

## **POWER AND THE STATE**

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**Keywords:** counteraction, elite, pluralism, power, state.

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### **Summary**

The study of power and the state has long been one of the central areas of research within sociology and a major point of contact with political science and political thought. It has, however, been a major area of contention. Varying views of power and varying understandings of the state have underpinned a clash between elitists and pluralists, Marxists, and liberals, and a variety of other approaches. At times it has seemed as if there could be no agreement and that no fixed conclusions could be arrived at.

This article will show that there is, in fact, a more optimistic view. The contending understandings of power can be related to a common underlying framework, and this can, in turn, serve as a basis for integrating the varied research methods used and can show the complementarity of findings from the major studies. Contention and disagreement remain, of course, and there are many unresolved issues, but there can be a clear grasp of the nature of the battlefield on which these conflicts are fought out.

The article begins with a general discussion of the nature of power, showing the major dimensions and faces involved in power relations. This will be used as a way of conceptualizing structures of domination and, in particular, the structure of the modern state as the key institution of power in the contemporary world. It will be shown that states can be seen in terms of the elites that comprise their leading positions, but that the actions of states cannot be reduced to those of their elites. It is essential to see elites as holding the potential for power, but to recognize the participation of wider social groups in the actual exercise of power. In this context, the article will review the key debate between elitist views and pluralist views — perhaps the central area of contention in the study of power. It will look at a number of studies in these areas and will suggest how they can be seen as parts of a larger picture. A final section of the article will consider the research methods used in the study of power, states, and elites.

## 1. Power and Domination

In order to find a way through the many contentious issues raised in discussions of power it is useful to return to some basic distinctions made in the work of Max Weber. Although these issues have generated much complex discussion, his basic ideas are very straightforward. Weber saw 'power' (*Macht*) as the possibility for an actor to impose his or her will on others, even in the face of their resistance. At its most general, social power is an actor's intentional use of causal powers to affect the conduct of others. In a power relation, one actor is the 'principal' or paramount agent, while the other is the 'subaltern' or subordinate agent. The principal has or exercises power, while the subaltern is affected by the power of a principal. The power of an actor is a potential that can be realized through action. Although an actor may have power over another because of their superior physique, their access to personal information, or other contingent factors, Weber attached particular importance to structural factors. He held that the power potential is determined by the structurally defined opportunities and capacities available to an actor. The social distribution of resources enhances or worsens the chances of an actor realizing his or her will in action. Thus, the determinants are systemic and not merely contingent.

The mainstream approach to power, particularly associated with Robert Dahl, Harold Lasswell, and C. Wright Mills, has followed Weber directly and has focused on the actual exercise of power. Its advocates have investigated the exercise of decision-making powers in sovereign organizations such as states, business enterprises, universities, and churches. They see power relations as asymmetrical and as organized around the conflicting interests and goals of the participants in these organizations. Because power is fixed in quantity, one agent or group of agents gains at the expense of others, and the focus of attention has to be on the distribution of abilities to secure advantages and promote interests. These mainstream writers stress the complementarity of formal decision-making power and the power inherent in the 'nondecision-making' that occurs when some actors have the power to keep matters out of the decision-making process.

A second approach to power has focused on the principal's capacity or potential to do something or to facilitate things. This approach starts out from an investigation of the determinants of power, stressing the institutional and relational structures that constrain actors. This approach is associated with the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Talcott Parsons, and Michel Foucault, who looked in particular at the cultural construction of power relations in the strategies and techniques through which power is exercised. They saw power as diffused throughout a society rather than concentrated only in sovereign organizations. Foucault, for example, referred to the discursive formation of power through mechanisms of socialization and community building that endow subjects with particular habits and routines of thought and action. The principals in power relations are those who are institutionally 'authorized' to discipline others, but the most effective and pervasive forms of power occur where people have learned to exercise self-discipline and so have been socialized as subalterns who conform without the need for any direct action on the part of a principal.

Both approaches to power have provided essential insights, highlighting different but

complementary processes and mechanisms. A combination of their insights into a more general account of the mechanisms of power can show how the most elementary forms underlie the more complex forms found in states, economic organizations, and other associations, and can provide a useful basis for empirical research.

