

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

Wednesday, 12 October 2005

TOPIC: Explaining Power Differentials, from classical theory.

Why do power differentials arise? Two fundamental answers:

- a) human nature
- b) society is *organized*

How are differences maintained/changed over time?

In the first set of authors we will discuss, each theorist will give different accounts of human nature but each will claim that human nature will inevitably produce differences in power.

(Excursus: Why it is important to attach time frame and social location for each writer? Ideas and people do not float free of their social worlds, fosters historical illiteracy, undermines resources for interpretation of the texts.)

NICOLO MACHIAVELLI – (1469-1527) Italian (Florence), general renaissance man

- not intimate with State power, not close associate with his prince
- 15th century Italy was fragmented into city-states and was not unified until 19th century
- Machiavelli neither served nor conceived of a strong unified state
- was spurned by the state in which he resided
- did *not* attempt to produce a unified model or picture of all power residing in the state
- does not provide blueprint like Hobbes or Marx – Machiavelli instead interprets **strategies of power** rather than offering some way to institutionalize power
- he was cast adrift from state service by the changing nature of political adventurism and division in Medici Florence and he was not inside with these power brokers
- characteristics of his works derive from his sense of his own **political world – a world of flux**, discontinuity, intrigue, illusion
- **thought that knowledge could not contain power, power was separate from knowledge but power and knowledge could enable each other through strategic understanding of how to deploy one another**
- aim was to “**be a mastery of a situation,**” to develop the knowledge of strategies and techniques of politics

Machiavelli *observed* – he wanted to uncover what was secret and to avoid being misled by performance. He studied strategies rather than sticking to *a priori* mechanical, causal conceptions of power.

His works: *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, descriptive ethnography of Florence, especially political culture and, in particular, power, but **power conceived of as strategic action, planned action**. In his work, Machiavelli makes no moral evaluation of whether power is good or bad – and this distinguished him from other authors who made such judgments. His only purpose was to discover **effectiveness** of certain power strategies. His refusal to evaluate set his work apart and to this day the term *Machiavellian* describes someone who is preoccupied with strategies of power. It often also means a “schemer,” with a negative connotation because until recently,

power was generally loaded with negative connotations. Thus, treating power as a phenomena without necessarily negative value brought to Machiavelli the negative valuation, e.g. schemer.

Power did not necessarily flow from the sovereign, justice, or right. He does not try to *rationalize* or *justify* power, but only to *specify*. He describes strategies as he sees them at work.

Power does not belong to any one or any place – isn't something that princes necessarily have.

Power is the effectiveness of their strategies for achieving a greater scope of action for one's self. Again, it is *not* inherent in any one – but tenuously produced and reproduced depending on strategic competence and the skills of actors who would be powerful. (Not unlike our sociological understanding.)

Machiavelli stressed description/interpretation rather than moral evaluation – and this marks his place in history, his **insistence not to judge, just to describe**. This contrasts with others, e.g. Hobbes, Machiavelli focused on power in particular situations, specific arenas, how it works.

At the center of Machiavelli's concern was the primordial fact that the **core of power is violence**, the willingness and ability to use violence – this was the boundary for Machiavelli. *To exercise power is to bring violence to bear on someone's persons or possessions, knowledge of when to be cruel and when to withdraw.*

- The prince must use an **economy of violence** sparingly which requires careful consideration of military capacity, knowledge of opponents' means, how to translate armed bodies into disciplined organized threat.
- But one should exercise power sparingly, wrecking **violence as political strategy led to structural weakness** – not only did it *make you weak*, it *demonstrated* your weakness. You demonstrated your weakness if you used *too much* because then you would simply use up resources and without having built up alternative reserves.
- An alternative reserve could be to **secure consent** – a more effective way of transmitting power than being violent. On some occasions violence may be more effective – *so that you can threaten it in future*.
- Where consent can be secured it cannot be generalized or universal nor could you base rule on it always or across all types of spheres of action – **consent is always in particular circumstances**.

Machiavelli Summary

He was not interested in designing some ideal but instead examined in a detached, rational way without judgment, asking *how is power acquired and maintained?* He used case studies asking *what acts are beneficial/detrimental to exercising power?*

We go back to one of our original questions...

Where do power differentials come from?

This was of crucial importance to Machiavelli who argued that **human nature is changeless but malleable**. (We can't make comparisons across time and space.)

What is the essentially changeless nature of humans?

We're **essentially evil**, according to Machiavelli: "men are ungrateful, fickle, lying, hypocritical, fearful, and grasping creatures" but this does *not* preclude **social cooperation** – but how do you get social cooperation if we're so bad?

Humans have **insatiable desires**. Our limitless ambition is our impetus for **self-preservation**. Can manipulate humans by using the goal of self-preservation.

