



## SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF POWER

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### ABSTRACT

*Power is a complex topic of discussion and debate as it involves multitude of structures and institutions of society. Academics, philosophers, politicians, and a host of other individuals from a variety of backgrounds have all debated and refined the definition of the word. Sociologist conception of power is very distinct from that of disciplines of social sciences. Sociological perspective on power has gained prominence and recognition since the development of the discipline. From Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, to Max Weber these classical thinkers laid the foundation for the study of power as a subject matter of significance, and in later years the subject of power became central to the sub discipline of political sociology.*

*The purpose of this article is to offer a selective summary of power or how power has been conceptualized, how it problematizes a simplistic reductive monolithic idea of power as domination versus subordination. The objective is to revisit all the varied definitions of power, currently present under different schools of thought and try present a nuanced perspective of power.*

**Keywords:** *Power, Society, Authority, Domination, Political Sociology.*

### Introduction

The term Power has been a significant topic of discussion and research, not just in social science lexicon but also within the discipline of sociology. Sociologist have a very distinct way of studying concept of power than political scientists or historians. The perspectives to locate and discuss power basis its existence or location are completely

different. Sociologists are interested in its influence, its location, its pattern of mobility, its affects and causes of conflict or contest.

From classical thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber to more contemporary thinkers like Anthony Giddens, C. Wright. Mills, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Robert Dahl, Steven Lukes

and others. Each thinker as had his (mostly men, as women contribution remains limited to study of power to this day except in feminist or gender studies) own interpretation to the study of power and has presented a new paradigm on it.

Power is a complex topic of discussion and debate as it involves multitude of structures and institutions of society. Academics, philosophers, politicians, and a host of other individuals from a variety of backgrounds have all debated and refined the definition of the word. Whether a state defined as capitalist or communist, monarchy or democracy, simple or complex, it becomes central to establish where power is located? How it functions? How it is exercised? All these questions have remained a matter of debate and conflict. The ideological ground on which nation state is established aimed to consolidate power and maintain hierarchy. As Steven M. Buechler (2014) argues that “the role of states as repositories of tremendous power”. They encapsulate lofty values, empower democratic involvement, and satisfy societal demands at their finest. At worst, they oppress citizens, incite conflicts, and commit genocide. The problem of legitimacy is critical at all times. As a result, it is critical to comprehend and challenge the role of the state, its legitimacy, and who wields state authority. Each theorist's work and contribution to the study of power has been undeniably significant, but each also gives a very distinct and exclusive perspective of power or methodology for investigating it.

The purpose of this article is to offer a selective summary of power or how power has been conceptualized, how it problematizes a simplistic reductive monolithic idea of power as domination versus subordination. The objective is to revisit all the varied definitions of power, currently present under different schools of thought and try present a nuanced perspective of power.

“Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1998).

As a subject matter of study power, to begin with is very complex, ever changing, unstable in form, limitless in structure and even opaque as some would argue. The study of power is contentious and very tricky, as the methodology to study itself is not widely acceptable or established, but then one can easily argue sociology itself remains, a critical discipline, which constantly questions its origins and its evolution (Turner S. Bryan, Intro., Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology, 2006). So, whether it is study of power or sociology as a discipline in order to make advances, critical analysis and constant questioning is very important. Starting from classical to more contemporary thinkers, the objective is to present each of their perspectives on power in a systematic manner. To begin, the most frequently accepted and generic definition of power is the capacity to secure one's aims, or the ability of a person or group to carry out one's will or dominate others, especially when others are opposed.

Among the classical works on topic of power, one of the most acknowledged works

of Max Weber. His distinct approach and methodology to study power provides a valuable insight. Weber famously defines power (Macht) as the 'probability' or chance that an actor will be in a position to achieve or impose his or her will over the resistance of others (Weber 1978 [1922]). It is when power is successfully exercised in a predictable manner and without resistance such that 'a command with a specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons' (Weber 1978 [1922]).

