

A2 Sociology

Revision Mapping

**Power
and
Politics**

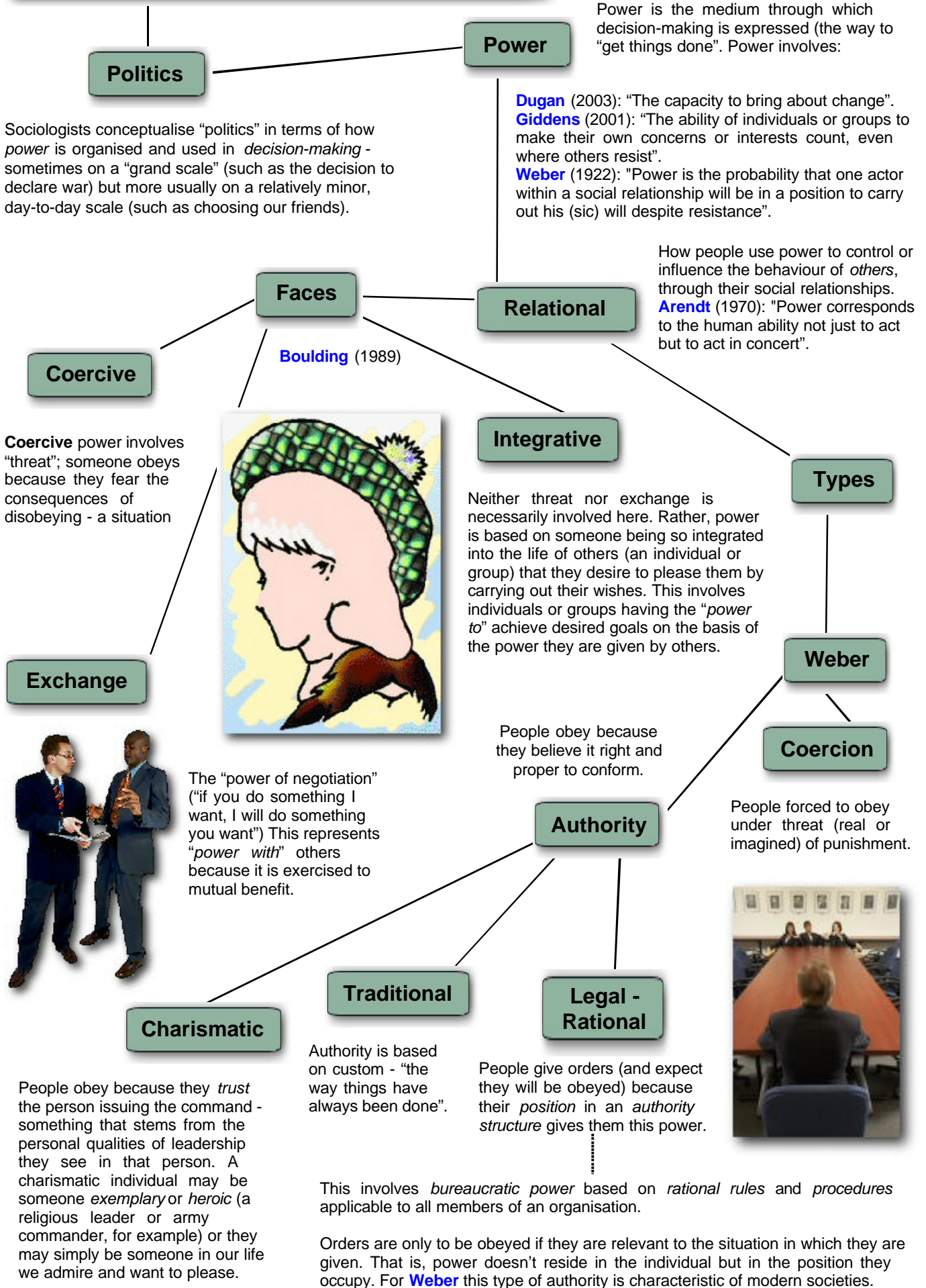
Explanations of the Nature and Distribution of Power

Explanations of the Nature and Distribution of Power

Power is the medium through which decision-making is expressed (the way to "get things done". Power involves:

- Dugan** (2003): "The capacity to bring about change".
- Giddens** (2001): "The ability of individuals or groups to make their own concerns or interests count, even where others resist".
- Weber** (1922): "Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his (sic) will despite resistance".

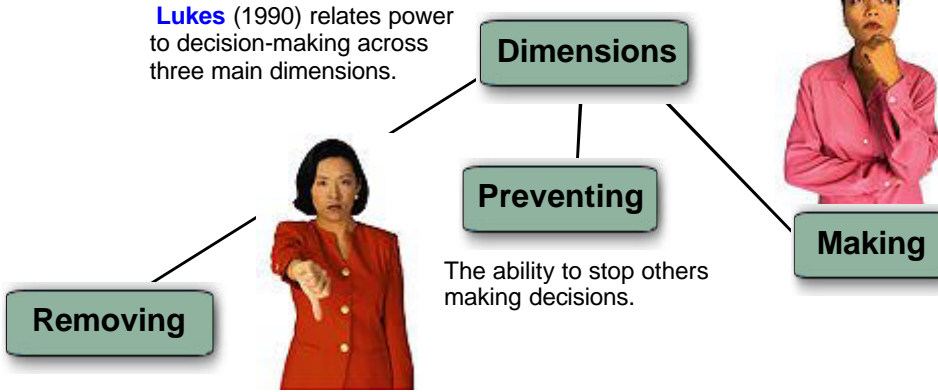
How people use power to control or influence the behaviour of *others*, through their social relationships. **Arendt** (1970): "Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert".



