**Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics and Power**

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**The Marxist Tradition of Political Sociology**

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In the following three sections of this chapter, we will begin our discussion of political sociology with a look back at how it developed through the study of the work of the “founding fathers,” Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. We will then go on to consider the “analytics of power ” developed by Michel Foucault, the single most influential thinker on the development of contemporary political sociology, and the work on “governmentality” that directly draws inspiration from his writings on politics and power.

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*The executive ofthe modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie. -Marx and Engels,* Communist Manifesto, 1848

In many respects, it is far from evident that the state should have a central place in Marxist analyses of capitalism, given their overwhelming theoretical commitment to the view that it is economic relations which ultimately determine all social and political life. Marx himself, concerned primarily as he was with capitalism as a mode of production, concentrated on the economic level, and had relatively underdeveloped and tentative views on the state.

Here we shall follow Dunleavy and O’Leary’s (1987) classification of Marx’s analyses of the state into three distinct and somewhat contradictory positions on how it contributes to the reproduction of the capitalist system and the economic power of the bourgeoisie.

First, in the instrumental model, the coercive aspect of the state is emphasized; it is seen above all as repressive of working - class resistance to exploitation. The “executive of the modern state” is “but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” (Marx, 1977:223). On this model, economic power is quite simply translated into political power, by which means the dominant bourgeoisie rules over subordinate classes through the liberal state.

Second, in his later, more empirical writings, Marx suggested a different model of the state – the arbiter model (Dunleavy and O ’ Leary, 1987 : 210). In “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, ” he sketches the modern state in such a way as to suggest its relative autonomy from the interests of the bourgeoisie. The modern state has grown so strong that in exceptional moments, when the bourgeoisie cannot completely dominate the other classes against which it must struggle, it may become an arena for competing interests, an ostensible mediator, and may even act independently to limit the power of the bourgeoisie (Marx, 1992). However, “state power does not hover in mid - air”; it is only class interests that are represented at the political level and, ultimately, economic power will determine how state power is to be used (Marx, 1992: 237).

Third, in his mature economic work, Marx suggested a third model of the state: the functionalist version. In this view, developed in *Capital*, volume 3, the state is “superstructural,” determined entirely by changes in the economic “base” of society. The state apparatus, government, and legal forms operate in order to optimize the conditions for capital accumulation, regardless of how directly the bourgeoisie manages state institutions and irrespective of the balance of forces in society (Dunleavy and O ’ Leary, 1987 : 21011). In this understanding of the state, political power is irrelevant; the state is but an epiphenomenon of the economic logic of the capitalist system which reproduces itself in every social and political institution to the advantage of the dominant economic class.

For some time after Marx ’ s death, this economistic model of capitalist reproduction was Marxist orthodoxy.

It is the neo - Marxist rejection of this simplistic economism which in recent years has led theorists to consider political power at the level of the state as relatively autonomous of economic power.

**Neo - Marxism**

**Gramsci**

Writing in the 1920s, Antonio Gramsci was the fi rst Marxist to theorize the ideological and political superstructures as relatively autonomous of the economic base. As such, he was a major infl uence on other neo -Marxists such as Louis Althusser. The key term for Gramsci is “hegemony” which means the way in which the dominant class gains consent for its rule through compromises and alliances with some class fractions and the disorganization of others, and also the way in which it maintains that rule in a stable social formation (Gramsci, 1971 ; Simon, 1982 ).

However, Gramsci is innovative in Marxism in not thinking of the state as the institution in which politics takes place. According to Gramsci, hegemony is gained in the first place in civil society where ideology is embodied in communal forms of life in such a way that it becomes the taken - for - granted common sense of the people. All relations of civil society involve issues of power and struggle, not just class relations. Politics is more a cultural sensibility than an institutional activity for Gramsci.

However, as a Marxist, Gramsci was committed to the belief that ideological struggle is grounded in class struggle; he, therefore, argued that there must always be a single unifying principle in every hegemonic formation and that this can only be given by a fundamental economic class

Gramsci ’ s model is also limited in that, seeing politics as ultimately rooted in class struggle, it cannot give sufficient weight to social movements organized around gender, race, sexual politics, the environment, and so on.

**ELITE THEORISTS VERSUS PLURALIST THEORISTS**

Elite theorists tend to see democracy as working along the lines proposed by Weber (Marsh, 1995: 285) and, although the history of its intellectual development has not been thoroughly traced, there are affinities between pluralist theories and Weber ’ s view that there are many sources of power, not just the economy, and that elites do not rule supreme but can be challenged by organized groups in the political process (Held, 1987 : 187).

Elite Theorists

Elite theorists are concerned with the question of how and why it is that a minority must always rule over a majority, which they see as inevitable in any society. Political elite theorists are, above all, concerned with the decision - makers in society, those they see as holding power as a cohesive, relatively self - conscious group (Parry, 1969 : 134).