### **Max Weber approach to Power**

He focused on 2 central notions, for power to be exercised, first domination (Herrschaft), then authority. His methodology to approach the study of power was based on typology of Ideal Type. For Weber, the ability to command, manifests from capacity to dominate. In his work *Economy and Society*, where domination and its study is central, he tries to related and further expand this concept to explain authority. Domination commands obedience and is based on some form of authority (legitimate and operating in a particular formal sphere of order, of course) which explain how power is constructed, yielded, and people are subjected to it.

Weber builds an ideal type of authority to explain his theory. Three forms of authority, first traditional authority, which emerges out of traditional social actions and sanctity of traditions, beliefs, customs and values. Then comes charismatic authority, is again legitimized and accepted by population based on superhuman qualities of one individual. In this form, charisma of one individual or personality, where his/her

following is based on a belief system, either heroism or holiness. Each call or command dictated by a charismatic leader is considered as a war cry, everyone to follow blindly for a better tomorrow. Charisma instigates revolutionary and radical changes in society. Last is rational-legal form of authority, based on rational established laws and bureaucratic procedures, where constitution is legally binding and state is in control. The rule is called as legal law, and not based on personal sanctions of one individual. This form of authority Weber was most focused on and predicted that all modern society to coincide with this form. For him, this authority was purest type and structured. Weber presents this form of authority later in his work on *Bureaucracy*.

For Weber, clearly, authority was legitimized form of domination, where state was in control. Weber study was structured and pure in form. He represented a clear, methodical and systematic image of study of power. Although significant and broad in field of study, it still showcased monochromatic representation of power.

### **Karl Marx: Bourgeoisie Class and Power**

Unlike Weber, Karl Marx saw not state but rather capital, control over means of production and private property, as sources of power. For Marx, power of the state or political power emerges from economic power. Power exists in capital, its production and through coercion. Those who yield and control economic factors (base structure) are in control of rest (superstructure). On matter of interests, only one class that's always prioritized, the capitalist class (Bourgeoisie class). The

principles of domination and authority are dictated by this class. State apparatus is also in control of the dominant class and they have successfully established rules and laws which are more accommodative to their interests. As Marx rightly argues “that the dominant class the Bourgeoise has successfully established the modern industry and world markets, conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx, 2008). Broadly speaking, the bourgeoisie has monopolized control over social and political power via various forms of coercion. It’s through different means and measures that the yard stick of power has remained with one particular class always.

Karl Marx presented a very structured and symmetrical source of power. His approach to power directly relates to his study on class structure, exploitation, alienation, antagonism and struggle of one particular class against the other. He presented a crucial depiction and nuanced view on how power relations get established and function in society. But, Marx, as his critique and supporters would argue had a precise vision to study power, where every reason related to economic factors. Some contemporary Marxist scholars like C. Wright Mills, Antonio Gramsci and Althusser expanded Marx theory and presented more comprehensive and holistic perspective on power. Their focus shifted from Marx’s demystified economic dependent variables to other equally critical variables of power like institutions, culture etc.

With the end of World War II, much work been done on understanding structures and institutions of power. The world altered dramatically post the wars and with it the axis of power of world order. Earlier Europe emerged as center of power, but after the war, this access swiftly changes towards Russia (Ideas of Communism and its society) and USA (Ideas of Capitalism and its society) especially after Gilbert, 2008. A strict intellectual arena developed to question the notion of power and a race to present which one is superior from the other or more acceptable and for betterment of society. Different schools of thought emerged, from Marxian to Neo Marxian, to pluralist, to more egalitarian notion of power like that of Peter Bacharach & Morton S. Baratz and most important amongst them that of Steven Lukes. One cannot ignore more discursive idea of power of Foucault, even Talcott Parsons functional (Weberian) understanding of power based on his study of social systems, produced a very fresh perspective on the notion of power. What is obvious is that the study of power has percolated over period of time percolate as a hot bed of debate and how the discourse changed by these schools of thought.