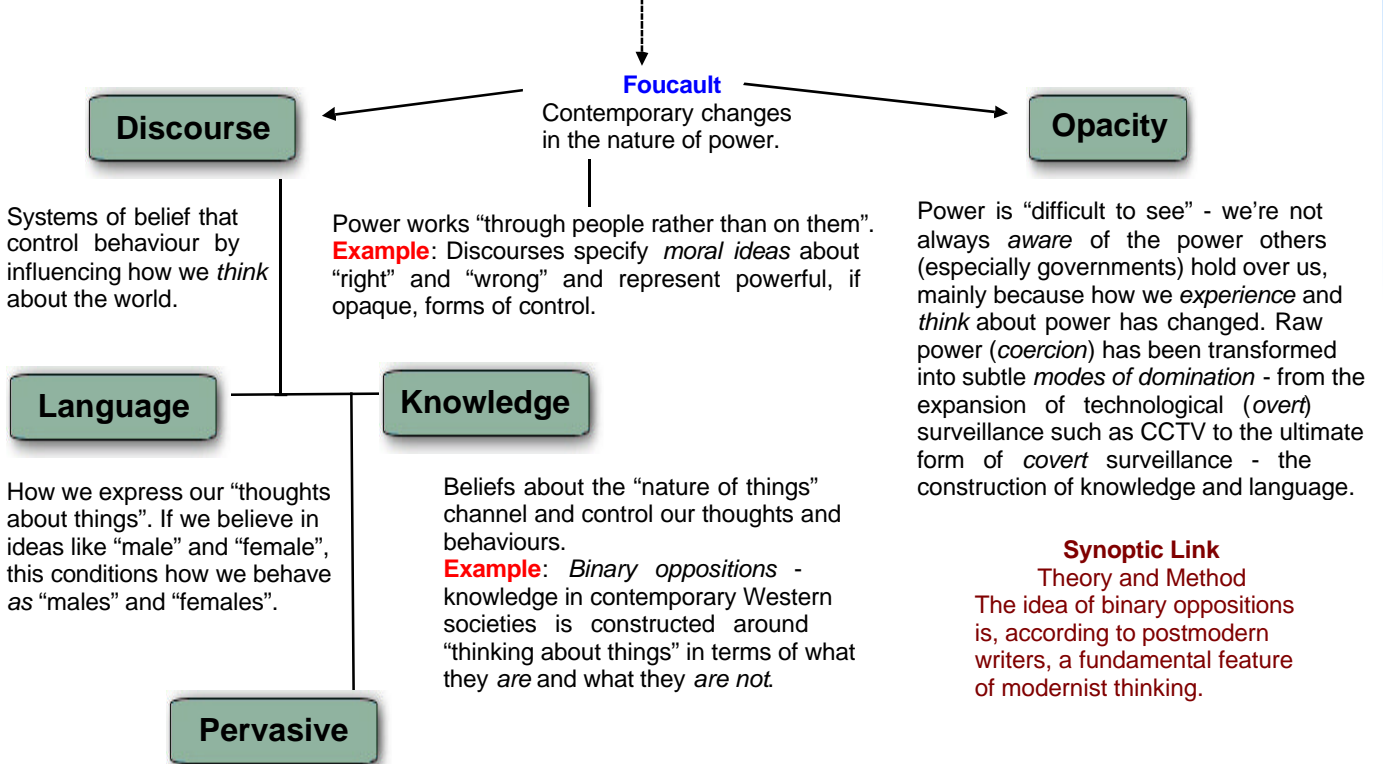
Synoptic Link

Families and Households

Lukes' dimensions of power can be applied to an understanding of gender relationships within families.



The ability to stop others making decisions because you have the power to make them believe no decisions are necessary. The powerful *manipulate* the powerless in ways that prevent challenges to their power.



Foucault: "Power is everywhere".
Gauntlett (1998): Power is, for Foucault, not something "Possessed by certain people and not...by others". Rather, power works through people.

