Study Guide: Power

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I. Basics

A. While there are myriad definitions of power, essentially they all agree that power is basically making someone or something else do what you want. Differences appear in the unit of analysis (are you talking about a person? an organization? a nation-state? a system?), in how the characteristics of power are articulated (if at all), and so on.

B. Power is multiple. Michael Mann: "societies are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociological networks of power." (1986, p. 1)

C. Power is relational -- it arises in the course of interaction between people and social groups.

D. Power depends on the notion of agency -- the possibility of action with volition by a subject. If there is no subject, there is no agency.

II. Problems in the Study of Power

A. Because we are immersed in the effects of the exercise of power, it is difficult to perceive. This is a general problem in the study of communications -- since we cannot extract particular messages from the sea of information in which we swim, it is difficult to analyze the effects of specific messages.

B. Power is multidimensional.

1. Most people who study the exercise of power look only at one form or in one "scope" (area of activity).

2. It is very difficult to "convert" one form of power into another for the purposes of comparison and analysis; eg, how many tanks does it take to equal an extremely successful propaganda campaign? In general, it is very difficult to quantify the effects of the exercise of power, other than in the most gross terms (eg, number dead, nations conquered).

3. The multidimensionality of power means that there is the additional analytical problem of understanding the relationships among the various forms of power, so that the problem becomes even more complex.

4. Several current streams of research are beginning to look at relationships among different forms of power by treating a manifestation habitually understood to be one form of power

as if it were another. One important example is in the study of the law; today many are looking at judicial opinions, bodies of law, and legal argumentation as forms of discourse, narrative forms in the sense of short stories and poems.

5. Power relations also arise at every level of the social structure.

   a. Thus the unit of analysis for any discussion of power relations must be made clear.

   b. Interactions among relationships at different levels of the social structure are multiple and complex.

C. We have habitually focused on the holders of power in analyzing power relations. However, the level and forms of vulnerability of the subjects of power are just as important in determining the outcomes of the exercise of power; we need to learn how to analyze these as well.

D. The number of claimants to power is multiplying. This happens through various routes:

1. New power holders emerge:

   a. Some new power holders emerge when non-traditional power holders attain traditional forms of power, as when women enter politics and the corporate world.

   b. Some new power holders emerge when non-traditional power holders come to be recognized as holders of a variety of forms of power in their own right, as when the power of mothers to socialize children in ways significant to their adult behaviors as citizens becomes recognized. In terms of theorizing power relations, what have previously been identified as forms of resistance are now treated as autonomous sources of power.

   c. All of these new power holders are not necessarily individuals or social groups, what we have traditionally understood to be the holders of power. Michael Schudson, writing about how we remember Watergate, sees history itself -- what we used to consider "fact" -- as a form of resistance (and therefore of power). What he is referring to is the way in which all efforts to revise the past confront multiple residues of what happened that have power in their own right.

2. New forms of power emerge:

   a. Some new forms of power become available because of changes in conditions, as the development of the information infrastructure -- the global telecommunications network -- has done.

   b. Some new forms of power become visible because we have just begun to become aware of them. Awareness of new forms of power shows up as new concepts and theories about power. One example is identification of consumption habits as a form of power, rather than seeing consumers as being only subject to the power of advertisers.

E. The holders of power are becoming inextricably interdependent. In situations in which potential actors are intimately networked across multiple dimensions of activity, it is difficult to identify particular actors as responsible for specific acts and effects.

   1. This is the problem that Ulrich Beck has identified as the problem of accountability in the risk society -- how does one determine who ultimately is responsible for an environmental disaster?

   2. Foucault talks about this problem when he denies there is a particular agent (in Marxist theory, a class) exercising power, but rather a heterogeneous whole, what he calls a "network of strategies."

   3. Mattelart says this is a shift in the notion of power from an attribute of agents to a relation of exchange and negotiation.

   4. In combination with the multiplicity of identities and fracturing of identity at individual, social, and national levels, this suggests that a fundamental problem in the analysis of power today is that there may no longer <u>be</u> agency or the subject.

F. Notions central to the analysis of power that we have traditionally treated as simple we are now coming to understand are multivocal and complex.