### **C. W. Mills his concept ‘The Power Elite’**

To begin our contemporary approach to power, one requires to begin with C. Wright Mills, in his popular work ‘*Power Elite*’ (1956), provides a very compelling argument on the notion of power present in United States of America. According to him “Power, resides with all those ‘who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it” (Mills, 1956). He focused on ‘Positions’ as

fundamental means to power (Mills, 1956). These positions are specifically important as it yields power only to few individuals and not rest. The hierarchy of positions gets erected within institutions, where power emerges from and distribution of power varies based on social structures of society. Hence, Institution give rise to position which are occupied by few individuals, who yield power from this centralized and concentrated system. Mills mentions 'As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women' (Mills, 1956). This is what Mills meant by his concept of role of power as 'Power Elite'.

Mills defined power elite as 'men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions that allow them to make decisions that have major consequences' (Mills, 1956). These institutions are although symmetrically aligned but yield power from one another and provide support. Each institutions acts its own but also mutually benefits other. Their functions and powers often overlap. Three particular institutions Mills focussed on, the economic, the military and political. He approached these institutions in a very systematic and conceptual manner. In Economic institutions, he focussed his attention on the 'corporate' positions. Those who are in these intuitions yield substantial amount of economic power through these positions. In Political space Mills (1956)

focussed on top positions of the President of the state, Vice President, Speaker, Cabinet members, and Supreme Court Justices etc and calls them 'the political directorate', who preside in the House of Senate, the Congress and the Justice department. And lastly the military 'warlords', includes the Chief of staff and Generals, those at the realm, presiding at the Pentagon (Building in Washington DC). These institutions and the hierarchy of positions they make to be occupied by few chosen one's is what Mills calls as 'Power Elite', it is they who rule and who establish laws for others to follow. They make all the decision and power is monopolised, controlled within these institutions, they work in tandem with each other to keep their positions of power strong.

Mills presents a very persuasive argument about where the power emerges from and where it remains. This small group of individuals, who rotate their positions from time to time within these 3 institutions, act as a unified force, and control more or less all the decision making power of the entire nation state. This circulation of elites breaks down divisions among economic, political, and military leaders and contributes to greater unity for the power elite as a whole (Buechler, 2014). For Mills these power yielding instructions are structured as one large Pyramid and that is how power flows from top to bottom. Mills argument although systematic presents again a very one directional location of power. Power Elite argument stands correct if you see capitalist societies from a Marxian perspective, where power is central and in hands of only a few.



### **Robert Dahl: The Pluralist Perspective of Power**

A more nuanced approach to understand power, Robert Dahl presented Pluralist perspective of power in his work, first came as an article, *The Concept of Power* (1957) and later published book titled, *Who Governs: Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961). Dahl, tried to differentiate pluralist view of power being different from elitist view of power. The pluralist viewpoint focuses on how power is dispersed and draws attention to diverse agencies of power. According to the pluralist paradigm, power is divided across various groups and is based on the decision-making element, but who decides this allocation of power? Coalitions of like-minded people, unions, professional associations, and business lobbyists are examples of such groups amongst whom this allocation of power happens. For Dahl (1957), the existence of an elite had to be demonstrated through the direct investigation of decision making. According to him (Dahl, 1957) “power is dispersed and more fragmented”. Certain groups provide a more effective way of representation than others. The larger the group, the more successful the decision-making process, which may be accomplished through established ways of negotiations and compromise. He called this as more observable and “Intuitive view of power” (Lukes, 1974). Further discovered that no single group would enjoy a monopoly on decision making since different groups were effective in different issue areas at different periods of time. Dahl argued (1957) that because every voter could find some type of

political representation, the system was pluralistic.