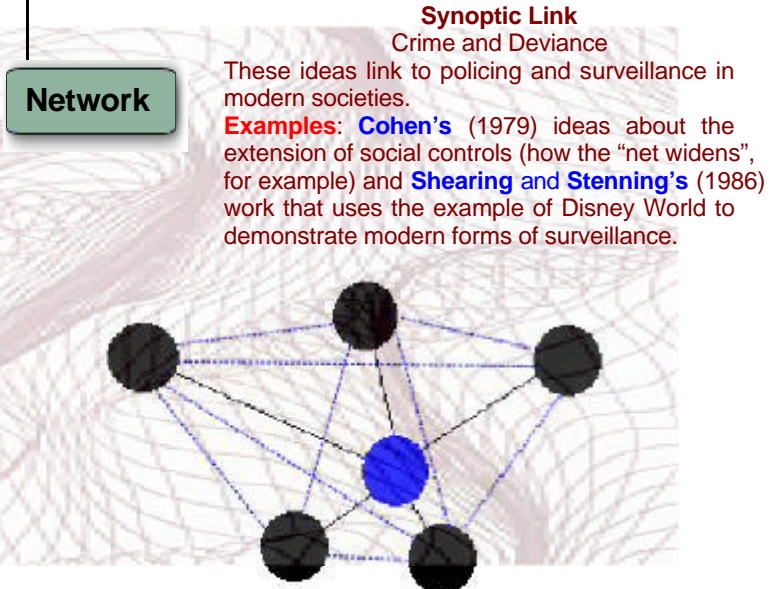
"In here": How we exercise control over own behaviour.

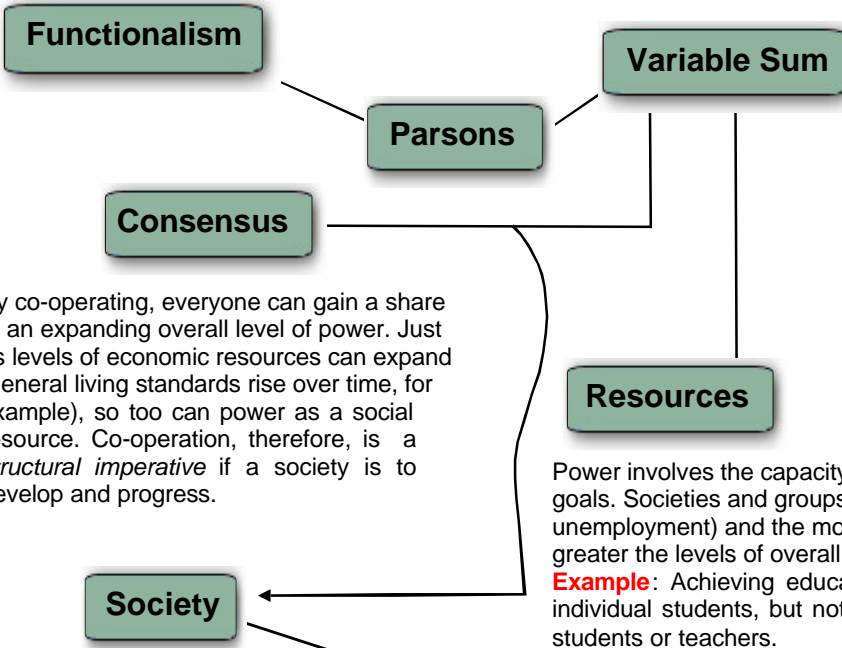
"Out there": Created through our relationships, both *personal* (and *impersonal*).

Power is not embedded in social structures ("I am male, therefore I have power"); rather, it resembles a network embedded in individual belief systems (the way we see, think about and make sense of the world) that spread outwards to encompass all aspects of daily life.

People become, in other words, their own police, patrolling and controlling perceptions of normal and abnormal, for example.

Power is like a net that spreads ever further until we are completely surrounded - by which point the net is closed and we see no way (and, for most of us, no reason) to break free.





Power is "possessed by society as a whole" rather than by individuals, which means power levels can vary within a society; individuals and groups, do not necessarily become powerful at the expense of others.



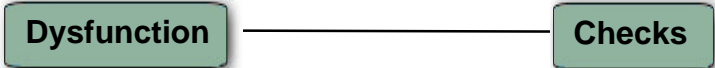
Power can expand like knowledge - for you to know more doesn't mean someone else has to know less...

By co-operating, everyone can gain a share of an expanding overall level of power. Just as levels of economic resources can expand (general living standards rise over time, for example), so too can power as a social resource. Co-operation, therefore, is a *structural imperative* if a society is to develop and progress.

Power involves the capacity to mobilise resources to achieve social goals. Societies and groups have collective goals (such as eradicating unemployment) and the more progress made towards these goals, the greater the levels of overall power that come into existence.

Example: Achieving educational qualifications confers power on individual students, but not necessarily at the expense of other students or teachers.

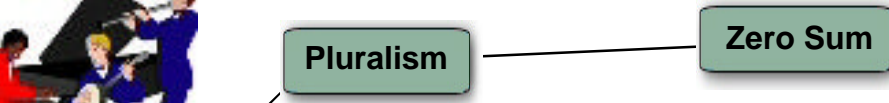
Power is distributed and exercised in the *general interests of society* as a whole, Although some groups will be more powerful than others, this is necessary (*functional*) because the achievement of *collective goals* requires organisation and leadership based on power.



If some groups become too powerful this can be **dysfunctional** if they pursue sectional interests at the expense of long-term social development and stability.

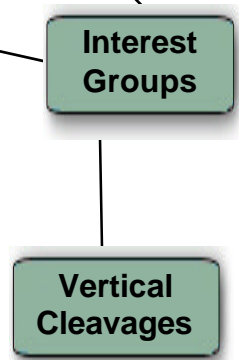
Structural checks and balances develop to the ability of individuals and groups to exercise power.

