Unit 11
Power and Institutions

Contents

Learning Objectives

After reading this Unit, you will be able to understand

* concept of power and related concepts

* the various institutions of power and its uses

* instruments of power

* sources of power

* contexts of use of power

11.1 Introduction

Social power is a universal phenomenon in human societies and social relationships. It is possessed by both individuals and social groups. It is, in fact, the basic common element in all social relationships, politics and economics. Social power is generally experienced in an unbalanced situation. These power imbalances are the root causes of most of the social problems.

Power can be understood in two main ways. One way of understanding power that has gained prominence in recent academic discussion is the *idea of power* as a simple quantitative phenomenon. This type of conception of power pins at a kind of generalised capacity to act. The approach considers power as enhancing the capacities of those who possess it, and thereby impinges to those persons who do not possess as an imposition on their freedom and liberty. The writings of Hobbes, Locke *inter alia* on the discourse of power may be considered under this general approach.

The other and more complex conception of power is that power which involves both *capacity* and a *right to act* which derives from the consent of those over whom power is exercised. This approach looks at the effects of power as generally identified by reference to 'counterfactual conditions'. In other words, the approach holds that power in the hands of others prevents its victims from doing what they otherwise would have attained, or 'even from thinking what they otherwise would have thought'. Foucault's analysis of power is a good representative (Foucault et al 1980) of this approach. This second conception of power is often implicit rather than explicit. The concept is central to much modern social and political thought today.

Power has also been viewed in various ways. Some scholars (Mills 1959) would consider power as a 'zero-sum' concept. Here, power is defined in a mutually exclusive manner. The concept would mean that if one person or party wins, the other necessarily loses. In other words, the approach conceives power

as to be possessed by only one person or group in such a way that a second person or group over whom power is wielded does not possess. There are others who opine that power should be looked at as a kind of a 'non-zero-sum' concept (Parsons 1961). According to them, each person or party shares power to the extent that both the parties ('share-holders') gains. In this approach, power is defined in terms of mutually inclusive objectives.

Thus, social power is defined in different ways. However, for our purpose, we generally define power as the ability of an individual or group to carry out its wishes or policies to control, manipulate, or influence the behaviour of others, whether they wish to cooperate or not. Social power is also the capability to influence others or resist influence from others. The agent who possesses power has resources to force his/her will on others. People with great wealth, muscle, status, intelligence, competence, etc. have more chances to influence other people.

Power has been invariably used as synonyms for the closely related concepts, such as, prestige, influence, eminence, competence, ability, knowledge, dominance, rights, force, coercion, authority among others. But they are not identical concepts *per se*. We shall therefore examine the differences of these terms.

Let us first of all differentiate between the independent variables of power and prestige. The relationship of the two terms may be understood in a way that power can occur without prestige while prestige would not occur without power. For instance, a scientist would have prestige but no power; whereas, a policeman would have power, but little prestige. In the same way, we could establish relationship between power and closely related terms such as competence, ability, knowledge, eminence and so on. These concepts can be accompanied or may not be accompanied by power.

The concept of power is very closely related to the concept of dominance. Basically, power is in essence a sociological concept whereas dominance is a socio-psychological concept. In other words, power is located in groups and it manifests in inter-group relations, whereas dominance is essentially located in the individual and it is expressed in inter-personal relationships. Again, power manifests in the statuses that people occupy in formal organisation, whereas dominance appears in the roles people play in informal organisation. Power is a function of organisation of associations, of the arrangement and juxtaposition of groups, and of the structure of society itself. On the contrary, dominance is a function of personality or temperament; it is a personal trait (Bierstedt, 1969). However, this distinction in terms of sociological and psychological discourses, and also group vis-à-vis personality need not be in a strict sense. Because nowadays, we often talk about collective dominance and hegemony and so much so, we also talk of power relations even in the inter-personal levels.

Likewise power and influence may be distinguished by an important feature, viz., power is by and large coercive, whereas influence is persuasive. In this context, we could consider that Karl Marx, the philosopher has a great influence exerted upon the 20th century; but he was not a powerful man. In almost the same manner, right, like privilege, is not power itself, but one of the perquisites of power. But then we can pose the question as whether force and authority are power? The answer would be that they are not, even though they are very closely related terms. In a simplistic way, then, we may

distinguish them by mainly considering that power is a latent force; force is manifest power; and authority is institutionalised power (Hindess, 1996). Power is potential, so that when it is used, it becomes either force or authority. For example, the threat of a minority to withdraw from an association would effectively wield power, but once the minority group withdraws from the association, it is no longer power, but force.

