



CHAPTER 2

Political Power, Authority, and the State

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Power is a crucial concept in the study of politics, one of the most important. It is also contested, meaning there are multiple definitions of what it is and how it operates. In this chapter we will start by defining

power in the context of authority, before going on to discuss the classic threefold typology of authority put forward by Max Weber. We then pose some conceptual questions. Is power the same thing as force?

▲ A crowd pays its respects at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Monument, Pyongyang, North Korea (@robertharding/Alamy Stock Photo).

Must it be exercised deliberately? Is it a good thing? Can we ever eliminate it? In the rest of the chapter we look at some of the methodological problems that arise when we try to measure power, particularly in relation to the theories of the state discussed in Chapter 1.

Power and Authority

As you may remember, we noted in the Introduction that **power** and **authority** are central concepts in politics. Politics is largely about competing interests and values, and in practice most of us want to see our own interests and values come out on top. Since those who have power can often determine the agenda that will be adopted by political decision makers, it's important to understand how power works.

We also saw that a common way of distinguishing between power and authority is to equate the first with coercion and the second with consent. Authority may be defined as legitimate power in the sense that rulers gain the acceptance of the ruled by persuading them to recognize the rulers' right to exercise power. This is why free and fair elections are so important to the democratic political process. Converting power into authority, then, is highly desirable (see the Case Study below). As Goodwin (2007, p. 328) points out, "Where coercion creates obedience at a high cost in manpower and equipment, authority can control both the minds and the behaviour of individuals at a very low cost."

With respect to the exercise of power, there are two possible alternatives to the use of coercion. One is to rule through ideological control. In this case the ruler maintains control by manipulating the preferences of the ruled so that they reflect the interests of the ruler. Such control—associated with elitist thought and Marxist critiques of capitalist society (see below)—is much more effective than coercion because it eliminates the need for permanent surveillance. But to believe this is possible, we have to believe that individual preferences can be manipulated in such a way.

Some political theorists link authority with philosophy and power with sociological analysis (Barry, 2000, p. 83). Here authority is linked with right, or what *should be*. By contrast, power is understood as an empirical concept, linked with what *is*. This distinction, unfortunately, is problematic. As we noted above, authority can be a product of manipulation; hence not all authority is legitimate.

There is no doubt, for example, that Adolf Hitler had a great deal of authority within German society, yet few would claim that the Nazi regime was legitimate. At the very least, we can agree with Goodwin's (2007, p. 331) assertion that "a state's authority in the eyes of the people is not necessarily an indicator of its justice." One could even argue that power is preferable to authority because, while authority can be based on imperceptible manipulation, power is based on coercion, which at least can be recognized and resisted (Goodwin, 2007, p. 331).

The second alternative to the use of coercion is to make the ruler legitimate in the eyes of the ruled—in other words, to convert power into authority. To understand how that might be done we need to consider what the basis of authority is and how we can judge whether a political system is legitimate or not. The best-known analysis of legitimate authority was provided by Weber (Gerth & Wright Mills, 1946; see Box 2.2). He regarded so-called "legal-rational" authority as the main basis for authority in the modern world.

CASE STUDY 2.1

The Supreme Court of Canada: Authority, Power, and Legitimacy



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PHOTO 2.1 | The Supreme Court of Canada, Ottawa.

One useful example of the distinction between power and authority is the role of the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court has important authority in the Canadian political system because of its established right to determine whether or not the laws made by the elected members of the federal Parliament and the provincial legislatures are constitutional. But members of the Supreme Court themselves are not elected: They are appointed by the prime minister, and (unless they choose to retire early or are removed for wrongdoing) they remain on the bench until they reach the age of 75.

Many commentators ask whether the Supreme Court's authority is worrying in a democratic polity. The court has made many important political decisions relating to such controversial issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, and Holocaust denial; yet its members are not accountable to the people in the way that elected legislators are.