Example: A "free press" able and willing to draw public attention to abuses of power.



Overall levels of power in any society are relatively fixed ("constant"); increased power for an individual or group, therefore, must be at the expense of others (a "zero-sum" totality of power).

Societies consist of competing groups, none of whom wholly dominate all other groups. Political parties, for example, compete for control of the law-making process while the police and judiciary have a degree of *autonomy* over how laws are interpreted and applied. Judges may also rule on the legality of different laws. Societies consist of a *plurality* of groups with different levels of power and influence.

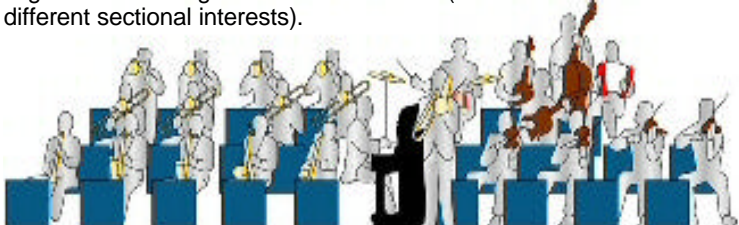


Societies consist of a range of different interest groups that ultimately pursue their own *sectional interests*. Groups compete for power and seek to advance their interests at the expense of other groups.

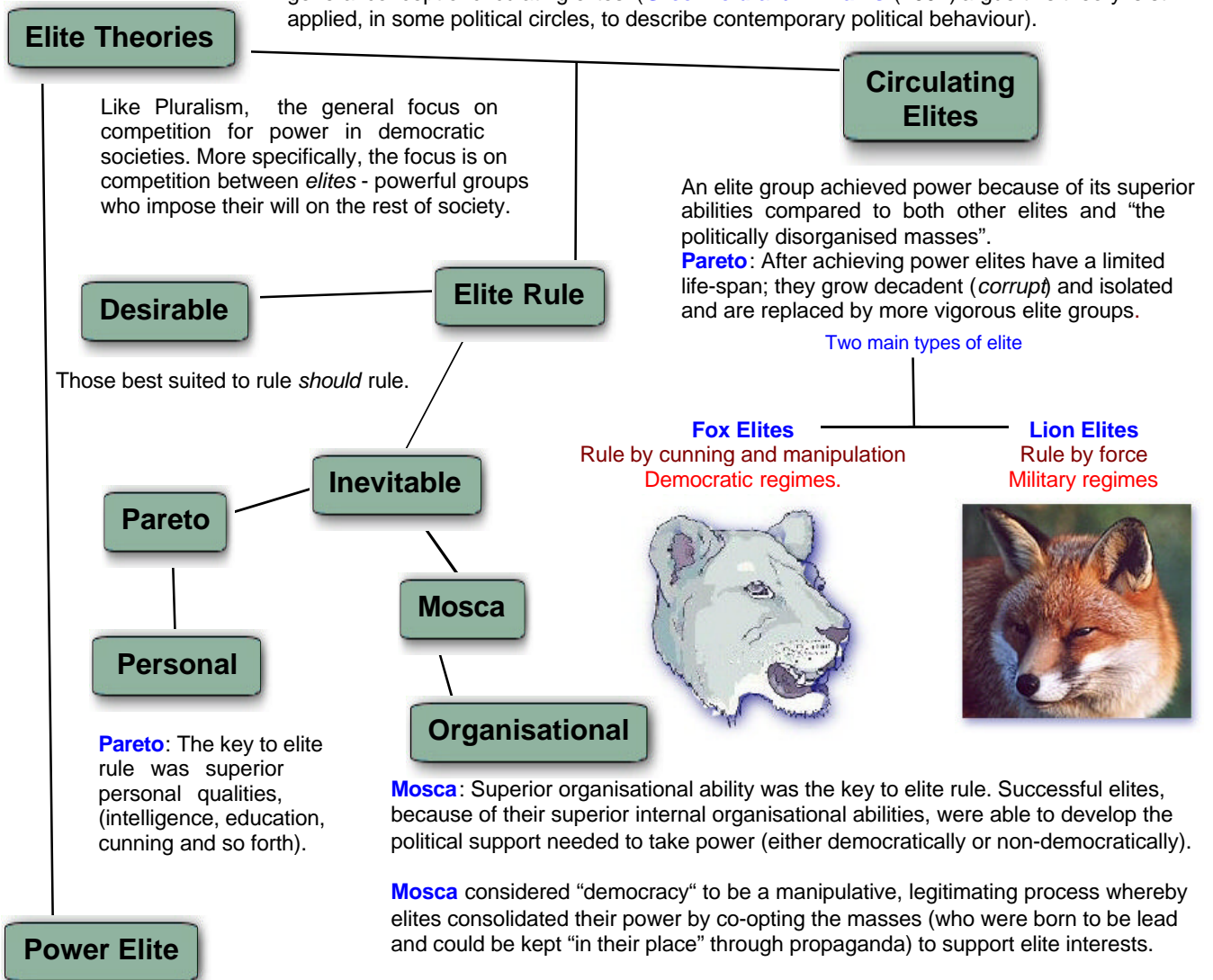
Interest groups contain individuals with characteristics that cut across categories like class, age, gender and ethnicity. **Robinson** (2001): "Class is a *horizontal cleavage*, while ethnicity is a *vertical cleavage* (there will be both workers and capitalists in ethnic groups)". Interest groups do not, therefore, need a common value system since they may be organised to achieve different goals. Stability within *pluralist* systems is generated through the role of the State (which acts as a broker between different sectional interests).



