

POWER STRUCTURE

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Summary

This article examines the structures of power and its characteristics in terms of the formal institutions of government. In addition to providing a general map of the concept of “power structure,” this article blends the variegated facets of traditional power structures with modern and late modern ones. It highlights the thoughts of the main thinkers who influenced and shaped the contours of prevailing structures of political power and briefly represents some of their important work. The impact and effect of political power structure are illustrated with examples from the classical, medieval, modern, and late modern periods including exceptions to general cases. The article concludes with several arguments that are likely to feature in the future of politics, the social and political sciences, and understanding human behavior in the New Economy.

1. Human Beings, Power, and Structure: All Power is Political

All power is political. Political power is the ability to convince, cajole, coerce, alter, influence, modify, or manipulate another individual’s actions, beliefs, or values. In other words, political power is about causing directional change or modification. Power structures are the vehicles with which such changes or modifications can be effected. Any examination of political violence, domestic and foreign war, insurrections, coups, rebellions, conquest, pillage, siege, defense, military and paramilitary operations over the past two thousand years will demonstrate the impact of power and the central importance of studying how power and its structures are deployed in human society. Because power is central to the study of political science it tends to be present in virtually all sub-areas of specialization in the scientific study of politics. The sub-field of political theory has anticipated and analyzed the concept of power since time immemorial from Socrates and Aristotle in classical Western European studies, the

Laws of Manu (who was partly a divine figure and partly a political philosopher) and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in India, and the work of Confucius, Mencius, and Lao-Tzu in China. As a result, the ideational approach to the concept of power has eventually become almost indispensable to administrative science, security studies, international political economy, and ethnic and racial studies. All power is political because it tends to be a spectrum of diversity, illusion, and abstraction whose effects can often be felt and seen but which itself cannot be touched because of its intangibility. As a result, there are competing definitions of power within a centuries-old debate. There is a primary tenet in the study of power and power structures that is known as realism. Realist political scientists (also known as "realists" and additionally by a later academic development, "neorealism") define power in concrete and physical terms: Power is the ability of A to get B to do what B would otherwise not do. This realist view of political power may be traced to the work of the eighteenth-century Scottish empiricist, David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740). However, Hume's position was limited in the sense that he endeavored to link it with morality and rights, as did other philosophers in his category, namely George Berkeley and John Stuart Mill. There are however other writers, perhaps collectively describable as the post-Hume writers, who modified his conception of power to take into account the complex matrix that modern forms of power entails (see *Realism*).

Realist political science tended to dominate the discipline of political science and its sub-discipline of international relations with the work of Hans Morgenthau in the 1950s. The realist concept of power also foreshadowed an entire generation of influential political scientists such as Robert A. Dahl, Gabriel A. Almond, Kenneth Waltz, and Sydney Verba and is commonly accepted by many if not most political scientists as a basic model for understanding political power, the structures of power, and their related complexities. By the mid-1960s, the behavioral movement in the social sciences as a whole—which was directly related to the functionalist movement and the importance of building general theories—modified the prevailing realist view of "politics as power" and brought into focus other forms of understanding the phenomenon of political power and political power structures.

There are also other forms of understanding the concept of power, and power structures. This would include a comprehensive array of how power might be approached, understood and treated such as administrative, bureaucratic, and organizational power; informational power, technological power, technocratic power, ethnic and religious power, colonial and postcolonial power, materialist and economic power, psychological power, class, and gender as power. The influence of behavioralism, functionalism, general theory building, and positivism in the political and social sciences resulted in an important premise: power is a double-edged sword that exists everywhere there are human societies. Like fire, power is a good slave but a poor master. Aristotle himself clearly explains the various uses of power in his interpretation of the various kinds of political regimes and constitutions in classical Greece. History has shown that monarchs, princes, tyrants, and dictators in power one day are suddenly divested of power the next day through coups, insurrections, rebellions, and war. Power that is uncontrolled may be garnered by anyone sufficiently capable of controlling its direction and distribution.

2. Understanding and Perceiving Power: Is Power Tangible or Intangible?

The methods used by the classical writers in the Aristotelian tradition and those of the late medieval to modern period such as Hobbes have treated power as the extension of human nature, its desires, motivations, and need for gratification. How then do we perceive power and how is it best conceived? Power is best perceived in terms of its effects. The effects of power are variegated and mixed. The effects of power include short-term violent political change, limited modifications to political, social, and economic structures, peaceful change, and long term change.