One way to understand the sort of authority the Supreme Court has is by reference to the distinction between power and authority. The court itself has no army or police force to enforce its decisions—no actual power to directly impel anyone to do anything. As a result, in order for its decisions to be accepted without the threat of coercion, the court relies on its authority. Arguably, the Supreme Court would almost certainly lose its authority, and therefore its legitimacy, if too many of its decisions were too far out of line with public opinion. Supreme Court justices are therefore constrained by the need to maintain the legitimacy of the court as an authoritative institution in the Canadian polity.

For example, François Hollande, the president of France, is obeyed not because he is charismatic or claims to have a divine right to rule, but because he holds the office of the president. In the modern Western world, and in many other parts of the world as well, political institutions are accepted because they are subject to democratic principles. Indeed, the president remains the only part of the French polity whose **constituency** is the entire French electorate.

As Hoffman and Graham (2006, pp. 5–11) rightly point out, we can define power and authority separately, but in practice all governments use both. Some exercise of power is necessary even in a democracy, since the decisions taken by a majority will always leave a minority who may be resentful that their views did not prevail. Thus, even though democratic states rely much more on the exercise of authority than do authoritarian states, which rely more on the exercise of power, the former have to exercise power at least some of the time and the latter always have some authority.

Unfortunately, the distinction between authority and power is further clouded by the reality that in many cases authority is granted to institutions or individuals precisely because they have power. Even totalitarian regimes usually have some degree of authority, if only the charismatic authority associated with political leaders such as Stalin or Hitler.



See Chapter 3, p. 67, for a discussion of the problem of majority rule.

KEY CONCEPT BOX 2.2

Weber on Authority

Max Weber proposed a threefold classification of authority. He recognized that these were ideal types and that all societies were likely to contain elements of all three.

Traditional authority is based on traditional customs and values. A major example would be the principle of the divine right of kings, according to which monarchs were ordained by God to rule. We still have this sort of authority today, although it is lacking in actual political power. Take, for example, Queen Elizabeth II. She is an important symbol of authority as Canada's official head of state (represented in Ottawa by Governor General David Johnston), but has no power to command armies, raise taxes, or call elections. Her authority is largely symbolic. The same holds true of the Emperor of Japan, who has symbolic authority but not actual political power.

Charismatic authority is based on the personal traits of an individual. It is often associated with the leaders of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, since charismatic leaders tend to emerge at times of crisis. This form of authority may be less important in modern liberal democracies, where authority tends to be based on the status of the office rather than personal qualities. But charisma still plays some part, particularly now that the media image of leaders is central to their approval ratings, their fundraising ability, and their power to pass legislation. In Weber's view, charismatic authority is unreliable since the disappearance or discrediting of this individual will immediately lead to instability.

Legal-rational authority is based on the status of either the ruler's office as part of a system of constitutional rules (in a democratic country) or a religious text such as the Quran (in Islamic regimes).

Weber argued that the tendency of the modern world is toward legal-rational authority.

Conceptual Questions about Power

The meaning of power can be teased out a little further if we consider the following questions.

Is Power the Same as Force?

It is often argued that there is a conceptual difference between power and force or coercion (Barry, 2000, pp. 89–90). Although power can be, and usually is, exercised through the threat of force, we might argue that the actual use of force means that power has failed. For example, the United States clearly used a great deal of force in Vietnam and, more recently, in Iraq. Yet it failed to win the war in Vietnam; by 1975 that country was reunited under a communist government and it remains a communist state today. As the sociologist Steven Lukes (2005, p. 70) points out, “having the means of power is not the same as being powerful.”

Must Power Be Exercised Deliberately?