Different groups pursuing different interests...

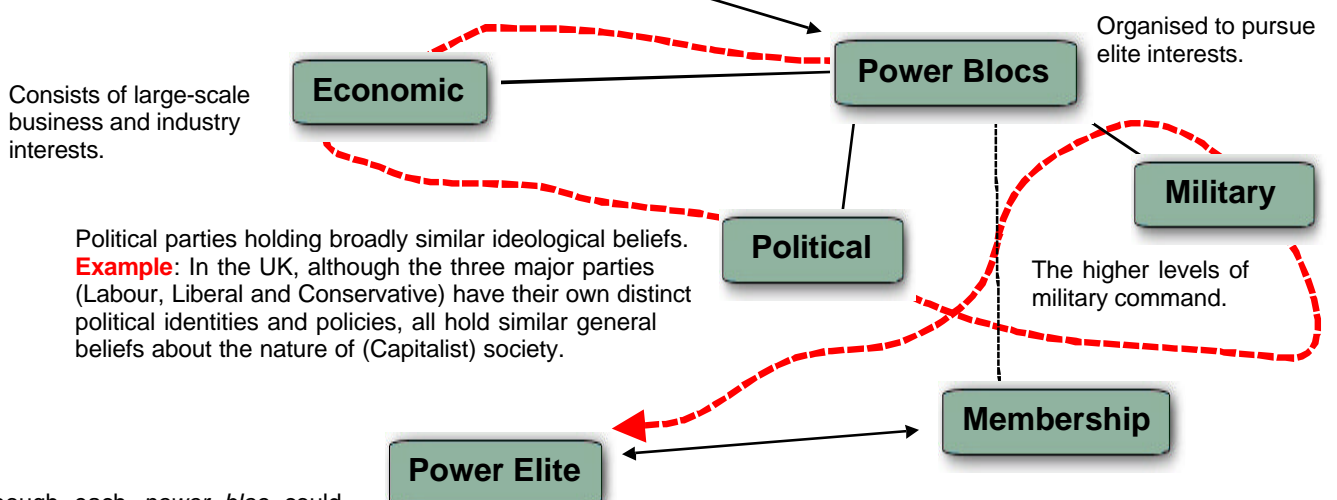


Early 20th century elite theory developed from work of **Pareto** (1916) and **Mosca** (1923) and general concept of circulating elites (**Greenfield and Williams** (2001) argue this theory is still applied, in some political circles, to describe contemporary political behaviour).



Mills (1956): Focused on how elite groups organise and take power in democratic societies through control of social institutions - a process that was neither desirable nor inevitable. Some institutions are more powerful than others (in modern societies an economic elite is more powerful than an educational or religious elite) and elites who controlled such institutions hold the balance of power in society.

Example: In post-war America three major elite



Although each *power bloc* could pursue *separate* - and sometimes *contradictory* - interests, the necessary co-operation between them meant they formed **power elite** dedicated to the wider interest of maintaining elite status, power and rule.

Powerful individuals could be members of more than one elite - business leaders could take up political appointments in government and politicians could sit on the boards of major corporations. In this way political power becomes concentrated and political decisions (about whether to go to war, for example) are effectively taken by a small, inter-locking elite minority.

The owners of the means of economic production (the bourgeoisie) are powerful because they own - and profit from - the means of physical survival.

Marxism
Different form of elite theory where power is closely related to economic class.

Ownership
Economic ownership is the most significant source of power in society. It also creates:

Ruling Class

Concentration

Power is held by a relatively small number of wealthy and influential people.

Power is used to further the interests of the powerful at the expense of the powerless.

Political influence
The institutions of government and the State reflect the interests of owners.

Cultural influence
Through, for example, ownership of the mass media.

Interests

Conflict
At root, the rich and powerful want to consolidate and expand their wealth while the poor and powerless want a share of this wealth.

Power

Constant (Zero) sum theory: There is a limited amount of power available in society; for one group to gain power another has to lose power.

Synoptic Link

Stratification and Differentiation
These general ideas can be used to inform assessments of Marxist theories of social class.

Types

Instrumental

Power flows from the "top" of society (a ruling class) to the bottom (the subject classes) and represents "a tool" to control the behaviour of the powerless. Control is exercised at all levels of society:

Structural

Poulantzas (1975): Saw power in terms of how it pervades all aspects of a society. Power is not simply "a tool" used by the bourgeoisie to keep the subject classes in their place; rather, it represents a way of creating "bourgeois political leadership".

Economic

Power is most obviously exercised in the workplace (control over time, wages and working conditions). Wealth is also a powerful instrument through which to buy or create political influence.

Political

Governments favour the interests of an economic elite; economic benefits to a ruling class include tax subsidies, while political benefits include laws favourable to the interests and behaviours of the ruling class.