The nature of power is such that it is an abstract concept cannot be “touched” or “seen” except through its effects and its symbols. For example, the effect of a change in presidential power in the United States may be seen in developments in foreign policy and domestic policy over time. Citizens of a state may, as the result of changes in tax policy may end up paying different levels of taxes. There are also unintended effects of power that can be perceived, for example, in the case of the fall of Margaret Thatcher and the poll tax in the United Kingdom; the 1997 economic recession in Indonesia that hastened the fall of the Suharto regime; and the assassinations of US presidents and other political leaders: as Mao Tze-tung once said, “power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”

However, the intended uses of power are immediately more discernible and common throughout history as seen in the Peloponnesian wars; conquests of the Mogul Dynasty in India; the building of the great wall of China through several dynasties; the wars between the Christian knights and the Moslem warriors in the medieval age; the Napoleonic wars; the Allied victories in the second world war; Hitler’s genocide of six million Jews; the Vietnam and Korean Wars; Pol Pot’s genocide of the Cambodian people; and Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War. At a local level, the intended character of deliberate power with international impact was seen in the arrest and sacking of former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim on grounds of moral impropriety; the bombing and destruction of the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center in September 2001; and the rise and fall of Japanese, Thai, and Indian prime ministers through the deliberate work of power brokers and fractions within the political institutions of these countries.

Power may also be perceived in terms of its symbols such as the head of state and head of government. These important political positions may at times be fused as in the US president, the kings of Arab and Gulf states, and the Sultan of Negara Brunei Darussalam; or separate as in parliamentary systems of government built on the Westminster model; and in most Western democracies. There are also several alternative ways of perceiving power as seen in the concept of divine power in the sacred status of the Emperor of Japan, and the King of Thailand.

3. Relational Power Structures

Power may be perceived to be everywhere because human beings interact with each other at various levels that necessarily involve an exchange of power, and such exchanges of power result in changes in the behavior of the individuals, groups, or

society at large. The greater the level of the power exchange, the higher the possibility of altering the environment and the context in which it occurs. There are various dichotomous relationships that illustrate how power is used in all human societies. These relationships are traceable to the primordial hunter-gatherer thesis, early civilizations along rivers and water bodies, ancient regimes, medieval codes of conduct, manorialism, the empire and colonial states, early industrial states, Fordist mass production states, postindustrial states, and complex information technology regimes.

Power relationships may be specifically understood in the following dyadic relations: (1) leader–follower; (2) superior–subordinate; (3) monarch–subject; (4) patron–client; (5) master–slave; (6) speaker–listener; (7) interviewer–informant; (8) enemy–friend. These eight dyads illustrate the exercise of power through a superordination-subordination thesis that suggests that in order for any human system to be effective and in order for any process to work, there must be at some point where the leader–follower/superior–subordinate relationship is established and employed. These eight relationships also represent the main ways in which power may be observed and perceived. The dyads may also be used interchangeably to evaluate the nature of power usage in a given political context. For example, the Huk rebellion and the Moro separatist movement in the Philippines may be analyzed in terms of the patron-client dyad between a disenfranchised bourgeois-led patron and their working class clients, or in terms of a perceived superiority of one ideological claim over the inferiority of another (Marxism versus Democracy, for example). These eight dyads also capture an inherent characteristic of power, that is, the importance of domination over species and domination of the environment. The dominant nature of human beings over other species on planet earth illustrates the superiority of the human intellect over the dependence by other species in the animal kingdom. This is not a situation of moral preference where one species is better than another, but a relationship of power where one species has come to dominate over other species, and in doing so, has changed the course of the latter's destiny.

At a simple level, as long as there are two individual human beings there will be a power relationship where one follows and the other leads. There can be no separation of power from human interaction as the leader-follower model is the basis for all human organizations. In fact, one of the reasons why the human species has been successful thus far is seen in their ability to capture and harness power between and among human beings and through invention, creativity, innovation, and the creation of systems of control. These systems of control are then modified and replaced over time and in order to establish their relative use to those in power.

The nature of power has been the subject of academic and non-academic discussion for time immemorial. Plato, Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hans Morgenthau, Sheldon S. Wolin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida are some powerful and influential thinkers who have discussed the nature and effects of power in their variegated work. The work of these political thinkers over the millennia have established and illustrated that power exists everywhere in human society and is at the center of human civilization. The idea that power exists everywhere and at various levels in human societies suggests that human beings have developed

ways of organizing and harnessing power to their advantage, and ironically, often to their own disadvantage.