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Michels took the concentration of power in the hands of an elite to be a necessary outcome of complex organizations. He is responsible for the emphasis in empirical political sociology on analyzing the dynamics of party politics. His famous “ iron law of oligarchy ” states that, in modern societies, parties need to be highly organized and so, inevitably, become oligarchic, being hierarchically run by party leaders and bureaucracy such that the bulk of members are excluded from decision - making (Michels, 1962 ). Michels was critical of this process, although he saw it as tragically inevitable. As a socialist, he was disappointed that socialist parties would be unable to realize their democratic ideals.

Developing Michels ’ s thesis, Schumpeter saw democracy as nothing but competition between political parties whose elite members deal in votes, just as businessmen deal in commodities. It does not, and should not, mean rule by the people; it is rather a method for arriving at political decisions by means of a competitive struggle for the people’ s vote. Once elected, professional politicians must be allowed to rule, assisted by a strong, independent bureaucracy of expert administrators, since the stability of the political system requires respect for the judgment of elected representatives (Schumpeter, 1943 ).

A radical version of Weberian elite theory is the institutional elite theory proposed by C. W. Mills. In Mills’s view, the elitism of the US in the twentieth century is a serious hindrance to democracy rather than the factor that makes it possible and viable. As he sees it, power has become concentrated and unified in the elites of three institutions in the US: the military, the corporate, and the political; the connections between them having been strengthened by the growth of a permanent war establishment in a privatized incorporated economy since World War II. This concentration, combined with the one - way communication of the mass media as it is organized by elites, makes ordinary citizens ignorant and rather complacent, although fitfully miserable, about the extent to which they lack control over their lives (Mills, 1956 ).

Elite theory has tended to approach studies of democratic processes from a conservative perspective, radical and Marxist elite theorists notwithstanding. Schumpeter ’ s work has not only focused attention on electoral politics as if they were politics *tout court* , it has also led to “ actually existing ” democracy being taken as a more or less perfect instrument of rule, with scope for only minor, technical improvements (Bottomore, 1993 : 28). In effect, for empirical political sociologists – the charge is less valid in the case of more conceptual and normative work **(Held, 1987 :178 – 85)** – **a limited view of what politics involves has been strongly linked to a limited view of what democracy must be if it is to be practicable and to allow for stable government.** The state - centric view of power and politics held by elite theorists is linked to their understanding of mass society consisting of a passive, ignorant, and apathetic population: technically incompetent to participate fully in politics, according to competitive elitists; and continually deceived as to its real interests, according to more critical versions.

**Once politics is seen as a matter of everyday life, however, the emphasis changes completely. Contemporary political sociologists see society itself as cut across with inequities of power, any of which may be politicized and, therefore, become the focus of contestation**. Far from being passive, social agents are seen as engaged in remaking their own identities and the institutions of their everyday lives.

Pluralism Theories

Unlike elite theory, theorists of pluralism do tend to see citizens as actively involved in politics. 4 As pluralists see it, politics is a matter of competing interest groups, none of which can dominate completely over any of the others since all have access to resources of different kinds. Furthermore, they see the state itself as a set of competing and confl icting institutions, rather than a monolithic entity which exerts its power over the rest of society

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For this reason, they avoid the term, preferring to think in terms of government. Similarly, the “ people ” in a democracy is not a unified whole with a single will to be exerted, far less an apathetic, incompetent mass which needs to be ruled by an elite. **Democratic politics involves endless bargaining in order to influence government policy, which is nothing more than a compromise between the differing interest groups involved in the political process** (Dowse and Hughes, 1972 : 135).

Although pluralists take a wide view of politics as central to social life and independent of the state, **ultimately they share the definition of politics held by classical political sociologists.** Pluralists are interested in the plurality of interest groups which form and re - form in the social only insofar as they orient their demands to governmental institutions. Although the state is seen as little more than the arena in which social groups engage in political conflict, it is only insofar as these conflicts take place at the level of the state that they are treated *as* political (McClure, 1992 : 118 –19**). By definition, for pluralists there is no politics outside the state.**

**This limited pluralist definition of politics is linked to a restricted definition of power which, although wider than that of other schools in traditional political sociology**, nevertheless makes it impossible to see the construction and contestation of social identities as political. Famously, Dahl (1956 : 13) defines power as “ a realistic … relationship, such as A ’ s capacity for acting in such a manner as to control B ’ s responses. ”

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This presupposes an already constituted social actor who is in possession of power such that he or she is able to control the effects produced. As critics of pluralism have pointed out, the emphasis on observable effects means that they neglect ideas and the way in which the political agenda may be shaped in such a way that direct manipulation of the outcome of the political process is unnecessary (Lukes, 1974). Indeed, we must understand the very formation of the identities, capacities, and concerns of social groups as effects of power. The formation of identities and the construction of political perspectives are much more fundamental ways in which the politics of politics is structured than by decisions taken in a centralized bureaucracy.

Although pluralists do not take the interests of the social groups they study as given, their definitions of power and politics prevent them from understanding the formation and contestation of political identities in the social field and lead them to focus only on the way in which individuals try to maximize their interests at the level of government. **In this respect, the pluralist perspective remains within the framework of traditional political sociology**. A theory of politics of this kind cannot begin to grasp the asymmetries of power between groups in civil society that have been politicized by the activities of new social movements since the 1960s; pluralists were, in fact, extremely surprised by this development (Held, 1987 : 199 – 200).