In his earlier paper *'The Concept of Power'* (Dahl, 1957) he expresses his “intuitive conception of power” as follows: “A possesses power over B to the extent that he can persuade B to do something that B would not otherwise do”. The first phrase relates to A's capability ('... to the degree that he can convince B to do something...'), but the second indicates a successful attempt—the distinction, of course, being between potential and real power, between possession and further exercise of it. The latter—the exercise of power—is crucial towards this understanding of power.

Dahl's key strategy in *Who Governs?* (1961) is to “identify for each decision whether parties launched alternatives that were eventually approved, vetoed alternatives facilitated by others, or presented alternatives that were rejected.” These acts were then documented as individual “successes” or “failures.” For him power is located among larger interest groups and is very much dispersed, this group can be a potential power holder, but we can only find that out when active exercise of power happens, participation matters.

### **Peter Bacharach & Morton S. Baratz: Two Faces of Power (1962)**

Dahl's arguments one power were appreciated and became the focus of attention among students studying notions of power. It also attracted sharp criticism from many. And one of the strongest amongst them came from *Peter Bacharach & Morton*

*S. Baratz (1962)*, their article “Two faces of power”, presented a strong criticism to Dahl’s standpoint on power. According to them there are Two Faces of Power, Decision making and non-decision making, they call this as ‘Anti Behavioural View’ (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970). Decision Making - 'a choice among alternative modes of action' and Non Decision Making - 'a decision that results in suppression or thwarting of a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision-maker' (Lukes, 2005). The voices are often suffocated before they can be expressed; or either kept covert; and even eliminated if required before they can get access to the relevant decision-making process.

They argued that power is expressed not only through decisions made in the political arena, but also through decisions about which potential issues are allowed into the political arena, and which are kept out, which they refer to as “non-decisions” or decisions made to avoid or suppress conflict (Lukes, 2005). They both argue that, “Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. Power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences.” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970).

According to them power is working and is active when potential grievances do not come out in public arenas and are suppressed. Some groups are denied access or are categorically deliberately ignored from decision making process, they call this as ‘Mobilisation of Bias’. Only issues that are acceptable emerge and becomes an issue, rest fail to see the light. Through sanctions or coercion compliance is secured by the powerful for rest, vested interests are maintained. According to them, the consensus that was helping to make decision making process more liberal and democratic is objectional, as non-decision making process excludes people when there is consensus and conflict is an integral part of this process.

### **Steven Lukes: The Three Dimensions of Power**

Another American Sociologist, Steven Lukes, goes out further, not just critique both Robert Dahl (1956) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) work, and presents his own model of understanding power. In his much celebrate work *Power: A Radical View* (2005), he tries to emphasise on hidden forms of power. According to him ‘both one and two dimensions of power ignores the structural aspects that are reinforced and normalised through repeated compliance and patterned behaviours which, rather than being a product of individual actions, are in fact maintained by factors on a systemic level and are often manifested through individual *inaction*’ (Lukes, 2005). The most interesting and hidden form of power, according to Lukes (2005), is manifested when people are precluded from recognising

their own grievances by having their issues, problems and wants so deeply influenced that they accept and even become complicit and ultimately help drive down their own domination, either by believing that it is natural or by believing that it is beneficial. He further argues that, while this may resemble consensus, there is in fact a latent conflict (which may never actually arise) between the interests of the powerful and the “*real interests*” of the people they dominate (Lukes, 2005). It is these real interest that people are kept away from and are deluded from what they want.