Humans are also **short-sighted** so we focus on immediate rewards, but it takes a longer strategy to outwit us. We're also **imitative** – inclined to follow the example of authority figures or be molded by leadership.

*Machiavelli does *not* say that some people are **innately superior** to others – that's not why they have more power. Some don't have right to dominate/enslave, but what he argues is that the **interplay of human nature** (evil, short-sighted, insatiable, imitative nature) in the right social circumstances under socially conditioned factors make for **inequalities of power** – and this is the **importance of conflict**.

- conflict is the permanent condition of society because of human nature
- basic manifestation is struggle between *common* people and *powerful* people
- cause of strife is **lust for power and domination** – insatiable desire of some to dominate others while everyone has desire for self-preservation, some desire domination, causing conflict

In order to channel human desires to more beneficial ends, must **create a State** and create conditions for security and well-being. This was Machiavelli's prescription for a successful government in *The Prince*.

How to control the insatiable desires for power

The best government is where **rank corresponds to ability** – (theme to be picked up by Pareto and was originally promoted by Plato.) Machiavelli argues that government will *contain conflict* if people of ability are in positions of rank.

(excursus: Plato – *The Republic* – written as dialogue, Socrates walking around the *agora* conversing Socrates' definition of justice = where people's position consonant with abilities. How to make sure of this? Although, Machiavelli says it will be effective in containing conflict, whereas Socrates makes **value judgments** – people are happy if they do what they are able, not more, not less.)

But how do you find out what people's abilities are?

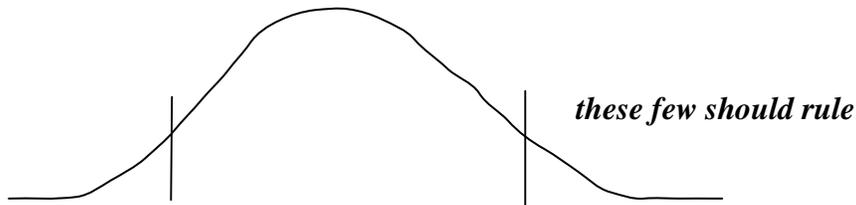
We can't, so we tell a big lie – the **governing lie** – where mothers tell their children this story: the gods had made human beings out of three different materials – some mixed with gold (*philosopher-kings*); some mixed with silver (*guardians, soldiers, protectors*); yet others with bronze (*laborers*). We then put them in different schools. Eventually, the philosopher kings will *appear* to be better than everyone else – people will see it that way and accept it. In the end, everyone will be performing to their ability (because we have trained them so). *If everyone*

performs at their ability, everyone is happy, and so we have a happy society!)

Machiavelli also argued that the effective state is one in which rank = ability.

What ability will people need to make an effective state? Will the skill needed be foresight? It is necessarily different from the short-sightedness. Must be *decisive and flexible and deceptive* – will have to **manipulate** people's self interest, insatiable desires, short-sighted nature.

Those with that ability are the few, pictured in diagram:



Governments often rule by manipulating people as Machiavelli prescribed.

- ◆ **conclusion:** power and the use of power is essential to society to achieve the socially desirable end of contained conflict
- ◆ **implicit message:** leader must know her followers because she needs to be able to manipulate them and know their nature to do so
- ◆ **importance for political-social thought:** Machiavelli was one of the first writers Enlightenment period writing without moral judgment – was simply description/observation

THOMAS HOBBS – (1588-1679) British, his themes were first enunciated by Machiavelli

Hobbes argued that **society itself is a human artifact**. It is not natural, but a human creation. And if is a human creation, we can alter it as we see fit.

Humans are not social or political by nature – we do not naturally cooperate. Society is imposed on humanity out of fear and self-preservation. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes was concerned with humans as they *are* not as they *should be*.

Again similar to Machiavelli, Hobbes’ analysis in *The Leviathan* portrays humans as incessantly active, not restful or peaceful. Whatever humans desire, they equate with what is good. (Notice classical and neo-classical economics claims that you can’t tell what is good, you can only know individual desires. Fulfilling desire is the function of economy, increasing capacity to fulfill desires). What they fear they equate with evil.

desires = good
fears = evil

Nonetheless, although humans are incessantly active they **all share a single want of self-preservation** (same as Machiavelli). Self-preservation impels humans to some degree of cooperation although our nature creates a “*war of all against all*” in the world without government.

Hobbes is often grouped in the history of social thought with John Locke (17th century) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (17-18th century, French) – all called **social contract theorists** because they imagined a world *before* society and cooperation, what was termed the “*state of nature*”

- the state of nature was not just a fictional enterprise of some philosophers
- early anthropologists sought to find what humans were like in the “state of nature” and that in part drove them in part to look at what were considered “primitive” and “undeveloped” societies.