11.2 Instruments of Power

There are three main institutions or traits that accord the right to use of power. In other words, there are three instruments for wielding or enforcing of power. They are *coercive* or *condign*, *compensatory* and *conditioned* power. These three instruments need not be strictly compartmentalised. They overlap each other at one point of time or another. We shall deal with them in brief before we get on to other aspects of power.

Coercive or *condign power* wins acceptance by threatening, intimidating and/or inflicting on others with dire consequences. It includes power exercised by any form of adverse action or its threat in the form of fines, resource or property expropriation, rebuke, and condemnation by any individuals or the community concerned. The process of such power takes place in a situation where power is gained by attaining submission from others to abandon their preferences or desires through the capacity to impose an alternative to those preferences of the individual or group that are unpleasant or painful.

We could understand coercive power in two levels: First, a situation where a person or a group who undergo a very painful experience would still opt for the *defacto* condition as the alternative provided appear to be either no better or even worse than what they have been experiencing at a given point of time; Second, a situation where the individual or group withdraws from acting against certain impositions or refrains from speaking his/her mind and opts to submit to the view of others in order to avoid unpleasant implications. In other words, the person or group just accepts the dictat of others and would not speak up because of the impending rebuke and harsh consequences that would come upon him/her or them.

Box 11.1: Comparing Condign and Compensatory Power

The most distinctive feature of both condign and compensatory power is their objectivity- or visibility. Those accepting the will of others are conscious of doing so; they are acting in consequence of a fairly deliberate calculation that is the better course of action. It has become so because of the offer of some specific quid pro quo for their submission. Those exercising the power are also purposefully aware of what they are doing.

The difference between condign and compensatory power is the difference between negative and affirmative reward. Condign power threatens the individual with something physically or emotionally painful enough so that he forgoes pursuit of his own will or preference in order to avoid it. Compensatory power offers the individual a reward or payment sufficiently advantageous or agreeable so that he (or she) forgoes pursuit of his own preferences to seek the reward instead. In less abstract language, condign power wins submission by the promise or reality of punishment; compensatory power wins submission by the promise or reality of benefit.
Source: Galbraith, 1984.

Compensatory power attains submission from others by offering affirmative action in the form of rewards to the individual or group who submits to the coercion. In economic terms, compensation in rural areas could be in various forms, such as, payments in kind or cash for services rendered, the right to work a plot of land, or sharing the product of the landlord's fields. In socio-economic and political sense, the affirmative rewards, be it, economic package for development *inter alia* provided to certain communities or regions infested with socio-political unrest could be another example of compensatory power in the modern situation.

In the above two cases, viz., coercive power and compensatory power, the individual or group is aware of his/her submission to the coercing agent through compulsion and persuasion and/or inducement respectively.

Reflection and Action 11.1

How would you define power? Can you differentiate power from dominance, prestige and influence?

The third instrument of power- *conditioned power* in contrast to condign and compensatory power (which is visible and objective) is subjective. In this case, neither those exercising the power nor those who are subject to it, need not necessarily be aware of its exertion. This kind of power is achieved by changing the attitude and belief of the individual or group. In this situation, a person or group accepts the will of another or others because they feel that the initiative taken seems to be right, by way of persuasion, education, social commitment, or promises. They submit to the initiative because they feel that it is in a preferred course or track. In such situation, submission is not necessarily acknowledged. Conditioned power is, in fact, the most crucial and pervasive kind of power to the functioning of modern society, whether it be in the aspects of economy and polity, and in capitalist and socialist countries as well.

11.3 Sources of Power

There are several sources or institutions of power. These sources or institutions of power differentiate those who wield power on others from those who submit to them. Scholars have identified different sources of power according to their perceptions. For instance, Bierstedt (1969) identifies three sources of power, namely, numbers of people, social organization, and resources. He includes various components in the third source of power, such as, money, property, prestige, knowledge, competence, deceit, fraud, secrecy, and natural resources. Mann (1986) would identify four sources of power, namely, ideological, economic, military, and political relationships. Tumin (1992) opines that there are five sources of power, namely, role-specific authority, goods and services, skills and abilities, personal qualities, and coercive power. Galbraith (1984) classifies three sources of power-personality, property and organisation. There are also many other scholars who classify them in many different ways. Therefore, it is difficult to follow one single classification of the sources of power. But all of these classifications have more or less similar elements of the sources of power. For our purpose, we shall consider the following main sources of power: *personality*, *numbers of people*, *resources or property*, *skills abilities and knowledge*, *media*, *coercive force*, *and organisation*.

Personality or leadership is the quality of physique, mind, speech, morality,

competence and other personal traits that enables a person to have access to the instruments of power. Personality also means personal qualities such as beauty, charm, or charisma that paves way to persuade others to get one's favour. In modern times, personality has its primary association with conditioned power, viz., the ability to persuade or change the attitude and belief of others.