There are some who argue that power must be exercised deliberately to be considered power. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1938, p. 25), for example, insisted that power is “the production of *intended* results: the unforeseen effects of our influence on others cannot be called power.” You have to want to achieve the outcome you do for your power to be recognized. Few of us would attribute power to someone who has benefited from a situation that he or she didn’t do something to create. As Polsby (1980, p. 208) points out, taxi drivers benefit when it rains, but the increase in business they experience is an unplanned effect of the weather, which they do nothing to cause. To show that taxi drivers benefit from the rain is not to show “that these beneficiaries created the status quo, act[ed] in a meaningful way to maintain it, or could, in the future, act effectively to deter changes in it.” As a result, “Who benefits? . . . is a different question from who governs?” (p. 209).

Is Power a Good Thing?

Some political thinkers would argue that whether or not power is good depends on how it is used. Using power to achieve certain outcomes is obviously good. As Lukes (2005, p. 109) put it, there are “manifold ways in which power over others can be productive, transformative, authoritative and compatible with dignity.” By contrast, using power to harm others is bad. From a liberal perspective, however, the exercise of power is always undesirable because it “involves the imposition of someone’s values upon another” (Barry, 2000, p. 99). This is why liberals recommend limitations on power, often through separation of powers, to prevent one branch of government from exercising too much power over another.

Can We Eliminate Power?

A related question is whether it is ever possible to eliminate power. Can there be a society in which no one exercises power over anyone else? For some theorists the answer is clearly no. Power is inescapable, although its nature changes over time. Here the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is instructive. Foucault is usually understood to offer a challenge to thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas (1929–), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), and Lukes, who imply that power is illegitimately exercised and therefore ought to be curtailed. For Foucault, power is everywhere, and power relations between individuals are inevitable.

In his work *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that the history of legal punishment in France seems progressive at a superficial level because extremely violent punishment eventually gave way to regimented incarceration; in reality, though, these are two ways of achieving the same goal. Both involve power relations and the domination and dehumanization of prisoners. History, for Foucault, is “an endlessly repeated play of domination” (quoted in Hay, 2002, p. 191). Because power is everywhere, there is no way to liberate ourselves from it, although we can, as Foucault shows, change its focus and implementation. Lukes (2005, p. 107) disputes Foucault’s conclusion that power and domination are inescapable and argues that it is possible, as he puts it, for people to be “more or less free from others’ power to live as their own nature and judgment dictate.” In his view, people can work to free themselves from domination: First, though, they have to recognize that domination exists.

Others, however, disagree. Interestingly, some societies have worked out ways to reduce the power of individual leaders and ensure that political power is spread out as much as possible within a community. For many **Indigenous peoples**, good leadership is temporary, based on particular circumstances and needs or the gifts of the leader, and followers are under no obligation to follow once the particular task of the temporary leader has been accomplished. Leadership, as George Manuel (Shuswap) observes, is derived from someone’s ability to give well and give often:

There was something basically democratic in the recognition of status through giving. Anyone of sufficient ability and generosity could achieve a status that would almost rival that of an office holder. The opportunity to develop the absolute power of a duke or baron simply did not exist. (Manuel & Posluns, 1974, p. 43)



AP Photo/Michel Lipchitz

PHOTO 2.2 | Michel Foucault and others demonstrate in Paris against the death of an Algerian worker in the central police station in 1972. Though best known as a theorist, Foucault argued that his work also had important moral implications.

Mohawk theorist Gerald Taiaiake Alfred promotes the same view, criticizing Western forms of leadership for creating “coercive and compromised forms of government that contradict basic indigenous values” (Alfred, 2009, p. 47). In traditional forms, “There is no central or coercive authority, and decision-making is collective. Leaders rely on their persuasive abilities to achieve a consensus that respects the autonomy of individuals, each of whom is free to dissent from, and remain unaffected by, the collective decision” (Alfred, 2009, pp. 49–50). Decisions are made collectively and for the good of the community with the consent of the community. Alfred has isolated six principles of Indigenous governance: “the active participation of individuals”; balancing “many layers of equal power”; dispersal of authority, and governance which is “situational,” “non-coercive,” and “respects diversity” (Alfred, 2009, pp. 50–1).