   1. There are many different dimensions of "access," for example: cost, education, technical expertise, access to equipment, maintenance of equipment, cultural biases, etc..

2. In a second example, there are many different ways in which the concept of "equality" can be understood: equality of access? opportunity? basic resources? power? as defined by one's class or gender? as defined by the weaker party or by the stronger? Etc.....

H. Social processes are increasingly chaotic. The study of chaos -- ways in which order comes out of chaos, and chaos out of order -- emerged out of the combination of developments in theoretical mathematics and and in the ability to process massive amounts of information fast (computing), is fairly new and is being used across the natural and social sciences.

1. Two examples from international communication:

a. The shutdown of the AT&T long distance lines a couple of years ago for a day resulted from the chaotic interaction of commands within extremely complex computer programs.

b. The activities of the stock market and the effects of "program trading" (stock market activity handled by computer programs) are increasingly chaotic.

2. In this environment, individual acts of power have increasing effectiveness in the sense that one decision can trigger many resulting decisions or effects that can't be anticipated but which are nonetheless essentially connected with the first. On the other hand, intended acts of power may fail because of intervention from a source considered trivial. As a result of this, there may be significant differences between attributed power and real power (that is, perceptions of power play a very significant role in potential power).

3. It is beginning to be suggested that complexity itself may be a form of power.

I. Today it can be very difficult for human beings to perceive the effects of power.

1. Reasons for this difficulty:

a. The effects may take so long to be felt (as with genetic mutation) that it is difficult to understand any causal relation between any particular exercise of power and its effects. Ulrich Beck describes the impact of the growth of this type of effect as one of transforming us into a global "risk society" in which we ought to be including in our economic analyses not

just apparent "costs," but calculation of long-term and widespread risk as well.

b. There may be no sensible -- meaning evident to human senses -- way for human beings to perceive the effects of the exercise of power. Contemporary surveillance techniques provide numerous examples of this; while we continue to feel that if we pull the drapes and whisper, we are private, for example, in truth we no longer necessarily are.

c. Identification of the "effects" of the exercise of power, like other facts, depends upon institutionalized reporting mechanisms to point them out. Historically our reporting mechanisms have been organized almost exclusively by nation-states with the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis. If the effects run across borders, as with environmental degradation, determining the relationship between cause and effect, or even becoming aware of particular effects as environmentally caused, becomes difficult if not impossible.

2. Difficulties in perceiving the effects of power are problematic because:

a. As Ulrich Beck pointed out, when we don't know wher danger is coming from, our uncertainty and anxiety are increased.

b. Greater likelihood of turning to non-rational explanations and ways of perceiving the world (eg, cults like in Waco, Texas).

c. It makes risk prevention more difficult.

d. It makes it difficult to assign accountability. When the effects are negative, as in the case of environmental degradation, effective actors do not want to be assigned accountability, so this is to their advantage. Alternatively, one could say in the case of environmental degradation that the problem is the whole system, and thus everyone is in fact accountable.

III. The Three Faces of Power

A. An extremely influential 1974 book by Stephen Lukes, Power, has shaped discussion by political scientists about the nature of

power ever since. In it Lukes proposed a typology of three forms of power:

1. Instrumental Power

   a. Instrumental power is power over the body.

   b. This is power as it is commonly understood: direct coercion of behaviors through force or other explicit action.

   c. Some forms of economic power, such as controlling wages, are instrumental.

   d. Because the exercise of instrumental power and its effects are generally behavioral, they are the most observable of all the forms of power.

   e. Most analysts include the use of violence in this category. Some argue that the term "power" can only be used among ontological equals who are in conversation with each other (and therefore members of a shared community); from this perspective, violence is not a form of power, but something separate.

   f. This can be called "decision-making" power because it affects how people make decisions, and requires an active decision in its exercise.

   g. Studies of instrumental power can be found in traditional military histories, etc..

   h. An example of the exercise of instrumental power within the academic setting is the assignment of grades.