Hegemony

Political leadership "with the consent of the led" involves creating a lens through which the social world is filtered. Power is used to create a "way of life" - one to which the subject classes are continually exposed:

Cultural

Ideological control (over how people think about the social world) extends through areas like the mass media and the education system.



ETON COLLEGE



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Institutions

Cultural institutions (such as the media, education system and religion) help to create a *hegemonic* view of power that operates in two main ways:

Exposure

Continuous exposure to a familiar set of ideas reflecting Capitalist views about the nature of social life.

Bocock (1986): The effectiveness of *hegemonic power* lies in people from *all classes* being encouraged to "buy into" ideas favourable to the interests of a ruling class.

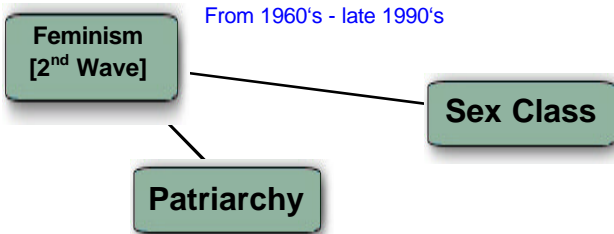
Marginalisation

Constant criticism of alternative world-views.

Synoptic Link

Education

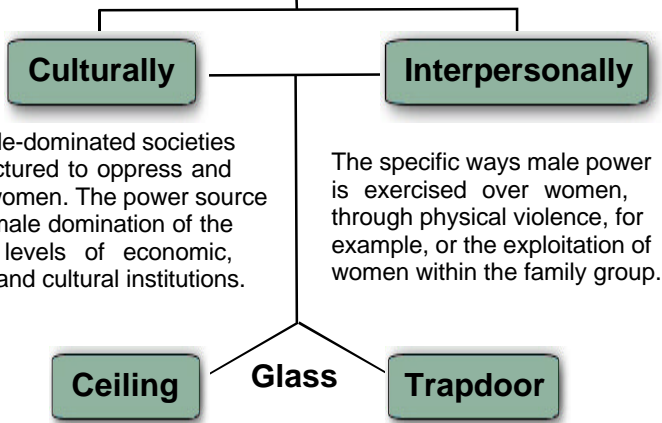
Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, argue the education system is structured, in terms of knowledge, qualifications, rules and routines, in ways that reflect ideas favourable to a ruling class.



Horizontal cleavage in society - men and women as distinct social classifications with their own (gender) class interests.

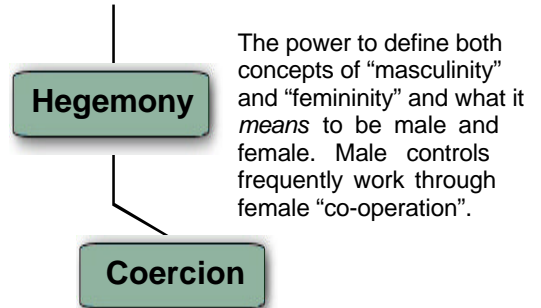
As with Marxist concepts of economic class, men and women have fundamentally *opposed* and conflicting lives and interests. **MacKinnon** (1987): "Men have power over everything of value in society - even the power to decide what has value and what does not". Male power is expressed in two main ways:

Exploration of the various ways male power is politically expressed:



How male-dominated societies are structured to oppress and exploit women. The power source here is male domination of the highest levels of economic, political and cultural institutions.

The specific ways male power is exercised over women, through physical violence, for example, or the exploitation of women within the family group.



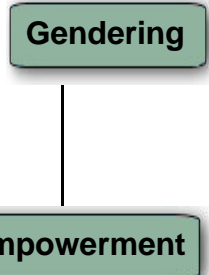
The power to define both concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" and what it *means* to be male and female. Male controls frequently work through female "co-operation".

Mackinnon, *personal* forms of male power (such as superior strength, the willingness to use violence and the physical subordination of women) translate into *cultural* terms in that social institutions (from government, through education and family life to the media) are gendered.

In the workplace, for example. women are only allowed to achieve "so much and no more" compared to their male counterparts.

Stephenson (1998): Women can enter predominantly male worlds (election to Parliament, for example) but only in limited numbers. Entry also comes at a price - women have to adopt *male* characteristics, values and attitudes to survive in male dominated institutions and spaces.

Institutions reflect a hierarchical organisation that devalues female lives and experiences as it values male lives. **Mackinnon**: Social institutions "have been historically constructed in male images to suit male preoccupations, needs and interests".