European conceptions of power, with power as an accumulation of wealth and resources, is largely antithetical to many Indigenous views of leadership. “Any man who has accumulated a great deal of wealth for himself has not been very good at giving, and would not be much of a leader,” Manuel argues; “On the other hand, a leader who exhausted his material wealth giving to his people and caring for them would be invested with greater wealth by those people. . . . The leader’s wealth is the status, prestige and respect that he enjoys on account of how well he has given” (Manuel & Posluns, 1974, p. 44). A classic example of giving-as-leadership is the potlatch ceremony in present-day British Columbia. This tradition of giving away goods has been central to leadership. As Consedine and Consedine (2001, p. 68) note, “At these gatherings political rank was determined, tribal decisions made, wealth distributed, and traditional rituals and dances performed. Celebrating and feasting capped the gatherings, at which conspicuous personal poverty was a chiefly requirement.” Others, such as the Dene and **Inuit**, had similar traditions of giving (Cuthand, 2007, p. 19). Interestingly, sheets of decorated beaten copper were gifted during the ceremonies and increased in value the more they were given away. As such, the giving of gifts increased the stature not only of the giver, but also of the objects themselves (Cajete, 2000, pp. 51–2).

KEY POINTS

- The concepts of power and authority often diverge over the issue of legitimacy, the former implying the use or threat of sanctions, the latter reflecting rulers’ right to rule.
- A key question is the degree to which power is converted into authority. Weber’s threefold classification remains useful. He argues that modern political authority is based on legal–rational factors rather than on tradition or charisma.
- Common questions asked about power include whether power is the same as force, whether power can be said to be exercised without the intention of doing so, whether the exercise of power can ever be good, and whether power relationships can be eliminated.

Power and Theories of the State

In the face of so many different theories of power, how do we figure out which of them most accurately describes the reality in, say, Canada or the United States? In his book *Power*:

A Radical View, first published in 1974, Lukes identified three dimensions or “faces” of power. The first face is universally acceptable: “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes, 2005, p. 30); an alternative definition comes from Robert Dahl: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (quoted in Lukes, 2005, p. 16).

Pluralism and Lukes’s Three Dimensions of Power

How power is conceptualized has an important bearing on the validity of theories of the state. To see why, we need to return to the pluralist theory of the state. Pluralists measure power in terms of decision making; this corresponds to Lukes’s first dimension above.

Pluralist researchers look at the decisions made and the preferences of the groups involved in decision making in a particular set of policy domains. If a group’s aims are met even in part, then it is judged to have power (see Hewitt, 1974). If no one group gets its way on all occasions, then the pluralist model is confirmed. The advantage of this approach, based on the first face of power, is that it is easy to research. Indeed, numerous “community power” studies were undertaken in the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s, most of which confirmed the pluralist theory of the state (Dahl, 1963; Polsby, 1980).

Clearly this approach could lead to nonpluralist conclusions; it’s possible that one group, or one small set of groups, will be found to get its way, in which case the pluralist model will not be confirmed. However, critics of pluralism suggest that the pluralist **methodology** is more than likely to generate pluralist conclusions (Morriss, 2002). In the first place, the pluralist methodology makes no attempt to rank issues in order of importance; it would treat a debate over where to put a school-crossing sign as no less important for the overall community than a debate over the minimum wage, for example. This approach makes no allowance for the fact that some issues are more important than others. Nor does it consider the possibility that an elite group may allow a small local group to have its school-crossing sign to ensure that the elite gets its way on more important issues, such as the minimum wage; see Box 2.3.

Second, pluralists assume that the barriers to entry for groups in the political system are low: If a group has a case to argue or a grievance to express, all it has to do is enter the decision-making arena and speak out. But this is a dubious assumption. Some groups—such as the unemployed or the homeless—may not have the resources or the expertise to organize effectively. Landed immigrants who do not have citizenship have no right to vote, even for their school trustees or city councillors, and are thus entirely disenfranchised from the political system. Until 1960, the same was true of **First Nations** peoples in Canada—they had to give up their official status as “registered Indians” under the Indian Act to become citizens and gain the right to vote in federal elections. Other groups may not even bother to organize because they are convinced that they have no chance of succeeding. By focusing on the groups that are active in the decision-making arena, pluralists may miss a range of interests that for various reasons never appear in that arena.