2. Structural Power

   a. Structural power is power over behavior.

   b. Structural power shapes the kinds of decisions that people and groups can make by forming institutions and establishing rules and regulations; it <u>structures</u> society and therefore the ways we act and interact.

   c. Structural power is more difficult to observe and analyze, though our ability to do so has grown over the past century.

d. Unfortunately, however, most of our analytical tools for the study of structural power assume structures that are stable or seek stability in form. In today's environment, we are coming to understand that all types of systems or structures are likely to undergo constant change. Thus a conceptual approach based on stasis is inappropriate; we are beginning to turn to what is variously called second order cybernetics (contemporary "systems theory"), chaos theory, catastrophe theory, and/or theories of punctuated equilibria for a conceptual approach for the study of structures in change.

e. Structural power has been called "nondecision-making" power because it determines which decisions are even possible to make.

f. Political economy, which looks at how economic interests shape political and social processes, discusses structural power; so does organizational sociology, which looks at the nature and impact of organizations.

g. An extremely important way in which structural power is exercised is through the design of research methods and the collection of statistics. Anthony Giddens: "What sociologists call 'societies' are ... also states. The intensifying of the administrative power of the state, involving especially the harnessing of informational resources, is one of the most characteristic features of the modern epoch." (1987, p. 27)

h. An example of the exercise of structural power in the academic setting is the design of degree programs that restricts your freedom in choosing courses.

3. "Consensual," or Symbolic, Power

a. Symbolic power is power over thought.

b. What Lukes calls consensual power and others call symbolic or cultural power is control over how people think, including the fundamental assumptions of their worldview and most basic beliefs. This type of power has been called "agenda-setting" power, referring to agenda-setting theory in communications; agenda-setting determines what you think about (though not necessarily your opinion about that matter).

c. This type of power is difficult to observe because as observers we are ourselves also affected by this type of power and therefore our observations are likely to be biased.

d. A century ago we began to study an obvious form of symbolic power, propaganda, which was the beginning of the field of communications as a distinct academic field. Cultural studies today is an effort to analyze manifestations of symbolic power. Fields like the sociology of journalism are attempts to understand the institutional processes that lead to the production of messages used in the creation of consensual power.

e. An example of an effect of the exercise of symbolic power is the idea that democracy is a good thing -- this is an assumption of which almost all of us are so persuaded that we never question it.

f. An example of the exercise of consensual or symbolic power in the academic setting is never questioning whether or not to get a college degree.

g. Impact of the "information society" on this type of power:

(1) Some argue that the capacity for this type of power has grown today because of our ability to transmit messages ubiquitously and constantly.

(2) Others believe that the effectiveness of this type of power has decreased in today's environment because of the diversity of messages received; in earlier environments, it was simpler to have a totalized communication environment as opposed to today's highly fragmented message stream.

(3) A third approach is to accept the importance of symbolic power in today's information environment, but to suggest that the nature of the power has changed. Today symbols refer not to things in the material or "real" world, but only to other symbols -- what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal."

4. Historically, different types of states have specialized in maximizing the use of different forms of power.

a. Culturally defined "nations" find their greatest strength in symbolic power. Traditional, informal, or formal controls over language use, religion, and the entire range of cultural patterns are where nations find their strength. Thus when the culturally defined Israel first came into being, one of its first acts was to develop Hebrew into a modern language unique to that nation-state, and the modern Islamic states strictly enforce Koranic law.

b. Bureaucratically defined "states" find their greatest strength in structural power. States as organizations exert their control by developing bureaucracies, often with elaborate information collection and processing mechanisms, and by setting rules. Thus Rome extended its geographic sphere primarily by extending its bureaucracy, including the infrastructure (roads, etc.) needed to sustain it.

c. Both nations and states will use instrumental power as needed. Ritual practices embed the use of instrumental power in nations; police and judicial mechanisms do so in states.

d. The nation-state that has dominated most of the industrialized world recently was an effort to bring these two ways of organizing society together; one way of understanding current political tensions in places like the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union is to describe what is happening as the coming apart of nations from states.

B. Lukes presented these forms of power as independent of each other.

1. Many of his commentators instead have explored their interdependence.

2. Some suggest that they are cumulative, so that structural power requires or includes instrumental, and consensual power requires or includes structural and instrumental power.

3. The interdependence of multiple forms of power is one of the things Foucault is talking about when he talks about a "network of strategies."

