

“A” Level Sociology

A Resource-Based Learning Approach

Power and Politics

Unit P1: Basic Concepts

Introduction

We need to begin by noting and understanding the definitions of - and inter-relationship between - the following concepts:

- a. Power
- b. Politics
- c. Authority
- d. Ideology

The concepts of **power and politics** are entwined / inter-dependent in the sense that politics - whether of the specifically **governmental** kind (political parties, pressure groups, etc.), the **economic** kind (bureaucracies, the organization of the workplace into social hierarchies based upon status, etc.) or the **interpersonal** (relations between males and females, children and adults, etc) - involves the exercising of power.

What we have to begin by doing, therefore, is to **define** the concept of **power** (and understand the differing **dimensions** / aspects of power - coercive power, types of authority and so forth) and relate it to such ideas as:

- a. The social characteristics of the powerful and the powerless.
- b. The development of ideological frameworks that legitimise the exercise of power.
- c. The social effects / consequences of the exercising of power.

Explicitly, in relation to politics and power there are two basic kinds of sociological question that we need to explore:

- a. Who rules in society?
- b. How is their power created, legitimised and reproduced?

In social terms, power, almost by definition, involves the rule by the few over the majority and we have to understand the political processes (both Structural and Interpersonal) whereby power is legitimated (the process whereby power ceases to be nakedly coercive and becomes power that is based upon authority).

Question:

How would you define the concept of power?

(Try to think of an example of a relationship based upon power (for example, making your little brother / sister into your personal slave) and "work backwards" from this to create a definition of power.

To begin with, it might be useful to look at a couple of definitions of power:

a. Giddens ("Sociology"):

"By power is meant the ability of individuals or groups to make their own concerns or interests count, even where others resist. Power sometimes involves the direct use of force, but is almost always also accompanied by the development of ideas (ideology) which justify the actions of the powerful."

Question:

Can you provide an example that illustrates Giddens' definition and explain why you think it represents a good example of power?

b. Max Weber:

"Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests."

Another way of expressing the above is that power represents the ability to get your own way, even if your "power" is simply based upon bluff...

Question:

We sometimes hear the phrase "knowledge is power". Explain what this means and provide an example of a situation in which this might be true (for example, does the knowledge possessed by your teacher / lecturer make them powerful?).

As I noted above, the concepts of **power, politics, authority** and **ideology** are linked in some way and it would be useful to explore this linkage in the following way:

"Political behaviour", as I have suggested, covers almost all forms of human social interaction - from Parliaments and political parties, through social systems characterized by notions of dictatorship / democracy, to interpersonal relationships such as that between an employer / employee, parent / child, teacher / student.

"Politics", in this sense, is a concept that can be defined as:

"A process involving the exercise of control, constraint and coercion in society".

In this respect, **any** social relationship involves some form of political relationship between the participants because all such relationships involve a concept of power - whether that power is openly displayed or obscured from view. By its very nature, any process that involves some attempt to control the behaviour of others (whether or not it is successful) is one that is based upon power and, by extension, is political in character.

Question:

Explain, using the example of your behaviour within the classroom, the meaning of "political" as it is defined above.

In addition, in order for any social process of interaction to take place, it must be **guided** by some form of **ideology** (a framework of belief about "what is going on"). In this respect, social relationships are guided - implicitly or explicitly - by certain **ideological principles / beliefs**.

For **example**, in a classroom we believe, in ideological terms, that education is "going on" and, by and large, we accept the nature of the political relationships that we find in this situation (teacher / student, student / student and so forth).

However, the vast majority of our social relationships - whilst underpinned by some concept of **power** - involve a more-subtle form of social control, namely "**authority**". In this respect, people comply with the wishes of others **not** because they are threatened or forced, but because they see the power of the person making a demand as **legitimate** - that the person making a demand has a right and proper expectation that their command will be obeyed.

The following chart, based on **Max Weber's typology of power** illustrates the distinction between **coercive power** (that is, power based upon the use or threat of force) and power based upon various types of **authority**.