The most elementary forms of social power are corrective and persuasive influence. Corrective influence occurs where actors take rational, calculative orientations towards each other and use punishments and rewards to affect their actions. Force is corrective influence that uses negative physical sanctions to prevent the actions of subalterns, while manipulation operates through both positive and negative sanctions to influence subaltern decisions. Manipulation typically uses such resources as money, credit, and access to employment. Persuasive influence rests on the use of arguments, appeals, and reasons so as to lead subalterns to believe that it is appropriate to act in one way rather than another. Signification is persuasive influence that operates through shared cognitive meanings, while legitimation operates through shared value commitments. In each case, actors are persuaded that a particular course of action is necessary or emotionally appropriate.

The elementary forms of power are the building blocks from which more fully developed power relations can be built as structures of what Weber called domination (*Herrschaft*). Domination is that form of power that is structured into stable and enduring social structures, as shown in the diagram. Structured forms of force and manipulation, both operating through constraint and constituting what Weber called 'domination by virtue of a constellation of interests' and Giddens called 'allocative domination'. The distribution of resources determines the constellation of interests experienced by principals and subalterns, and principals are able to influence subalterns by using the resources they control to determine the action alternatives faced by subalterns and the considerations taken into account in choosing among them. Structures of expertise and command, on the other hand, are forms of signification and legitimation and operate through discursively based systems of authority on the basis of institutionalized commitment, loyalty, and trust. They constitute what Weber defined as 'domination by virtue of authority' and Giddens called 'authoritative domination'.

While mainstream power research has focused on allocative domination, the constraining mode of domination, the second stream of power research has emphasized authoritative domination, the discursive mode of domination. The complementarity of the two approaches should be apparent from the place that each mode of domination has in the framework that I have proposed.

Any exercise of power tends to generate resistance, and this resistance is also, of course, a form of power. Subaltern resistance within structures of domination is counteraction — power from below, rather than power from above. This may be expressed in inchoate resentment, hostility, or withdrawal, and in isolated acts of disruption and sabotage, but is most importantly manifest in co-ordinated collective action. The significance of counteraction depends upon the number of subalterns able to unite together and the degree of solidarity they can achieve in their actions.

Institutionalized opposition that is recognized and accorded legitimacy within a

structure of domination is ‘pressure’, and is collectively exercised by pressure groups. Where subaltern counteraction occurs outside the formal institutions of power, posing a challenge to these structures, it can be called ‘protest’. Collective protest is subaltern resistance exercised as a counter-mobilization to established structures of domination. Pressure and protest overlap in concrete situations. Protest groups that attain some of their goals may accommodate themselves to the power structure and transform themselves into pressure groups and their protest may be transformed into more subdued resistance. Similarly, pressure groups that are frustrated in their actions and become increasingly confrontational or that are subverted from within may be radicalized as protest groups

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**John Scott** has been at The University of Plymouth since October 2008. From 1994 to 2008 he was Professor of Sociology at the University of Essex, and before that he was Professor and Head of Department at the University of Leicester. Until 2005 he was an Adjunct Professor in the Sosiologisk Institutt at the University of Bergen. He is Editor of the *European Societies*, the journal of the European Sociological Association, and has been an active member of the British Sociological Association since 1970 having been Newsletter editor, Secretary, Treasurer, Chairperson, and President, and currently an Honorary Vice-President. John is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), and an academician of the Academy of Learned Society in the Social Sciences (AcSS).

John's research and teaching interests are in the areas of social stratification, business organisation and sociological theory, but he has also published on social research methods. Main publications include *Corporations, Classes and Capitalism* (1985), *A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research* (1990), *Who Rules Britain?* (1991), *Social Network Analysis (Second Edition, 2000)*, *Poverty and Wealth* (1994), *Sociological Theory* (1995), *Stratification and Power* (1996), and *Corporate Business and Capitalist Classes* (1997), and *Power* (2001). He recently took over as editor for the third edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (2005). His latest book is *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology*, an overview of historical and contemporary debates.

In 2006 a Third Edition of the textbook *Sociology* (jointly written with James Fulcher) appeared. There is a web site dedicated to this book (<http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199285006/>), with teaching and learning links for students and lecturers. During 2006 three new collections appeared in the Routledge Key Guides series: *Sociology: The Key Concepts*, *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Formative Thinkers*, and *Fifty Key Sociologists: The Contemporary Thinkers*.