C. <u>The exercise of one form of power can in and of itself increase</u> the potential to exercise other forms of power.

1. The effects of the successful exercise of power will increase the perception of subjects of the power holder's strength, thus increasing the holder's power potential.

2. In a particularly important area, symbolic power is critical to the development and sustenance of what is called "legitimacy" -- the acceptance by a population of its government -- in order for structural power to be successfully exercised. At the end of the 1980s in Poland, for example, while everyone talked about the failure of the economy and the way in which everyone broke the law, Polish sociologists saw the lack of legitimacy of the Polish government and the creation of a much more sound black market economic environment in which everyone was scrupulously attentive to commitments. Legitimacy is gained not only by attempting to direct public opinion, but by the ways in which citizens choose to have themselves represented. This representation includes not only elected representatives in Washington, but also "representation" through the imagery and words of our discourse.

D. The effects of the exercise of one form of power shapes the environment in which the potential for other forms of power might be actualized.

E. An increase in the use of one form of power is likely to be accompanied by a decrease in the use of other forms of power. When police force is exercised strongly, for example, it is likely that consensual power is very weak.

F. Today many scholars are looking at ways in which particular exercises of power are simultaneously examples of more than one form of power.

1. The law, for example, is a primary element of structural power, but some today are studying it is as a discourse -- that is, as symbolic power.

2. Cynical analyses of the Gulf War see that exercise of instrumental power against another population as an exercise of symbolic power against our own population (and the rest of the world) -- as a TV program.

G. Below, it is argued that a fourth "face of power" needs to be added to this typology to accurately portray today's conditions.

IV. Dimensions of Power

A. Extensiveness

1. The range of power holders and the range of power subjects.

2. The greater the number of subjects:

   a. The greater the difficulty of maintaining control.

   b. The longer the chain needed to exercise power.

   c. The greater the likelihood that alternative power centers will develop.

   d. The greater the likelihood that power subjects will differ in significant ways that make the uniform exercise of power more difficult.

B. Comprehensiveness

1. The range of the power subject's total life activities -- the number of <u>scopes</u> -- that come under control of the power holder.

2. Ability to wield power in a range of scopes itself adds to the power of the power holder. The dual domestic/international role of the nation-state, for example, strengthens the power of the state.

C. Intensity

1. The range of options available to the power holder within every scope in which it is able to act.

2. The broader the range of options, the more likely those options are to include extreme versions of power.

3. Extremity of options is not in itself a measure of intensity, because the effectiveness of even an extreme exercise of power depends on:

   a. The vulnerability of the power subject.

   b. The cost of the exercise of extreme power to the power holder (<u>eg</u>, one cost of the development of nuclear weapons is a justification for increasing surveillance of populations, risk to health, etc.).

D. There are interrelationships among these three dimensions of power.

1. The most total and unlimited power, meaning the greatest in comprehensiveness and intensity, is likely to be the least extensive.

2. Every increase in power leads to an increase in the burden on the control center.

3. Some suggest that there is power inflation and deflation -- it becomes deflated if it is not used; inflated if used too much.

4. We can distinguish between "integral" and "intercursive" power by whether or not both parties to an interaction exercise some power.

   a. In an integral situation, one entity holds all the power.

   b. In an intercursive situation, agreements among entities determine scopes and forms of action for each. A marriage in which each partner is dominant in some areas of decision-making is an example of intercursive power.

V. Potential vs. Actual Power

A. The potential to exercise power and the actual exercise of power are usefully distinguished analytically and in practice. Morgenthau, for example, identifies as the first objective of diplomacy determining the potential and actual power of one's own nation and of the nation-states with whom one is dealing.

B. Potential power includes:

1. The degree of autonomy of the agent relative to other agents at the same systemic level, and relative to those at other scales of action. That is, a nation-state's potential power includes its power relative to other nation-states (at the same systemic level), and relative to both global and local entities (at other scales of action).

2. The capacity of the agent:

   a. Resources

   b. Knowledge of how to use resources

   c. Infrastructure (communication system, transportation system, organizational structures, etc.)

d. Perceptions of the agent by the "other"

e. Internal cohesiveness

f. Will to act

g. Etc.

