
POWER AND AUTHORITY *

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Power is the ability to get things done, to make others do what you want – even if they do not want to do it. A variety of means can be used to persuade people to do things, but power always has as its base the ability to reward or punish.

From this outline it becomes clear that power is not something that only exists at a national or international level; power exists wherever people are involved in relationships – at a family level, in school, in work, or even when playing sports. Within the family parents have considerable power over their children, they can make them eat cabbage, go to bed, or wash behind their ears. When children are older, they may have a strict time by which they should be home. Children do as they are told, to a large extent, because their parents can back up their instructions with either rewards or punishments, including the ultimate expressions of power – *force*. Within certain limits parents may use force to discipline children and most children are aware of this – but force is not used very often, the threat of it is enough.

Many children realize that their parents can control them. Some also realize that they have some power over their parents. Again this power is based on *rewards* and *punishments*. Children can also, to some extent, punish parents – through tantrums, lack of co-operation, and so on. Usually, though, parents have more power than children – and so can win a struggle. Yet this illustrates a major point. We all have some power – the problem is one of degree: who has more power than me and who has most power of all?

Children do not only obey their parents because they know that their parents can reward or punish them, they also believe that their parents have a right, based on age, experience, or simply because they are parents, to be able to tell them what to do (even if they may not always like it). At school, teachers are not simply obeyed because of their power – pupils accept that teachers should be in a position to tell them what to do. In the main individuals accept that the government should be in

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a position to run the country.

There are considerable disadvantages for a government which depends solely upon military power to maintain control. In the long term it is important for all people in positions of power that they should have their position recognized as legitimate (rightful) by those over whom they have power. Professor Crick, in his article, 'Basic concepts for political education', has this to say:

Probably all governments require some capacity for or potentiality of force or violence; but probably no government can maintain itself through time, as distinct from defence and attack at specific moments, without legitimating itself in some way, getting itself loved, respected, even just accepted as inevitable, otherwise it would need constant recourse to open violence – which is rarely the case.

Authority is the quality of being able to get people to do things because they think the individual or group has the right to tell them what to do. Those in authority are followed because it is believed that they fulfil a need within the community or political system. Authority, then, is linked to respect, which creates **legitimacy** and, therefore, leads to power.

A distinction needs to be made here between authority and authoritarian. All governments need authority for people to accept their right to make decisions. Not all governments are authoritarian. Authoritarian regimes are those which rely heavily on coercion, on making people do what the governments want, irrespective of their wishes. This is often done by the use of arbitrary imprisonment, use of the armed forces, and secret police. A more commonplace example may make this clear: a teacher can control a class in a number of ways, often by his authority as an expert. Some teachers rely instead on the exercise of strict controls, punishments, and limited freedom of action for individuals – such behaviour can be seen as authoritarian. Because such a situation can be unpleasant for the individuals concerned there is an automatic tendency to criticize such an approach, yet it may have its advantages at times and may, in some circumstances, be necessary. A teacher with an unruly class last thing on a Friday afternoon may have to be authoritarian in order to get any work done.

Perhaps an example might clarify this. In the past in Britain the church had great secular as well as spiritual power – it was a large landowner, it had its own courts and it could control to some extent the lives of ordinary people. In the twentieth century the control of the church over people's lives has declined – fewer people attended services and many

churches have closed. Successive governments have taken over many of the functions previously carried out by the church, for example, in areas such as education and health care. Even so the church and church leaders still have considerable authority. The intervention of the Archbishop of Canterbury's special envoy, Mr Terry Waite, into many potentially explosive situations and his ability to produce results is indicative of the great authority still exercised by the church. Mr Waite, in Iran in 1981 and Libya in 1985, was responsible for securing the release of detainees being held hostage when conventional methods had failed.

According to the German writer Max Weber (1864-1920), there are three main types of authority: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic.

Traditional authority is legitimated by appealing to the past. It often looks back to old customs and the acts of ancestors. Weber claims this is the type of authority typical of simpler, pre-industrial societies.

