scale societies (their populations measurable in terms of a few hundred or few thousand people).
- c. They are not organized into large, fixed, territories (although some attempts at "boundary marking" are usually made).
- e. They are normally based on a system of agricultural production (which, due to the lack of technological development tends to be subsistence farming).

Give an example of a "stateless society".

2. Statelike societies:

This type of society has an element of political organization and some form of political centralization. Such societies are normally based around powerful Chiefs and may involve the development of Clans (kinship-based political and economic networks). In this respect, Statelike societies are normally headed by an individual (usually, but not necessarily, male) to whom the population owe allegiance.

Chiefs usually owe their power / authority to their status as a warrior, priest or both and are able to command armed retainers to enforce their decisions. In this respect, the rule of a Chief in such societies usually involves the assistance of a Council or Court (which, in the main, will be kinship based).

An example might be Britain 400-100 BC, which was divided into numerous small territories (some of which were the size of our modern counties), each of which had its own Chief and political leadership. The Saxon conquest of Britain that took place over a few hundred years circa 350 BC heralded the emergence of a more modern form of State (since it involved the gradual development of a Monarchy, legal and political system and so forth), namely the "Traditional State society".

3. Traditional State societies:

In this type of society we find the development of a system of localized Chiefs into a Monarchy (involving such statuses as King, Queen, Emperor and so forth). In addition, the main features of this type of society include:

- a. An elaborate Royal Court / Household.
- b. Standing armies (organized for internal social control and foreign conquest).
- c. Some form of legal system (nominally, if not always realistically, operating on a national territorial basis). This usually involves some form of full-time, paid, officials (a "Civil Service" of sorts, although not in the way that we would conceive of such an organization in present-day Britain).
- d. A system of State taxation.

It is also useful to note that in such societies, territorial boundaries may start to become relatively fixed, although frequently subject to dispute...

4. Modern State societies:

The main features of Modern State societies include:

- a. The development of a government apparatus, on a national basis, laying claim to a specific territorial area (marked by clear borders and policed in some way).
- b. A formalized (i.e. written) code of national law that is enforced through a police and judicial process.
- c. The development of some form of political representation, whereby the wishes of the population can be effectively transmitted to political rulers.
- d. The development of a national armed force network primarily constituted for defensive purposes (but also acting, in times of crisis, as an internal means of social control).

Although the traditional and modern forms of the State are similar in many ways, there are a number of specific differences that can be noted:

1. Territorial differences:

Traditional States tend to have poorly-defined national boundaries. national sovereignty (as we might understand it in our society) is less clear-cut. Modern States on the other hand, (sometimes referred-to as "Nation States" because they are States developed on the basis of some concept of National identity), have clear-cut notions of territorial sovereignty.

2. Concepts of citizenship differences:

Traditional States tend to have poorly-developed concepts of citizenry (that is, the sense of belonging to a wider, national, community of people who have something in common that differentiates them from the citizens of other States). In this respect:

- a. There is little day-to-day awareness amongst the mass of the population of a political decision-making process (the majority of the population in Traditional States have no direct say in the election of rulers and so forth).
- b. Power tends to be concentrated amongst a few powerful groups (the Monarchy, nobility / aristocracy, Armed Forces and so forth).
- c. Such States are highly centralized politically. All important political decisions are in the hands of a small group of powerful individuals.
- d. The majority of the population are effectively politically powerless.

**What mechanisms exist in our society for both the integration of people into society and the development of a "national identity"?
(For example, State ceremonies, the activities of the mass media).**

3. Nationalism:

The Nation state invariably involves some concept of nationalism - a sense of belonging to a particular State or country. This tends to involve a set of symbols (such as a national flag, costume and so forth) and beliefs (an ideology) that gives a sense of belonging to a single, relatively specific and clearly-defined cultural community.

As Giddens ("Sociology") notes:

"A Nation State refers to a political apparatus, recognized to have sovereign rights within the borders of a demarcated territorial area, able to back its claims to sovereignty by control of military power, many of whose citizens have positive feelings of commitment to its national identity".