C. The actual exercise of power is the common sense understanding of power.

D. Potential power becomes actual through specific practices.

1. Increasingly, these practices involve the collection, processing, and distribution of digitized information.

2. The chain of practices through which potential power is transformed into actual is becoming lengthier and more geographically dispersed, increasing dependence upon the processing and distribution of information.

3. Economic historian Alfred Chandler, in a book called The Visible Hand, seminally pointed out that with automation, we transfer kinds of decision-making that had been in human hands to the automated processes themselves. Thus processing and distributing information is a form of power in themselves. With the lengthening of the chain of processes, power increasingly inheres in information processing.

4. Lengthy chains of processes also increase the interdependence of different entities. The significance of this for the understanding of international relations and the global economy is demonstrated in the emergence of the terms "network economy" and "network firm" or "embedded firm."

5. Digitization of information collection, processing, flows, and use has so changed the way our economy works that, as we learn from economist Roberto Scazzieri, there are really two separate forms of organization in the economy.

a. The technical organization of production refers to the available transformative processes. In the digitized environment, this means the available ways of processing digitized information now available with computers and the intelligent telecommunications network.

b. The social organization of production refers to the manner in which production is organized into specific jobs to produce specific products.

c. These two can relate to each other in various ways. Technical organization refers to processing capabilities, irrespective of the material being processed. In the digitized environment, this is increasingly information processing.

6. In this environment, ownership of information and of ways of processing it are key forms of power.

a. It is possible to claim intellectual property rights (patent, copyright, or trade secret) in the mathematical algorithms that describe computer processes.

b. The act of processing information establishes property rights in the information processed. Genetic information taken from the plants collected in the Amazonian forest and analyzed (processed) in the US then belongs to the Americans, not the Brazilians; the latter have to pay to get the benefits of the results of the analytical work.

c. This situation privileges the most "advanced" nations of the North globally.

VI. A Fourth Face: Transformational Power

A. While historically little attention was given to the practices by which the elements of potential power were transformed into actual power, today control over those practices has become the dominant form of power altogether. Thus we should add a fourth "face of power" to the Lukes' typology: transformational power.

B. Information processing and flows are increasingly the most significant form of transformational power globally.

C. French postmodern thinker Baudrillard points out that capital became so powerful because of its ability to transform things into each other.

1. Quote from Baudrillard (1983, p. 43): "it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power."

2. Digitization of information flows means that personal phone calls, movies, transaction data, and remote sensing are all transformed into the same thing -- digitized information -- and therefore into each other.

3. While capital can be used to exert instrumental force, it also has transformational power; information is in the same situation.

D. Transformational power is coming to be the dominant form of power in today's environment.

1. It is critical to the transformation of all potential forms of power into actual.

2. The institutions designed to exercise traditional forms of power are evolving to take advantage of the new information technologies.

a. Instrumental: In the US military, for example, there is almost a generational dispute over reorganization questions, with younger officers seeking to maximize the possibilities made available by the network and other new information technologies such as satellites, and their elders clinging to the traditional habits that have left, for example, different military radio networks unable to communicate with each other.

b. Structural: All types of institutions in society are also evolving in response to the possibilities made available through the development of new information technologies. Organizations are increasingly coming to be understood as information collection and processing entities, and the nature of an organization itself a critical element of power potential.

(1) The finance industry is one that is often discussed as an example of an industry that has completely reorganized as a consequence of the use of new information technologies, with 24-hour trading ability, instantaneous knowledge of global transactions, and global mobility for all players.

(2) Transnational corporations have evolved more quickly than nation-states in this regard, since they have fewer decision-making encumbrances; this provides a large portion of the explanation for why transnational corporations have risen in

importance relative to the nation-state in recent years.

(3) The Clinton/Gore presidency is the beginning of an effort to take the United States through an evolutionary process of this type.

c. Consensual: The multiplication of scopes in which consensual power can be exercised (I personally thought using the back of bathroom doors as billboards was going a bit far, for example, for it permitted advertises to enter another domain of my experience), the speed with which messages can be created and distributed, and the ability to relate detailed information about the subject population to message creation have all increased the power potential of those who manage public opinion.