Third is the related assumption that the issues discussed in the decision-making arena are the most important ones. In other words, the pluralist approach ignores the possibility that an elite group, or even a ruling class, has determined what will and will not be discussed.

KEY CONCEPT BOX 2.3

The First Face of Power and Its Critics

The decision-making approach to measuring power, which corresponds to what Lukes (2005) calls the first face of power, is illustrated in Table 2.1. The table shows the outcome of four issues on which three groups took positions. All three groups got their way at least some of the time: Groups A and B got their way on Issues 1 and 2, while Group C achieved its goal on Issue 4. Pluralists would conclude from this that no one group was able to get its way on all issues, and that power is therefore widely dispersed.

TABLE 2.1 | The Pluralist Decision-Making Approach

| | Issue 1 | Issue 2 | Issue 3 | Issue 4 | Total |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Group A | WON | WON | LOST | LOST | 2 |
| Group B | WON | WON | WON | LOST | 3 |
| Group C | LOST | LOST | LOST | WON | 1 |

Source: Adapted from Hay (2002, p. 174).

The decision-making approach can generate nonpluralist conclusions. Group A might have got its way on all four issues, and Groups B and C might have lost out. However, critics of pluralism suggest that the decision-making approach is likely to generate pluralist conclusions. One reason is that pluralists tend to assume that all issues are of the same political importance when they are not. As Table 2.2 illustrates, this assumption can distort the political reality. What it misses is the possibility that an elite group will win on the most important issue or issues, while other groups will win only on the less important ones. Thus, in the example below, Group C wins on fewer issues but still gets its way on the issue weighted most heavily (Issue 4).

Table 2.2 | Pluralism and Issue Preferences

| | Issue 1 | Issue 2 | Issue 3 | Issue 4 | Total |
|------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| Weighting | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 | |
| Group A | WON | WON | LOST | LOST | 2 |
| Group B | WON | WON | WON | LOST | 3 |
| Group C | LOST | LOST | LOST | WON | 5 |

Source: Adapted from Hay (2002, p. 177).

Imagine, for instance, that Groups A and B are trade unions and Group C is a business organization. Further imagine that Issues 1–3 give workers an extra 15-minute coffee break at various times in the workday, while Issue 4 grants employers the right to prohibit strike action. Clearly, Issue 4 is much more important for business interests and is a serious restriction on trade unions, yet a pluralist methodology would fail to count this as an exercise of power by one group.

This is where the “second face” of power comes into play. First identified in the 1960s by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, this face recognizes that the pluralist decision-making approach (the “first face”) measured only the *public* exercise of power. They argued that power is also exercised in less obvious ways: for example, when a

dominant elite keeps issues that might threaten its interests off the public agenda, limiting contestation to relatively unimportant “safe” matters (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, p. 948). Thus elites may create “barriers” to the public airing of certain grievances or mobilize social “bias” to freeze out some options while privileging others. For Lukes, this kind of agenda setting clearly *is* a form of power, and Bachrach and Baratz don’t go far enough, simplistically assuming that “interests are consciously articulated and observable” (Lukes, 2005, pp. 5, 20–4).

Although difficult, it is possible to identify cases of non-decision making, where issues of importance to some groups have not appeared on the political agenda. A number of empirical studies (Blowers, 1984; Crenson, 1971) have attempted to show how the third face of power can be observed in situations of seeming inaction. A starting point is to identify covert grievances—grievances that clearly exist but are never openly discussed. The next step is to identify reasons they might have been excluded from public discussion. There are a number of possibilities. For example, those who would have brought certain issues forward might have been prevented by force or coercion, or perhaps politicians have reached a consensus and decided that there is no need to offer the electorate a choice. Rules or procedures can also be used to exclude certain issues. For example, if an issue is referred to a legislative committee or, in the Canadian context, a royal commission, decision making will be postponed until more evidence has been collected.