Explain the meaning of the above in your own words.

However, in understanding the development of the modern State it is not enough to see it simply in terms of a set of struggles over political organization. The development of the State - and the development of political organization and representation - is closely related to the development of different economic forms of production. In this respect, we can combine the two ideas (economic production and political forms of organization) to talk about such things as:

a. The Feudal State:

This is a politically-organized form of State based upon a particular form of economic production (mainly agriculture). Feudal society can be characterized as being highly politically-centralized (political power residing in the hands of a few (unelected) groups - an aristocracy, for example). In such societies the mass of the population have no say in the administration of the State and are frequently subject to arbitrary forms of social control. An example of a feudal State would be England / Japan / France in the Middle Ages.

b. The Capitalist State (The State in Capitalist society):

This is a politically-organized form of State based upon industrial forms of economic production. Such States are not necessarily democratic, but in their Westernised form we can see the emergence of political institutions designed to involve the mass of the population in the political decision-making process (if not always directly, then at least indirectly through elected political representative).

The Capitalist State, as I have suggested, can have a number of different forms (based upon a basic dichotomy between "dictatorship" at one extreme and "democracy" at the other. In this respect, the emergence of Nation States can be characterized as involving an historical power struggle over:

- a. Control of territory and territorial borders.
- b. Control over political and / or military power.
- c. Control over economic production.

Using Britain as an example, we can trace the relationship between political and economic power / representation in the following way:

In **Feudal Britain** (for example, during the 15th century - a period characterized by the political and economic domination of an aristocracy), political power was fragmented, insofar as it was split (unequally) between various factions of the nobility (Barons). the monarchy effectively "ruled" on the basis of the construction of broad alliances between various feudal barons.

Although, in theory, there was a rigid hierarchy of allegiance, in practice this hierarchy was a relatively fluid system of alliances and power struggles (as witnessed by the many feudal wars of succession that occurred throughout this period. In this type of society, since political organization was not particularly well-developed, the death of a Monarch, for example, often lead to a power struggle over succession to the throne.

The relative pacification of large areas of territory (mainly through the aforementioned alliances) allowed trade and stable markets to develop on a more or less national basis. Once this occurred, a political framework could begin to develop (which had the function of allowing the powerful to rule more effectively) and this, in turn, led to the development of an increasing population, towns, a merchant class ("emerging bourgeoisie") who bought and sold commodities, the development of manufacturing as technological developments started to appear and, finally, the emergence of industrial (Capitalist) forms of economic production (these began to develop, in Britain, from the mid-16th century - the "start" of the Industrial Revolution).

The development of **Capitalism** brought with it the development of a new social class (capitalist owners, entrepreneurs, merchants and the like) who had little in common with either the landless peasantry or the land-owning aristocracy. In simple terms, they were an increasingly economically-powerful class in society without being a politically powerful force. In this respect, we can see two main things:

1. The tension ("conflict") between the two classes (the old regime whose economic power-base - the ownership of land - was being systematically eroded by industrial production (factories taking people from the land, huge profits being made and so forth) and the new regime whose economic power-base was increasing dramatically.

Whilst the former held political power and diminishing economic power, the latter had an increasing economic power and, as yet, little real political power.

In some States (most notably France) the tension between the two classes exploded into revolution (what is usually referred to as a "bourgeois revolution" by writers such as Barrington Moore - the bourgeoisie taking control of the State through "revolutionary" means), whilst in Britain the process of a transfer of political power was handled more carefully with the gradual development of "democratic" forms of political representation.

In crude terms, the aristocracy gradually began to concede political representation to the bourgeoisie (in effect, an attempt was made to co-opt the bourgeoisie into the political process - successfully, as it turned out in terms of avoiding revolutionary change).

2. The significance of economic ownership and control as a power-base for the development of political representation and power.

It is this theme we now need to develop in relation to theories concerning the nature and distribution of political power in modern Nation States.