Types of Power			
Coercion		Authority	
	Charismatic	Traditional	Legal - Rational
People are forced to do as they are told under threat of punishment (for example, in a prison or a school classroom).	People obey because of the personal qualities of the person doing the telling. Well-known charismatic figures include Jesus Christ, Hitler, Chairman Mao and so forth. However, charismatic figures may arise in any social grouping and such people assume positions of authority over others on the basis of personal qualities of leadership perceived in that individual by other group members.	Those who exercise authority do so because they continue a tradition and support the preservation and continuation of existing values and social ties (for example, the Royal Family).	Those in authority give orders (and expect they will be obeyed) because their job gives them the right to give orders. Anyone who fills the same position has the right to issue orders, which means this type of authority is not based upon the personal qualities of the individual. Orders are only to be obeyed if they are relevant to the situation in which they are given (for example, a teacher could reasonably expect the order to "complete your homework by Thursday" to be obeyed by a student in their class. The teacher could not reasonably expect that the same order issued to the student's parent would be obeyed. Similarly, the order to "go down the street and get me a newspaper" would not be seen as a legitimate order for a teacher to give his / her student, hence the student would not feel compelled to obey). This form of power is the typical form that exists in our society and is sometimes referred-to as "bureaucratic" power since it is based upon the status of an individual's position in a social hierarchy, rather than the individual herself.

An **example** of the **inter-relationship** between the concepts of **power**, **politics**, **authority** and **ideology** might be as follows:

The relationship between an **employer** and an **employee** is a **political** one, insofar as it is based upon a particular form of **ideological** framework (Capitalism).

The **ideology** of capitalism specifies the basic or **general form** of this relationship. The employer, for example, buys the labour power of the employee and it is the nature of this basic form of relationship which makes capitalism, for example, different to slavery (since, under Capitalism the employer does not own his / her employee).

Political behaviour, in the above example, represents the real, everyday, form which the relationship between an employer / employee takes.

Power enters the equation in the sense that the employer exercises power over the employee in the workplace. The nature of their political relationship specifies the broad nature of their power relationship.

In one sense, this is a political relationship underpinned by some form of coercive power - the employer can make the employee do certain things that may be against his / her will to resist. However, a better way of looking at this political relationship is to see it in terms of authority (the legal / rational type).

The employee, for example, obeys commands given by an employer:

- a. Because the nature of their (contractual) relationship effectively gives the employer the power to exercise command.
- b. The employee recognizes that the employer has a legitimate expectation that commands will / should be obeyed.
- c. The power of the employer, however, derives from the office that he / she holds. The employee, for example, would not be forced to recognize the authority of the employer outside of the workplace (although, as is the nature of our social relationships, both will be aware of their respective status differences in any such situation). Similarly, certain commands would not be seen as the legitimate exercising of power, even within the workplace. For example, it would not be seen as a legitimate form of power for an employer to command an employee to break the law.

Question:

Briefly explain why you think this would not be a legitimate form of power. (Think about higher forms of power to which both employer and employee might be subject).

Thus, power, in this sense, is recognized as legitimate only within the confines of the particular political relationship that specifies the form that this power should take. Once that relationship ends (the employee leaves his / her place of work, for example) so the power of the employer over the employee ceases to operate.

To link all of the above together, we can note that:

a. **Ideology** specifies the general form of a social relationship.

For example, the ideology of capitalism is different to the ideology of feudalism or slavery. Under each system, a different form (or forms) of social relationship apply.

b. **Politics** specifies the specific form of a social relationship.

For example, the relationship between one employer / employee may be based upon mutual trust, mutual like, mutual dependence, whilst the relationship between another employer / employee may be based upon mutual need, suspicion, dislike and so forth.

c. **Power** underpins the form taken by any given social relationship.

d. **Authority** legitimises that relationship, such that the participants see their relationship as right and proper.

We are not, of course, restricted to the analysis of employer / employee relationships here. It is possible to analyse any form of social relationship in the above way.