Lukes asserts that this form of power is the most evil and distorted. It is difficult to understand, evaluate or even analyse, as it comes from within. People forget their own values, beliefs, morals and perform what has been dictated to them time and over again. Lukes calls his three dimensional view the “supreme and most insidious exercise of power” as it allows rulers to shape the preferences and perception of the masses as well as prevent them from having grievances (Lukes, 1974). According to him (Luke, 2005), for 3<sup>rd</sup> dimensional power to operate effectively, requires an acceptance of the status quo because of an accepted underlying ideology. Those who hold power within the system will be accepted by the people, due to the peoples belief in the system. In such a situation the preferences of the people can be manipulated to fall into line with the agenda of the rulers (Lukes, 1974). People accept the conditions they live, the work they perform, the beliefs they have, into everything that’s taught to them or the way they are socialized. Role are established for individuals and are meant to

be performed the precise manner without questioning. Ideologies are dictated and educated to population so that their subjugation remains, based on their own willingness. Those in poverty will never question being poor and accept who they are, what is provided to them is for they own benefit. Even ultimate acceptance to the fact that there is no escape, this is ultimate goal of 3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension of power- a radical view, than liberal or reformist. Lukes refers to this as hegemony, a term borrowed from work of Antonio Gramsci (1971).

### **Antonio Gramsci: Hegemony, Ideology and Power**

The modern theory of power started to focus on multi-dimensional approach to study power than earlier unidimensional centralised notion. In its modern state, power is present everywhere, it represent either certain individual’s, institutions or is spread more evenly across. He one of his best acknowledged work is in the *Prison Notebooks* (1992). Where is presented his ideas and approach towards ‘Hegemony’ and how it establishes itself and functions. His notion of hegemony embodies his concept of power. Both power and hegemony works in tandem, there is perfect alignment between them. Antonio Gramsci notion of power is focused on two relations that established power, one that’s based on consensus and other coercion. The momentum rotated between both consensus and coercion. A hegemonic system is established where those in control of hegemonic positions wish to maintain their rule, only class that emerges winner after all



negotiations is this hegemonic class. It is here the power exists.

Consensus is established by 'civil society,' while coercion is built by 'political society,' and a wide balance between the two is maintained through negotiations between the two. This hegemonic class practices ways to mediate and remain at helm at all means. They play tricks to keep the civil society engaged and offer sacrifice of their own interest in order to keep broad control over civil society and remain itself as 'fundamental class', a class that is between two poles in relation of production. This class offer sacrifice only to keep its position of power intact. Gramsci calls this negotiation or methods used as hegemony.

For Gramsci (1992) the state controls "the hegemony of one social group over the whole of society exercised through so-called private organizations, such as the church, trade unions, schools, etc.," and a balance with the ensemble of public (coercive) organizations such as the state, the bureaucracy, the military, the police, and the courts. Thus, state power rests in a hegemonic equilibrium with alternated moments of force and consensus but there is no predominance by coercion over consensus. This hegemony of a certain class is formed through establishing itself over positions of power within a system, such as political, intellectual, and moral authority, and presenting a new method to govern or operate within this system through 'Organic Ideology' (Gramsci, 1992). This ideology is accepted by everybody, whether civil society or political society. The ideology and power to present it as collective will is

where power exists and dominates. This structural, systematic and Neo Marxian critical perspective by Gramsci revolutionised our outlook of understanding power. Where power is located and how it is manoeuvred by a particular class by providing a collective ideological framework to further condition the mass into subjugation.

### **Michel Foucault: Dispersive view of Power**

His approach to power has been highlighted in his seminal writings, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume One* (1988). Both of these works are critical to understanding his perspective on power. He defined power as "the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation" (Foucault, 1978). For him power is organized and exercised in different ways. For him power is dispersive, its spread across systems, its everywhere. It's not situated within a particular framework. 'Power is everywhere and come from everywhere' (Foucault, 1998).

He was not convinced about the idea that power is wielded by particular individuals, groups or single agency. Power radiated from everywhere, and must have a broad meaning, it is impersonal and cannot be possessed by one authority. Power is based on a complex system of relations, for Foucault power is 'blind'. For him power is within our everyday practices, actions between individuals, it is present wherever human are to act as subjects and agents. One

of the most important aspects about his work on power is, how he presented power to be not as a negative image but rather showcased it to have a positive impact on society and social relations. Power was to be considered in a productive capacity as it produces both reality and truth. Power is aimed to have a circulatory network like function rather than a direct linear function and it never localised. According to him (Foucault, 1998) “Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain . . . Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation . . . Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application”.