In 1651 the English philosopher and arguably the first modern political scientist, Thomas Hobbes used what he understood as a “scientific method” to study of the structure and organization of human beings, the characteristics, the *body corpora*, the Christian Commonwealth, and the concept of power. Hobbes defined power mechanistically as, “a relation between cause and effect, between an active pushing ‘agent’ and a passive ‘patient’” (Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651] 1991:62). While some scholars believe that Hobbes was unable to break away from the Aristotelian, and subsequently Cartesian (an episteme after the work of the Famous French philosopher and scientist, Rene Descartes) modes of thought where all effects are the result of a directional cause, it is clear that Hobbes himself had made a radical departure from the classical and medieval epistemologies to power by relating the concept to a naturalistic motivation that began with the Senses in the human biological make-up, “the Power of a man is seen in his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good” in the *Leviathan*. Unfortunately, Hobbes who wrote and published in the seventeenth century did not have access to the kind of post-Enlightenment literature that is available in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and in effect contributed to a prevailing predominance of prejudice against women. However, Hobbes’s stereotyping in his work does not completely detract the late modern reader from Hobbes’s ability to provide insights into the concept of power and how power was structured and motivated, here we recall the work of the vain-glorious people, within a commonly shared biological base. Hobbes was important because he provided an early form of model of state power in a manner that contrasted Niccolo Machiavelli’s Italian metaphorical prose in *The Prince*. The acquisition therefore of “some future apparent Good” is referred directly to the idea of motivation, desire, want, and need for physical and political action. Again, in the *Leviathan*, all power is political is best demonstrated in Hobbes’s statement that there is a “general inclination of all mankind, a *perpetuall* and restless desire of Power after power, that *ceaseth onely* in Death.” The fact that the desire and quest for power can only end in death means quite simply that those who seek power must know that such a desire also potentially exists in other human beings. Aristotle had argued centuries before Hobbes, and Seymour Martin Lipsett argued after him, that human beings are by nature political.

But why would there be a need to organize and harness power in the first place? The reason is the state of nature. Thomas Hobbes eloquently described the state of nature in his *Leviathan* of 1651 as one where life was “solitary, poor, brutish, nasty and short.” The Leviathan was a mythical animal that is supposed to be half crocodile and half hippopotamus. This strange beast was supposed to symbolize the body politic of a sovereign state that would be sufficiently adaptable in all kinds of environments, on land and in water, in order to continue to survive. The single word that best describes Hobbes’s state of nature is anarchy. This was a primordial situation where individuals survived through wit and physical strength. Only the fittest and most capable were able to survive. The only way out of such a brutish nightmare would be, according to writers such as Robert Nozick, the formation of multiple protective agencies. These agencies were akin to security agencies that ensured the survival of the common individual’s routine activities by providing protection to their physical beings. In other words, these

were in fact one of the first forms of structured power. Structured power is about controlling brute and physical force, as seen in Hobbes's *Leviathan* (see *Anarchism*).

Max Weber is considered by many social scientists, especially sociologists, as a pre-eminent scholar of society and bureaucracy, and perhaps arguably, the most prominent sociologist after August Comte, and Saint-Simon. Weber argued that the exercise of power was itself an action or activity on the part of one actor that was forced upon other actors within a system. We can therefore conclude that the success or failure of the strength of an actor's power is seen in the extent to which there is resistance to the force of power. If the resistance is strong, then it is said that the actors will prevail; if there is little resistance or the resistance is weak, then it may be said that the force of power in terms of the initiator's will does not prevail. Weber was the editor of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* and went on to publish many influential articles including: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1903–5); three volumes of *Religions in the East* (1921); *Politics as Vocation*; *Religion as Vocation*, and other more literary work. His concentration in his Calvinist inspired thesis on capitalism was used by sociologists, and turn of the century economists, to radicalize Karl Marx's claims about historical materialism and its antecedents. His main contribution to the study of economic power came via the way of a kind of religious zeal. However, Weber's primary contribution in terms of bureaucratic power was perhaps best captured in the image of the "iron cage," that arose out of his work on society and economics, which human beings cannot escape. For Weber the idea of bureaucracy was to control and extend the power of its occupants, and those who held office.

By channeling the forces of power towards a particular location and through a system of properly regulated procedures, political power would thus be productively employed towards the development of a given set of objectives such as the concept of the national interest. Structuring power is crucial in all human societies because power is inherently potent and when misapplied or wrongfully employed leads to disaster. Power also bears no preference for time, place or state of economic development. This is illustrated in the 1979 nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA; the Union Carbide plant disaster in Bhopal, India, in 1984; the and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster the Ukraine, the former USSR, in 1986; the French nuclear tests in the South Pacific at Morurua atoll in 1995 and later at Fangataufa in 1996 are all testaments to the disastrous effects and unintended consequences of the misuse of power.

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Biographical Sketch

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