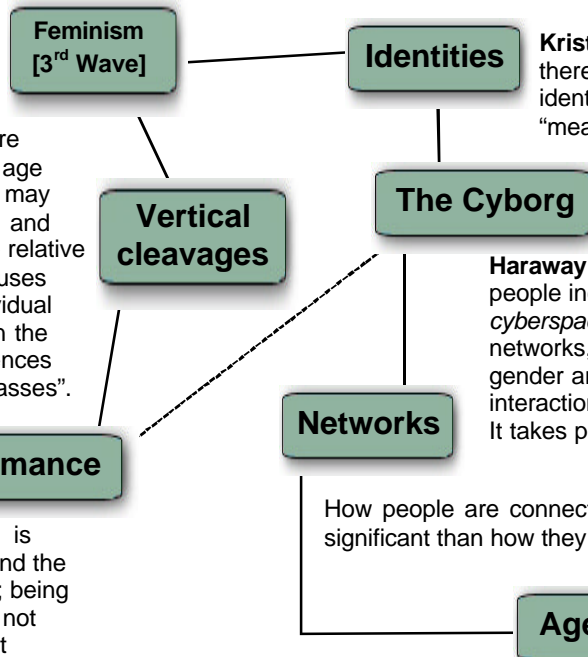


Synoptic Link
Mass Media

Ideas about patriarchy and sex class are related to the concept of the "male gaze".

In patriarchal society women are not only alienated in terms of their relationship to men and other women, but also from their own bodies (women as the objects of male power).

From the late 1990's onward - frequently called **Postfeminism**



Kristiva (1995): There are "as many sexualities as there are individuals" - we should not think about identity and power relationships in terms of "meaningless" categories like "male and female".

Gender relationships are complicated by class, age (young and old women may have little in common) and ethnicity. Analysis of the relative distribution of power focuses more on the lives of individual men and women than on the (supposed) power differences between them as "sex classes".

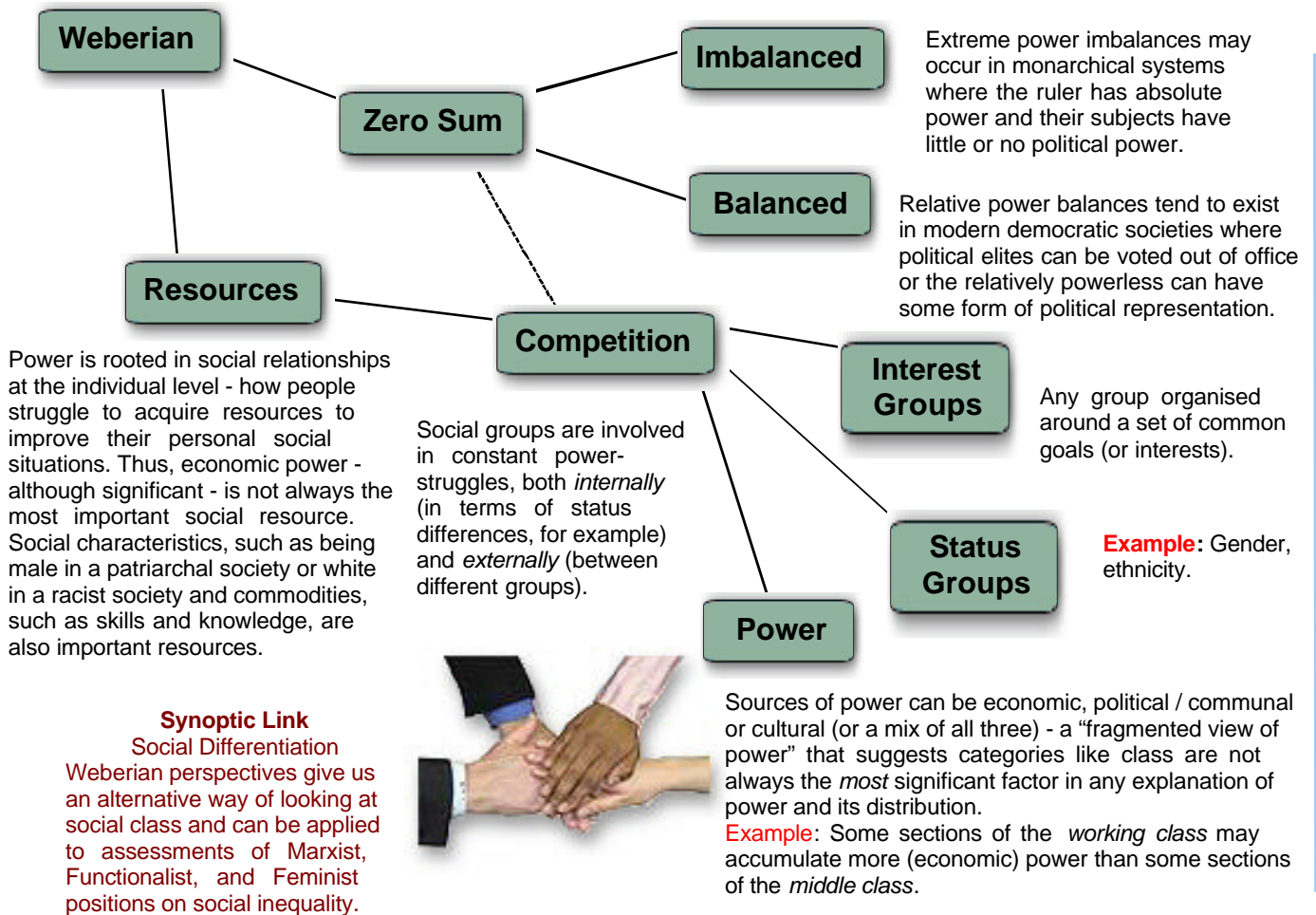
Haraway (1991): Where people increasingly interact in *cyberspace*, through computer networks, traditional notions of gender are redundant since interaction is not face-to-face. It takes place in virtual spaces.



