Sociologists conceptualise “politics” in terms of how power is organised and used in decision-making - sometimes on a “grand scale” (such as the decision to declare war) but more usually on a relatively minor, day-to-day scale (such as choosing our friends).

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”.

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**Faces**

**Coercive**

Coercive power involves “threat”; someone obeys because they fear the consequences of disobeying - a situation

**Boulding** (1989)

**Integrative**

Neither threat nor exchange is necessarily involved here. Rather, power is based on someone being so integrated into the life of others (an individual or group) that they desire to please them by carrying out their wishes. This involves individuals or groups having the “power to” achieve desired goals on the basis of the power they are given by others.

**Weber**

**Coercion**

People forced to obey under threat (real or imagined) of punishment.

**Authority**

People obey because they believe it right and proper to conform.

**Legal - Rational**

People give orders (and expect they will be obeyed) because their position in an authority structure gives them this power.

This involves bureaucratic power based on rational rules and procedures applicable to all members of an organisation.

Orders are only to be obeyed if they are relevant to the situation in which they are given. That is, power doesn’t reside in the individual but in the position they occupy. For **Weber** this type of authority is characteristic of modern societies.

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**Relational**

**Exchange**

The “power of negotiation” (“if you do something I want, I will do something you want”) This represents “power with” others because it is exercised to mutual benefit.

**Charismatic**

People obey because they trust the person issuing the command - something that stems from the personal qualities of leadership they see in that person. A charismatic individual may be someone exemplary or heroic (a religious leader or army commander, for example) or they may simply be someone in our life we admire and want to please.

**Weber**

**Traditional**

Authority is based on custom - “the way things have always been done”.

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**Types**

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**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”.

**Power**

**Politics**

Explanations of the Nature and Distribution of Power
Lukes (1990) relates power to decision-making across three main dimensions.

- **Preventing**: The ability to stop others making decisions. This means you have power because you’ve stopped others making a decision. The powerful manipulate the powerless in ways that prevent challenges to their power.

- **Removing**: 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.

- **Making**: The ability to take a decision (in the face of possible opposition).

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

Families and Households

The ability to take a decision (in the face of possible opposition).

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**Dimensions**

- **Preventing**
  - The ability to stop others making decisions.

- **Removing**
  - 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.

- **Making**
  - The ability to take a decision (in the face of possible opposition).

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**Foucault**

Contemporary changes in the nature of power.

- Power works “through people rather than on them”.
- Example: Discourses specify moral ideas about “right” and “wrong” and represent powerful, if opaque, forms of control.

- Power is “difficult to see” - we’re not always aware of the power others (especially governments) hold over us, mainly because how we experience and think about power has changed. Raw power (coercion) has been transformed into subtle modes of domination - from the expansion of technological (overt) surveillance such as CCTV to the ultimate form of covert surveillance - the construction of knowledge and language.

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**Synoptic Link**

- **Theory and Method**
  - The idea of binary oppositions is, according to postmodern writers, a fundamental feature of modernist thinking.

- **Language**
  - How we express our “thoughts about things”. If we believe in ideas like “male” and “female”, this conditions how we behave as “males” and “females”.

- **Knowledge**
  - Beliefs about the “nature of things” channel and control our thoughts and behaviours. Example: Binary oppositions - knowledge in contemporary Western societies is constructed around “thinking about things” in terms of what they are and what they are not.

- **Pervasive**
  - 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.

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

- **‘In here’**: How we exercise control over own behaviour.

- **‘Out there’**: Created through our relationships, both personal and impersonal.

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**Synoptic Link**

- **Crime and Deviance**
  - These ideas link to policing and surveillance in modern societies. Examples: Cohen’s (1979) ideas about the extension of social controls (how the “net widens”, for example) and Shearing and Stenning’s (1986) work that uses the example of Disney World to demonstrate modern forms of surveillance.

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**Revision Mapping**

- **Power and Politics**
- **Synoptic Link**
- **Families and Households**
- **Lukes’ dimensions of power can be applied to an understanding of gender relationships within families.**
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.

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).

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 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.

**Functionalist**

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.

**Consensus**

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.

**Parsons**

**Variable Sum**

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

**Society**

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.

**Dysfunction**

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.

**Checks**

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.

**Zero Sum**

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).