Briefly analyse your relationship with your teacher / lecturer using the three categories / concepts noted above:

Ideological aspect:

Political aspect:

Power aspect:

As another example, we can understand these concepts "in reverse":

Any form of political relationship at the level of individual interaction involves some form of power. The employer, for example, derives his / her power, in part, from the dependent nature of the employee. The latter depends upon the former for employment and this dependence involves the ability, on the part of the employer, to apply sanctions, both positive and negative, to the employee.

However, relationships based purely upon coercion are inherently unstable, since they involve a constant battle between the person doing the coercing and the person being coerced. This idea is significant in relation to Marxist Conflict perspectives, insofar as Marxism stresses that the relationship between social classes under Capitalism is fundamentally unequal and based upon power imbalances that inevitably give-rise to conflict between such classes.

In this respect, naked forms of coercion tend to provoke confrontational responses. In this sense, such an exercise of power might be termed "opaque", insofar as both parties are aware that some form of power struggle is taking place.

Thus, naked forms of coercion tended, ultimately, to be self-defeating, since they explicitly encourage the coerced to:

- a. Recognize the fact of their subservience.
- b. Take steps to try and confront - and thereby eliminate - the power of others.

A more-successful way of wielding power is to secure the "co-operation" of those you want to obey your commands (power seen in terms of authority), since the exercise of power becomes "transparent" (that is, whilst power is being wielded, it is not seen as such by the person being commanded).

By convincing the subject of your power that your relationship is good, right and proper, therefore, compliance with your wishes can be achieved without repeated confrontations. Co-operation can be secured without the subject of your power "realizing" that power is being wielded.

As an **aside** here, it is useful to note the **difference of interpretation** involved in **Structural Functionalist and Marxist Conflict** analyses of the basis of social organization.

For the Functionalist, a positivist preoccupation with "observable social phenomena" tends to mean that the "co-operative" nature of social life is taken for granted without questioning the idea that such "co-operation" may well be based upon an underlying (unobservable) coercion.

Marxists, on the other hand, tend to theorize "co-operation" (which clearly exists in any society) as the "observable manifestation" of hidden social phenomena (economic inequality and the power relationships produced by this structural inequality).

Think about why you "co-operate" with your teacher / lecturer in the learning process. What "underlying" power relationship might exist in this relationship, such that "co-operation" is actually an illusion?

In this respect, ideology comes into play, insofar as it is through the successful dissemination of ideology that the powerful are able to persuade the powerless that

their subordinate position is normal, natural and right - that the powerful have a right to command and influence.

Finally, using **domestic labour** as an example, we can see how **Weber's typology of power** may operate within this context.

How, for example, do men ensure that women do most of the domestic labour within the family? Consider each of Weber's categories in turn and briefly state whether or not you think it is a useful explanation of this power relationship.

a. Coercion:

Although male violence against women within the family is fairly common within our society, men do not really need to force women to do domestic labour.

b. Charisma:

Whilst some form of charismatic attraction between the sexes might exist at various points in their relationship ("falling in love" for example), this does not constitute a particularly useful explanation in this context.

c. Traditional:

This aspect of authority is clearly significant in this context, insofar as the balance of power between males and females is partly based upon traditional forms of social relationship - women have "always" been the domestic labourer, men have "always" been the breadwinners (except, of course, that this is not actually true - it just appears to be true).

d. Legal / Rational:

Again, in tandem with tradition, a significant aspect of the power relationship within the family is based upon this form of authority. People see it as "right and proper" that domestic labour is mainly "female work". Women, in this respect, do not have to be openly forced to do domestic labour but, on the contrary, the force of their socialization leads them to internalise ideas about the role of women, the role of men and so forth, that leads "naturally" to their primary social role of domestic labourer.

What I have tried to demonstrate, in the above, is the idea that the concept of power is always based upon some form of social relationship which, in turn, always involves some form of inequality. What we have to do now, therefore, is to investigate the origins and distribution of power in society, in order to understand the social basis of power.

In this respect, we can begin by focusing upon the structural origins and basis of power (and, by so doing, understand something about the nature of political relationships and political power at the level of both Social Structure and Social Action) and, to do this, we will start by looking at the development of the modern political State.