E. Some of the most important things that the new technologies make possible are:

1. The ability to combine "local knowledge" (multidimensional and intimate knowledge of local conditions) with "general knowledge" (scientific information and information about the whole). This resolves an ancient problem for military leaders who, during battle, had to trade-off the dangers and narrowness of vision from being on the front-lines with the lack of intimate detail and timeliness in information available from the relative safety of the quarters away from battle. Today both local knowledge and the big picture are available from anywhere, as coverage of the Gulf War well demonstrated.

2. Decision-making capacity and knowledge can be put together in one location or entity or individual (what is called "colocation").

3. Speed of information flow.

4. Extraordinary, and extraordinarily variable, intelligence.

5. Dispersal of the intelligence throughout the network -- and into users' hands.

6. A massive volume of information can be transmitted.

F. Some of the ways in which the new technologies have caused losses of power or increased "vulnerabilities."

1. The term "vulnerability" in this context was first used by an expert report to the Swedish government in the late 1970s on the impact of the computerization, or "informatization," of society on Sweden. The report, which used the term in its title, emphasized the ways in which dependence on computerized information storage, processing, and distribution weakened the state, increasing its vulnerabilities. Study of differences among nation-states and forms and dimensions of power makes clear that any analysis of the impact of the use of a new information technology on the nation-state must be specific about which form of power is under discussion, and which nation-state.

2. Electromagnetic pulse (EMP), which fills the atmosphere with the explosion of nuclear weapons, will completely disable the communications system. The military is trying to deal with this by making "hardened" satellites that are supposed to be able to survive nuclear war.

3. Information that is sent using radio waves -- that is, broadcast on any wavelength from microwave to the very long waves generated by having turned northern Michigan into a transmitter -- can be intercepted. The military tries to respond to this through encryption, by transmitting information in such a way that it jumps from frequency to frequency, and by using frequencies that require very high and therefore not widely diffused technologies.

4. Even more spectacularly, any information that passes through the network is potentially subject to invasion -- and change -- by "hackers" of various degrees of professionalism. We already know that a high school student has been able to break into NASA's computers; in Germany and other places in Europe, these techniques are being developed by political groups who see actions through the network as a new form of revolutionary activity.

5. Because most nations must rely on foreign vendors for supply and maintenance of the information infrastructure, they are vulnerable to being held hostage by those who control the infrastructure upon which the government and all activity are now dependent.

6. The complexity of the network itself has come to be recognized as a form of vulnerability.

G. Consequences of the rise of importance of transformational power include:

1. A shift in the relative importance among the resources that comprise potential power: ability to access and process information is now more important than ownership of natural resources and military equipment.

2. The emergence of intellectual property rights as the key aspect of power potential, and debates over intellectual property rights as the locus of tensions over the distribution of power.

3. Technical and regulatory discussions over the design and use of the information infrastructure -- Gore's information superhighway -- are discussions about the infrastructure that is most central to the potential for power, and the place where, therefore, the essential decisions about the distribution of power are made. Armand Mattelart: "Based on the analysis of organizations as systems of action in which the strategies of different actors converge, the new logistics of communication have shown themselves to be one of the contemporary stakes for the redefinition of the technology of power." (1990, p. 118)

4. An increase in certain types of vulnerability for all players.

VII. Relationships between Information and Power

A. There are three types of relationships between information and power:

1. Information in the direct exercise of power, as in the use of propaganda or public opinion polls.

2. Information as transformational power.

3. Information as a resource among other resources critical to the capacity that determines an agent's power potential, as in the use of bureaucratic information for implementing governmental policy, or knowledge of crop conditions as a bargaining tool.

B. These three types of relationships are themselves interdependent. Information flows that influence public perceptions (type 1) so significantly that the modes of production are transformed (type 2) may reasonably be treated by economists as inputs into the economy -- that is, as resources (type 3).

C. In all three conditions, the importance of information to and as the exercise of power is growing in the information society. While information has always been critical to the exercise of

instrumental, structural, and consensual power, the range of scopes in which any agent can act, the speed and complexity of information processing capabilities, and so forth, have heightened the importance of information to the exercise of power.

D. That form of power to which information and its processing and distribution are central, transformational power, is coming to be the dominant form.