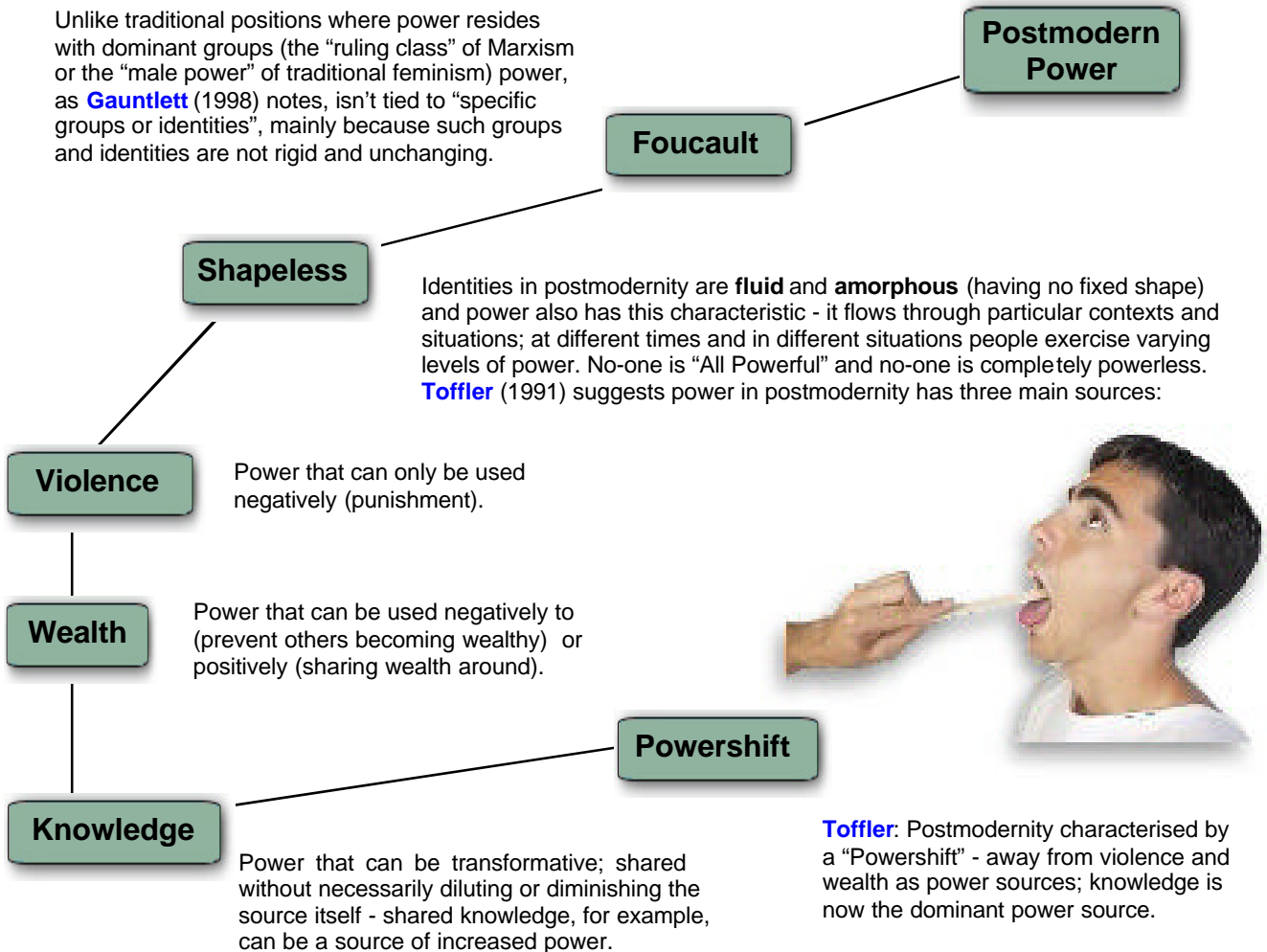
How people are connected ("networked") in cyberspace is more significant than how they are connected (or not) in "the real world".

Butler (1990): Gender is socially *constructed* around the concept of **performance**; being "male" or "female" is not something you *are* but something you *do* and gender differences are not innate (*essentialism*) but cultural - they result from how power shapes our perceptions and lives.

Interaction across computer networks can be **agendered** - you may not know the gender characteristics of the people with whom you interact. The distribution of power across *space* and *networks* is less a matter of "traditional gender relationships" and more one of exploring how *individuals* accumulate, use and distribute power.



Unlike traditional positions where power resides with dominant groups (the "ruling class" of Marxism or the "male power" of traditional feminism) power, as **Gauntlett** (1998) notes, isn't tied to "specific groups or identities", mainly because such groups and identities are not rigid and unchanging.



Exam Questions**12 marks**

Describe and briefly examine some of the sociological evidence for the existence of a ruling elite in Britain today.

40 marks

Compare and contrast Marxist and feminist theories of the nature and distribution of power in contemporary societies.

40 marks

Assess the relevance of elite theories to an understanding of the distribution of power in modern Britain.