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– *When we take away what we know of human institutions, what do we see?*

In the state of nature, there is no place for industry because the fruit thereof is uncertain, no culture, no society, a continual fear and danger of violent death, and “**in the state of nature the life of man is solitary, nasty, brutish, and short**” (famous Hobbes quote)

How do we go beyond the state of nature?

Shun death (the “chief of evils,” the boundary of human interaction), seek self-preservation, find and seek means of peaceful interaction.

Fundamental dictate of law of nature = find peace to preserve the self.

We contain “the war of all against all” by **ceding**, by *giving all of our rights to a sovereign who in exchange gives us security.*

Hobbes was the speech writer for the absolutist king of England. During the parliamentary revolution in England in 1688, Parliament limited the power of the king, but until then the king went relatively unchecked and Hobbes was explaining why this unchecked state was an okay thing. (Earlier limitation on monarch in Magna Carta, nobles setting up parliament but were relatively weak until 17th century.)

***ceding to sovereign in exchange for security = social contract**

With the social contract, there is always a change, sometimes a “bargain” or “consideration” (as it would be called in law) and it’s always an interaction (A↔B).

The social contract is another myth created by numerous writers to explain society – so they proposed this “state of nature,” humans in “natural” form *before* shaped by society. This imagined notion was used to identify human nature – it addressed the question, *what would be at the human core without socializations imposed by society and experience?* It was used to justify a particular social vision of how society should be organized (i.e. “given certain set of certain conditions, these are the subsequent material, organizational and cultural things we need...”).

Locke = social theorist animating American vision, argues that government is instituted to protect our industriousness, imagines a peaceful existence with some insecurity, we need government to protect our property.

Rousseau = collectivist, romantic, in state of human nature we are perfect, society corrupts.

Hobbes = sovereign can take any form (democratic, aristocratic, monarchic, etc.) but power will be limitless regardless of form

- once you created a sovereign, it was non-removable, it was the end-all
- final test is that the sovereign keeps law, order, peace
- but sovereign *does* have duties – to keep law, order, peace, obliged to make well-being of people the rule of action
- sovereign who acts otherwise is acting against reason of peace and law of nature
- sovereign is responsible for caring for subjects and subjects’ interests Hobbes was defending the absolutism of the British king – he assumed that absolutism was in general

interest of his subjects because it *protects all the people for the good of the people*. If the sovereign does not provide that safety, then he breaks the bargain!

Power arises out of necessity – we have no choice but to *submit to authority* if society is to be realized. *Inequality of power* arises out of human nature which propels us to be subject to an all powerful sovereign who will protect us.

(The **notion of rights** was just starting to develop during this time, and rights were to be ceded to the sovereign.)

Hobbes' conception served his immediate political workings, since he was an intimate advisor to the king who sought legitimacy.

Hobbes wrote 100 years after Machiavelli, and used the metaphors of mechanics (he was a contemporary of Newton & Bacon – hence the mechanics).

His means of legitimating king, state, and community were important because he was seeking a **secular justification** for absolutist king who *had* been legitimated by saying “king was agent of God” but that wasn't going over so well after the Protestant Reformation which challenged Catholic hegemony. There were schisms in western Christianity – kings who spoke in God's name were problematic since Pope also spoke in god's name – so Hobbes offered a non-religious justification.

Order was to be constructed through the secularizing and generalizing of god – it was a rational explanation. He talks about the **perfect body of the sovereign** – not a *person* but a *concept* who **exists only through the sovereign's subjects**: Illustrated by the image of the king composed entirely by little people. The frontpiece of *The Leviathan* when it was published.



Notice how **each subject is clearly discernible** – citizens are not swallowed up into an anonymous, mystical mass – instead each remains discrete and retains identity

***organizing principle:** to completely identify each subject *with* the sovereign

What is achieved through the social contract is the basis of the **body politic**.

There is surrender and silencing of the translation...

How do we translate each individual's identity into the sovereign and vice versa?

The act of subjecting one's self to the sovereign is made invisible. The conflict is rendered into the sovereign to display, not to the people to enact. Hobbes uses metaphors of voice, language, words – he **legitimizes the political community** which is located in a **mechanical notion of power as a just exchange**.

Discussion:

What is marginalized?

How is rule or power organized?

What power will be used for what ends? When? How?

Machiavelli gives us **strategies** but Hobbes is preoccupied with **translation** of people into the body of the sovereign and is not concerned with *how* it works, but is more concerned that it be *located* in the sovereign – the *cause* of power but not *how* makes things happen.

Machiavelli = strategies of power

Hobbes = locus of power

Power arises out of necessity of overcoming the war against all against all. There is no choice but to submit to the authority of society. By the willingness of people to participate in the social contract is how it is maintained, but there are few details of how it is exercised or changed.