Other examples of non-decision making might include cases where anticipation of failure discourages a group from entering the decision-making arena in the first place,



Norma Jean Gargasz/Alamy Stock Photo

PHOTO 2.3 | Who wields power in the United States? Even though former president Barack Obama’s healthcare plan (signed into law in 2010) was a long way from the sort of state-funded healthcare seen in Canada, the UK, France, and Germany, powerful business interests were able to persuade many Americans that “Obamacare” was “socialism”—a term of abuse on the American right.

or decision makers themselves decide not to oppose certain powerful interests because of the anticipated costs. An older study by the American political scientist Charles Lindblom (1977) found that business interests are powerful in the decision-making arena because of their position in the economy. This is still true today, perhaps even more so than in Lindblom's time. Governments recognize that businesses help deliver desirable economic scenarios, such as economic growth and low unemployment rates. As a result they are likely to go along with business demands. The power of business is enhanced even further when governments have to deal with multinational companies that have the option of taking their business to another country if they don't get what they want.

The crucial point here is that business interests don't need to lobby decision makers or demonstrate on the street to be heard. Thus pluralist researchers using the decision-making approach to measure power may not identify business interests among the various interests with a stated position. Yet governments will automatically consider business interests because they anticipate business's influence.

The first two dimensions of power assume that political actors are aware of their own interests. This is not the case with the third. A much more insidious way in which an elite group or ruling class can set the political agenda is through its ability to shape the demands that groups articulate in the decision-making arena. As Lukes (2005, p. 27) explains this third dimension of power, "A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants." For additional comments on this subject by Lukes, see Box 2.4.

Pluralists are criticized for assuming, without much evidence, that the preferences expressed by individuals and groups are in their interests. No attempt is made to figure out how individuals and groups come to hold the preferences they do. For elitists and Marxists this is a serious omission, since the ability of dominant groups to exercise ideological control is a key aspect of their power. For those studying the third face of power, elites, by shaping individual preferences—through control over the means of communication and socialization—can ensure that demands that would pose a threat to its interests never reach the political agenda (for example, see the discussion of the power of the media in Chapter 12). Thus a seemingly pluralistic country—with freedom of association, free elections, and so on—may in reality be nothing of the kind if most people suffer from some form of **false consciousness**.

See Chapter 12, p. 251, for a discussion of the power of the media.



KEY QUOTE BOX 2.4

The Third Face of Power

Is it not the most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural or unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes, 2005, p. 28)

KEY POINTS

- Determining the empirical validity of the theories of the state requires an analysis of power.
- Pluralists focus on the decision-making arena, or what Lukes calls the first face of power.
- This approach, though capable of producing nonpluralist conclusions, does not provide the complete picture. It misses the possibility that a political elite or ruling class can prevent decision making on certain key issues (the second face of power) and ensure that the wants expressed by political actors are not the kind that will damage the interests of the ruling group (the third face of power).

Interests and Power

Despite the force of their arguments, critics of pluralism face methodological difficulties of their own. If power is exercised in more subtle ways, how do we go about measuring it? We saw that it is possible (though not easy) to identify non–decision making, but how do we figure out if individual preferences have been shaped by dominant forces in society?

Lukes’s third face of power assumes that it is possible to distinguish between what individuals or groups *perceive* to be in their interests and what their interests *actually* are. We might be able to recognize when people are acting against their best interests, but this is rarely simple. Take the issue of smoking, for example, which the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut argued was “a classy way to commit suicide.” Can we say that smokers who understand the dangers of smoking are acting against their best interests? Some people would have given up smoking if they had been aware of the damage it was going to do to their health. Others, however, well aware of the potential health costs, may insist that they want to continue smoking because of other benefits. They may argue that it relaxes them, prevents them from putting on weight, provides an ice breaker in social situations—or that they value other things more than a long life. In these situations, are we still able to say that these people are acting against their best interests (Dearlove & Saunders, 2000, p. 368)?