Numbers of people is yet another important source of power. In other words, majorities constitute a residual locus of social power. Given the same organisation and the same resources *inter alia*, the larger number can always control the smaller and obtain its compliance. We can see the number game of power in various contexts. In simple societies, the access to power was usually through physical strength and coercion. Families with large youths and muscular males would have advantage of wielding power on others. In other words, the muscular male youths in these families would be great sources of power. This does not, however, mean that diplomacy and intelligence does not work in these societies. There are many instances where intelligent people wield powers in the simple societies.

In the modern societies, we can also understand the number factor of power as seen in elections of all kinds, where the majority is given the right to institutionalise its power as authority. This kind of power is observed in all associations, be it democratic, autocratic, or otherwise. The power of a majority as found in both formal and informal associations is beyond doubt the key to either threat or sustaining the stability of the association concerned.

Skills and abilities is one source of power which enables people to provide services that others need or desire. These skills could be in terms of craft skills, military acumen, economic expertise, medical knowledge, and literary artistry. It also includes knowledge and media power, among others. These skills give the possessors the advantage to have power over those who desire the benefits of their skills and expertise. Knowledge becomes power because it is an asset to comprehend circumstances, to predict and plan, and to create effects, especially by knowing how to use other forms of power.

Media in the modern world has become one of the great sources of power. Its contribution is most significantly manifested in influencing or controlling information and communication by having access to the media and through controlling and manipulation. For example, the projections that the columnists make in the print media or television reporters on important but controversial and important issues have great impacts on the readers and viewers.

Resources or Property is one of the important attributes to wield power. Resources may be of many kinds. It includes property, money, prestige, knowledge, competence, skills and abilities, deceit, fraud, secrecy and all the things pertaining to natural and also supernatural resources. In the later case (viz., supernatural resources), we can understand of religious associations which, as agencies of a celestial government, apply supernatural sanctions as instruments of control. A wealthy person commands respect and authority. In the process of its activities, a wealthy person can attain conditioned submission by way of submission or otherwise. The possession of goods and services enables the possessors to purchase and acquire what they want.

However, property-wealth, income, etc. is mainly associated with compensatory power.

In c*oercive force,* power is derived from coercion, be it, psychological, social, or physical that one possesses. Through this coercive force, the possessor of the force can threaten others to submission and carry out one's intention and objective. People out of fear for torture or any kind of punishment—physically, mentally, or otherwise, and the fear of the loss of their freedom and resources yields to the force. They thus become victims of coercion. These threats could be real or imaginary perception.

Organisation is said to be the most important source of power in modern societies. A well organised and disciplined body of army or police can control a much larger number of unorganised majority. In many instances, we also experience an organised minority control an unorganised majority. This simply speaks largely of the power of organisation. Organisation is associated with all the three instruments of power, namely, conditioned power, coercive power, and compensatory power.

Reflection and Action 11.2

What are the sources of power? Describe at least four sources.

Role specific authority is also an important component of organisation power by virtue of the authority sanctioned by the organisation or position that one holds. For instance, the president of an organisation has the power or authority of the office. Similarly, power is also possessed by judges, police, employers, teachers and others in a formal relationship in which one partner has the legal or customary right to command or control some or all aspects of the relationship. These powers may be seen within the limits of the formal relationship. It is specific to the status relationships one is associated.

An organisation usually has the ability to persuade others towards realisation of their objectives. Organisation has also the access to coercive or condign power like in the case of the state. The kind of access of an organisation to compensatory power would however depend on the quantity and value of the property it possesses.

Box 11.2: Distinguishing Legitimate and Illegitimate Sources and Uses

Legitimate and acceptable powers must be distinguished from those that are deemed illegitimate and unacceptable. Yet all illegitimate powers rest on the same bases as those which yield legitimate power. Gangsters, thieves, terrorists, prostitutes, gamblers, and others in the illegitimate world are able to exert power because of their role-specific authorities in that world, or because of their material resources, skills, personal qualities, and psychological and physical coerciveness. Moreover, those who secure resources from the illegitimate world, that is, money from stealing, gambling, or drug peddling, can use such illegally acquired assets as a source of power in both the legitimate and illegitimate world. Money secured in legitimate ways, such as through work, can be used for either legitimate or illegitimate ends, such as to purchase illegal drugs or to gamble illegally, or to secure a position or contract through bribery. In the same vein, a person with superior role authority can use the power of his position, such as the ability to fire another person, to coerce the subordinate, illegally, into desired forms of behavior.

Source: Tumin, 1992.

The sources of power would also have quite a number of combinations among and between them. They also include both legitimate and illegitimate sources of power (Talcott Parsons et al, 1967). They are also combined in various strengths. Due to the variation of combinations, varied results are also yielded for enforcement of power.