To help understand the capillary notion of power, he employs a methodology to understand power through knowledge, it is in this relation that power is born and produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another: that there is no power relation without the correlation constituting of field of knowledge nor knowledge that does not presuppose and constituted as the same time power (Foucault, 1977). Both power and knowledge have a reciprocating relation. While explaining this relation, Foucault introduces the concept of ‘Panopticon’ (Foucault, 1977) to establish how power knowledge interplay happens and how power is regulated. He borrows this concept of ‘Panopticon’ from Jeremy Bentham, presented as an architectural design to showcase how discipline and regulations emerge and behave within particular setting.

He uses the metaphor of Panopticon to emphasise how through constant surveillance of others, power and knowledge emerge.

His perspective offered a fresh nuanced understand and even critique to many theorists who studied power at great detail. The decentralised image of power that Foucault theorised, presented and argued over, translated into a paradigm shift towards approach to power.

### **Talcott Parsons: Social System Theory and Power**

True to his Weberian standing Talcott Parsons presents a grand model to help us understand power and its functions. In his paper “*On Concept of Political Power*” (Parsons, 1963), tries to explain his position and perspective on power. Parsons aimed to understand the concept of power basis general conceptual scheme and analyse how power functions in large scale complex social systems. To him power is consensual and is present in society, for society. He argued, (Parsons, 1963) that power needs to be understood as a “specific mechanism operating to bring about changes in the action of other units, individual or collective, in the process of social interaction”. His view of power is different than that of Weber, his focus is not to prove power as a legitimate source, but rather how social interaction leads to exchange and operation of power. For him power is similar to money, just as without money one cannot survive or function in a capitalist economy, without money one cannot buy or sell human comforts, similarly power is to political systems. Money and power help

shape society and function with ease. Both help in first building confidence, stability and then help establish legitimacy.

According to him “Power then is generalized capacity to secure the performance of binding obligations by units in a system of collective organization when the obligations are legitimized with reference to their bearing on collective goals and where in case of recalcitrance there is a presumption of enforcement by negative situational sanctions-whatever the actual agency of that enforcement” (Parsons, 1963). For him power is embedded, through individual socialisation this legitimacy comes in to effect. On authority Parsons (Parsons, 1963) says “Authority is essentially the institutional code within which the use of power as medium is organized and legitimized. It stands to power essentially as property, as an institution, does to money”. Both power and authority stands as a ‘collective system’.

## **Conclusion**

This paper on sociology of power, aim was to understand, compare and differentiate paradigms that have emerged within sociology on study of power in this due course. Although in a very limited capacity have tried to explain different school of thoughts in relation to study of power. Power from being studies in a linear, structural, localized perspective to a pervasive, collective, decentralized, multi-dimensional perspective. Some had command element of investigation and understanding about power. From Marx to Gramsci one can easily locate how Marx’s idea of power from base structure to

superstructure has shifted focus. Gramsci aimed to understand power from a cultural-political perspective than economic as studied by Marx. Steven Lukes, in his work ‘*Three dimensions of power: A Radical view*’ (Lukes, 2005), had a vantage point given by Peter Bacharach & Morton S. Baratz and Robert Dahl to work and use Gramscian theory of hegemony and ideology to explain his ideas in more nuanced manner. Talcott Parsons picked best of both the classical sociology theorists, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in order to explain his perspective on power. According to my understanding there has been a collective approach to understand the notion of power within the discipline of sociology. All major thinker and their theory about power, were aimed towards expanding the dimensions of power. From being legitimate source, to being dominating and exploitative, as representative of the elite, to being used only for subjugation, pervasive and even being a source to keep society function. These perspectives have enriched not just sociological way of thinking about power, but rather have helped other social science to broaden the horizon to understand different faces of power.

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