A more morally complex example of conflict over “real interests” can be seen in the battles over enfranchisement of First Nations peoples in Canada. Until 1960, Indigenous peoples had to renounce their status as members of their particular nation in exchange for the right to vote in federal and provincial elections. In this situation, First Nations peoples were faced with a choice: In order to vote and have the same “legal” status as other Canadians, they had to renounce their national identity and their membership of a group that had signed a treaty with the Crown (Fleras & Elliott, 1999, p. 180). According to Fleras and Elliott, First Nations


prefer to define themselves as a people whose collective rights to self-determination are guaranteed by virtue of their ancestral occupation, not because of difference, need, or disadvantage. There is little enthusiasm for being integrated as an ethnic component into a Canadian multicultural mosaic, with a corresponding diminishment of their claims. (1999, p. 189)

Although social contract theorists from Thomas Hobbes to Carole Pateman take it for granted that people want to vote and be equal citizens, this case should make us question that assumption. Not every society privileges the same values and has the same goals.

As we hope these examples illustrate, there is an ever-present danger of taking a patronizing attitude toward individuals and promoting a “we know best” mentality. As Colin Hay (1997) has pointed out, researchers must take care to prevent their own subjective preferences from intervening.

Another innovative critique of the “third face of power” argument is provided by James C. Scott (1990). He argues that researchers tend to mistakenly assume that dominated groups will always comply with those who try to manipulate them ideologically. This is not the case; in fact, some dominated groups will pretend to absorb and articulate the dominant worldview of the rulers while promoting a below-the-surface counterculture that challenges these dominant norms. This kind of strategy, Scott argues, is apparent in cases of slavery, serfdom, caste domination, and, at a micro level, in relations between prisoners and guards or teachers and students. Although Lukes (2005, pp. 127–8) casts doubt on the correctness of Scott’s interpretation, arguing that the evidence “does not show there is also not widespread consent and resignation” (p. 131), in fact both scenarios are possible. The problem is that without inside knowledge, it may not be possible to know what the group’s goals and strategies actually are.

Socialism and Power


See Chapter 5, p. 91, for an exploration of the development of socialism.

Socialism as defined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels has largely disappeared from the world stage. Few if any states, other than China and Vietnam, claim a Marxist heritage these days, and China certainly seems to have more in common with capitalist industrial states than with anything Marx would have envisaged in the nineteenth century. While we could say that Marxism is dead, the socialist critique of the modern industrial state and its inequalities remains powerful and persuasive for many people.

The concept of false consciousness was developed by many post-Marxian socialists. The Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) emphasized the ability of the ruling class to manipulate the working class ideologically through their **hegemony** (that is, a form of domination that appears to be legitimate to those within the system). In any society, the elites had the power to determine not only what would be legal and illegal, but also what would be considered normal and abnormal. In this way they shaped the character of everyone living in a particular territory. Gramsci (1971) believed that intellectuals had a crucial role to play in challenging this domination, because they could step outside social conventions and see how people were brainwashed into thinking one way or another. Similarly, Herbert Marcuse (1964) observed that capitalist states created a situation where a large part of the population was led to believe that the state was benign, if not beneficial, whereas in reality the state was often exerting its power against their interests. For Marcuse, writing during the 1960s, the evidence was obvious: The state was increasingly forced to react violently to public protests against its policies.