11.4 Contexts of Power

There are four main contexts where power can be exercised. They may be seen in the contexts of *political affairs*, *institutional patterning*, *ensuring life chances*, and *personal relations (Tumin, 1992)*.

In the milieu of *political affairs*, it is essential to set the structure and mechanism of the affairs and conduct of political communities, such as towns, cities, states, nations and/or international community. In this context, power has bearing with both realms of individuals and groups. The groups would include associations, political parties, whole communities, *inter alia*. Such collectivities derive power mainly from their positional roles. For instance, we have a situation where the federal governments have more powers than the local governments as provided by the constitution of the respective states. In the context of the Indian state, the Union government has greater powers than its federal states.

Institutional Patterning is also an important context of power appropriation. Power is relevant in the interplay of roles in the basic institutions, such as the family, polity, the educational system, religious institutions and the economy. In these institutions, we find some kind of relations, be it between employers and employees, teachers and pupils, priests and laymen and so on. Even in our everyday life, we all have some position and role in these basic institutions which govern our life. Because of our involvement in such relationships, we do experience differential power relations, the patterns of dominance and submission which are important elements in determining the pattern of conduct. In such patterning of institutions, role-specific authority is a crucial component and role-player.

Power is also exercised in *ensuring life chances* in one's life. It operates in the competition for share of valued life chances. It could be in terms of the chance for surviving the first year of life, maintaining good health, securing good opportunities for schooling and jobs, and living a reasonable long life span. These valued life chances are important factors to control one's destiny because they are contributory attributes for enhancing one's position and role and the ability to shape and control one's future.

> **Reflection and Action 11.3**
>
> Discuss the various contexts in which power is exercised.

Personal relations outside the purview of the institutional roles are relevant to the appropriation of power. These relations could be of many forms and would take place at different situations. We meet people in the market, in stores, on the street, in buses, sub-ways, trains, planes, parks, stadiums, seminars and conferences. We do make friendships and love relationships at one time or the other. We also meet people in the neighbourhood and other people who are not formally bound to us. But we know with whom we must network with for realizing our interests, desires and movements. All these

relationships are good examples where power plays important role in personal relations.

We also have situation where people are attracted and so won their friendship through one's personal charm and beauty. The same quality can influence other people in winning their love and confidence. These situations are some of the instances where power works through personal relations.

All these powers discussed above are not equally relevant nor are they relevant at all situations. But one or more of these forms of power will be relevant in all the four contexts of power.

Box 11.3: Measurement of Amount of Power

The amount of power exercised by an individual may be measured either by the ratio of his successful power acts to all of his attempted power acts or by certain criteria …. These measures may be used as a basis of comparison between different power-holders. The two "amounts" represent not alternative techniques of measurement but differences in what is measured. Amount in these cases does not mean the same thing. Most investigations of power, in so far as they deal with the amount of power, utilise "amount" in the second sense.

Two principal criteria may be used to measure the amount of power exercised by a power-holder: the number of actions of any given person in each of any number of selected types of behavior, over which control is realised (or potential); and the number of persons so controlled. The definition of dictatorship as "a form of government where everything that is not forbidden is obligatory" indicates complete power in terms of the spheres of behavior over which control is exercised.

Source: Goldhamer and Shils, 1969.

There is no necessary relationship either of the amounts of power of an individual or group in one context and their power in the others. A person may be very powerful in one context and may be powerless in quite the other. For instance, a person may be powerful in the family, but he may be a subject to the will of everyone outside the family. Likewise, one may be powerful in national affairs and yet be relatively powerless in personal relationships.

11.5 Conclusion

Social power is a universal phenomenon that transcends all human societies. It is experienced in everyday social relationships in one way or another. Power may manifest as a generalised capacity to act and/or as involving both capacity and a right to act. Generally, power may be understood as the ability of an individual or group to carry out its wishes or policies to control, manipulate, or influence the behaviour of others, whether they wish to cooperate or not.

Social power is also the capability to influence others or resist influence from others. The concept of power is often considered as synonymous to its closely related concepts such as dominance, prestige, influence, force and so on. But they are not the same.

There are three main institutions (instruments) for enforcing power. They are coercive or condign, compensatory and conditioned power. These three instruments are however not strictly compartmentalised. Again, there are several sources of power such as personality, numbers of people, resources or property, skills, abilities and knowledge, media, coercive force, and organisation.

Power is manifest in various contexts, be it political affairs, institutional patterning, ensuring life chances, or personal relations. The amounts of power of an individual or group are not necessarily the same for different contexts. A person may be powerful in one context and may be powerless in another.

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