**Pluralism**

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**

**Vertical Cleavages**

**Competition**

**Resources**

**Dysfunction**

**Checks**

**Zero Sum**

**Consensus**

**Society**

**Parsons**

**Variable Sum**
Power and Politics

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).

**Elite Theories**

Like Pluralism, the general focus on competition for power in democratic societies. More specifically, the focus is on competition between elites - powerful groups who impose their will on the rest of society.

**Desirable**

Those best suited to rule should rule.

**Inevitable**

**Pareto**

The key to elite rule was superior personal qualities, (intelligence, education, cunning and so forth).

**Mosca**

Superior organisational ability was the key to elite rule. Successful elites, because of their superior internal organisational abilities, were able to develop the political support needed to take power (either democratically or non-democratically).

**Circulating Elites**

An elite group achieved power because of its superior abilities compared to both other elites and “the politically disorganised masses”. Pareto: After achieving power elites have a limited life-span; they grow decadent (corrupt and isolated) and are replaced by more vigorous elite groups.

**Fox Elites**

Rule by cunning and manipulation

Democratic regimes.

**Lion Elites**

Rule by force

Military regimes

**Power Elite**

The higher levels of military command.

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.

**Political**

Political parties holding broadly similar ideological beliefs.

**Example**: In the UK, although the three major parties (Labour, Liberal and Conservative) have their own distinct political identities and policies, all hold similar general beliefs about the nature of (Capitalist) society.

**Membership**

Consists of large-scale business and industry interests.

**Power Blocs**

Organised to pursue elite interests.

**Power 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.

**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

Organised to pursue elite interests.
The owners of the means of economic production (the bourgeoisie) are powerful because they own and profit from the means of physical survival.

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.

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

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:

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.

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

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

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

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.
Feminism [2nd Wave]  
- Sex Class  
- Patriarchy

Exploration of the various ways male power is politically expressed:

**Culturally**
- 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.
- **Ceiling**
- **Glass**
- **Trapdoor**

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

**Hegemony**
- 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.

**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:
- **Coercion**
- **Gendering**
- **Unempowerment**

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

**Synoptic Link**

**Mass Media**
- Ideas about patriarchy and sex class are related to the concept of the “male gaze”.

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

- **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”.

**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.

**Butler** (1990): "And what you perform on the stage is not a performance: it is a display of a set of performances - for example, the male and female 'performers'...

**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”.

**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. 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.
Power is rooted in social relationships at the individual level - how people struggle to acquire resources to improve their personal social situations. Thus, economic power - although significant - is not always the most important social resource. Social characteristics, such as being male in a patriarchal society or white in a racist society and commodities, such as skills and knowledge, are also important resources.

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.

Identities in postmodernity are fluid and amorphous (having no fixed shape) and power also has this characteristic - it flows through particular contexts and situations; at different times and in different situations people exercise varying levels of power. No-one is “All Powerful” and no-one is completely powerless. Toffler (1991) suggests power in postmodernity has three main sources:

- **Power that can only be used negatively (punishment).**
- **Power that can be used negatively to (prevent others becoming wealthy) or positively (sharing wealth around).**
- **Power that can be transformative; shared without necessarily diluting or diminishing the source itself - shared knowledge, for example, can be a source of increased power.**

Sources of power can be economic, political / communal or cultural (or a mix of all three) - a “fragmented view of power” that suggests categories like class are not always the most significant factor in any explanation of power and its distribution.

Example: Some sections of the working class may accumulate more (economic) power than some sections of the middle class.

Power and Politics

Extreme power imbalances may occur in monarchical systems where the ruler has absolute power and their subjects have little or no political power.

Relative power balances tend to exist in modern democratic societies where political elites can be voted out of office or the relatively powerless can have some form of political representation.

Any group organised around a set of common goals (or interests).

Example: Gender, ethnicity.

Synoptic Link
Social Differentiation
Weberian perspectives give us an alternative way of looking at social class and can be applied to assessments of Marxist, Functionalist, and Feminist positions on social inequality.

Weberian

Rational-Stratification

Status Groups

Power

Interest Groups

Competition

Resources

Zero Sum

Imbalanced

Balanced

Wealth

Knowledge

Violence

Powershift

Postmodern Power

Foucault

Shapeless

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Exam Questions

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.

12 marks

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