Socialists, like elitists, have struggled to explain why the ruling class continues to rule despite universal suffrage and competitive elections. Socialists such as Ralph Miliband (1978) have advanced three arguments. First, they note the similar social and educational backgrounds of state and economic elites. Second, socialists observe that

business constitutes a particularly powerful interest group. Third, socialists (as well as elitists) argue that we should focus not on the way decisions are made and who is involved in the decision-making arena, but on the outcomes of decision making. Who wins and who loses as a result of the decisions that are made? From the Marxist perspective, we have only to look at the inequalities in most societies, including liberal democracies, to see that the same groups win and lose every time. As Westergaard and Resler (1975, p. 141) put it in their classic account of the class structure:

Power is visible only through its consequences: they are the first and the final proof of the existence of power. The continuing inequalities of wealth, income and welfare that divide the population are . . . the most visible manifestations of the division of power in a society such as Britain.

While it is true that a great deal of inequality exists in most capitalist societies, it would be false to claim that universal suffrage and the rise of left-of-centre governments have had no impact on the distribution of resources. The creation of the welfare state and the introduction of free education have improved the lives of many people in modern liberal democracies. In response to this argument, socialists contend that the creation of the welfare state was instrumental for the owners of capital because good healthcare and education are essential to produce and maintain a productive workforce. They also argue that reforms benefiting the working class are made only when concessions are necessary to prevent social unrest.

Both of these arguments are problematic, however. First, not all social benefits are necessarily in the interests of the dominant economic class. This might be the case with measures designed to improve industrial productivity, but it's hard to see low-cost higher education in the humanities and social sciences in that light. Second, the argument that reforms have prevented social unrest and even revolution is weak because it is impossible to disprove—we cannot possibly know what the consequences of not granting concessions would have been. Finally, we have to ask whether a class that is constantly making concessions to public demands can still be described as a “ruling” class. Another point to bear in mind is that the changes in the way our economies function, especially during an age of globalization and increasing technology, means that new elites are rising up as old ones become less influential.



See Chapter 6, p. 121, for a discussion of the relationship between economic growth and environmental protection.

KEY POINTS

- Socialists have had difficulty explaining how a ruling class can still be said to control a liberal democracy in which universal suffrage has long been the norm and a welfare state has been established for decades.
- Socialists often argue that universal suffrage does not dent the power of business interests, and that social welfare reform is in the interests of the dominant class.
- The post–Cold War world is a very different place from the world that socialists of the 1960s and 1970s described. Globalization and the rapid development of computer and communications technologies have led to new elites and different social and economic dynamics.

Conclusion

We have seen that semantic, normative, and empirical questions about power abound: What is it? Is it a good thing? How is it distributed? The answers to all these questions are contested, especially the answer to the last one. In fact, here we reach something of an impasse. On the one hand, the pluralist answer, although quantifiable and researchable, is incomplete. On the other hand, the answer favoured by socialists, although persuasive, is problematic because it appears unresearchable. This helps to explain why the debate between competing theories of the state continues without any clear victor.

Key Questions

1. What is the difference between power and authority?
2. Is power always exercised deliberately, or can it be unconsciously wielded?
3. What are the implications for the pluralist theory of the state of Lukes's second and third faces of power?
4. Is power as thought control a viable concept?
5. What does the character of political elites tell us about the distribution of power?
6. Is there anything of value today in socialist theories of the state now that the Soviet Union and its communist satellites no longer exist?

Further Reading

Bachrach, P., and Baratz, M. (1963). *Decisions and non-decisions.* *American Political Science Review*, 57, 632–42. A much-cited critique of the pluralist theory of the state, emphasizing the importance of non-decision making.

Blair, G. (2015). *Donald Trump: The candidate.* New York: Simon and Schuster. A look at power and privilege in the American political system, through the case of billionaire Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Dahl, R. (1963). *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city.* New Haven: Yale University Press. The classic example of the decision-making methodology associated with pluralism.

Gilens, M. (2012). *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. A recent look at political and economic power in the United States.

Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. A celebrated account of power; this second edition includes an essay defending the original account (published in 1974) against critics.

Web Link

<https://stevenlukes.net>

Steven Lukes's website offers a selection of his articles and chapters.