Legal-rational authority is legitimated by appealing to rules and laws. The British government has authority because it was elected by a legal process and because it works within the laws of the land. This type of authority is typical of industrial countries.

Charismatic authority is based on the personal attributes of an individual which give him the ability to get others to follow, even if they have to break the law. Hitler and Mussolini could be examples of charismatic leaders, as could Jesus. Charisma is very rare and societies with charismatic leaders often have difficulties in replacing them.

These are ideal types of authority and are unlikely to exist in their pure form. Britain, for instance, has a government based largely on legal-rational authority, but with some element of tradition (for example, the monarchy) and from time to time some elements of charismatic leadership (for example, Churchill).

Types of power

We have already seen that power can exist at an almost infinite number of levels but we will now have to concentrate upon an analysis of different types of power at a national level. Here it becomes necessary to try to distinguish between different types of power, for individuals may be very powerful in some fields but not in others – although we will see later there is a considerable overlap. These divisions of power can be seen a consequence of a type of society in which there is considerable division of functions – a complex society will develop certain complex and specialized groups to deal with particular types of problems. Their

expertise will give them power over the non-expert majority, often linked with the ability to make life pleasant or unpleasant for the mass of people. We can identify three main concentrations of power in modern Britain:

- (a) political power;
- (b) economic power;
- (c) military power.

Political power

For the purposes of this discussion we shall take the concept of politics as being concerned with those decisions which affect the way a society is organized and the goals which that society chooses to pursue. Conflict about goals and ways of achieving them is an inevitable feature of such a definition.

In Britain it is the party which gains a majority of MPs in the House of Commons which forms a government. The leader of the party usually becomes Prime Minister and together with his chosen cabinet formulates policies which are then passed to parliament for discussion. A government with a working majority can usually get its way.

At one level, then, political power rests with the government (some would go further and say that it rests increasingly with the Prime Minister), but if parliament has supreme legislative power – it is sovereign – then it must be the repository of political power. Parliament, however, has limitations to this sovereignty but it can still exert strong political control, even to the extent of causing a government to resign and forcing a general election. A minority government is particularly vulnerable to such pressure but even a majority government could be under threat from a major revolt of its own back-benches.

Even if a party does not form the government under a parliamentary system, it can retain a certain amount of power. The Opposition, to some people, seems to be a negative institution – blind opposition for the sake of it. This is a mistaken view for the Opposition serves to keep the government of the day on its toes, provide an alternative government for the electorate to choose if the occasion should arise, and attempts to amend what it considers to be misguided, excessive, or ill-considered government legislation. In items of minority government, opposition parties can limit the activities of government.

Party, parliament, and government hold much political power but, many would argue, it is the individual who has supreme power. The major difficulty is that many others would argue persuasively that the individual has little or no power. The act of voting can be seen as an

expression of the will of the people – democracy is, after all, people power, but the extent to which an individual can influence the outcome of an election is minimal. His ability to influence political events between elections may be less, but he can try. Just as the individual voter often feels powerless, so, too, do many back-bench MPs who feel themselves to be controlled by the party machine which whips them into line. MPs are able to ask questions, designed to reveal the shortcomings of a government, and to introduce Private Members' Bills. However, the need for specialists in government and the cloak of official secrecy which still falls over much government business has led back-benchers to feel that they lack real power.

The position is somewhat complicated by the narrow definition of political power so far adopted, for we have seen in recent years that power may be leaving the hands of other powerful bodies. There has been increasing speculation that other centres of power are becoming concerned in politics – the main brunt of the attack has been aimed at trades unions. There seems to be much doubt as to how far it is now possible to talk of political power as being divorced from other types of power. The relationship between these various, political, and 'nonpolitical' elements and which is likely to be most dominant is discussed further in a later section.

Economic power

The wealth of a nation depends on the extent to which it can produce goods and services efficiently and the way that those with economic power help or hinder such production. In the twentieth century governments have become increasingly involved in regulating economic forces by introducing price controls, trades union legislation, import restrictions, and taking control of large sectors of manufacturing and service industry, including steel production and the railway service. The fact that government is often a major employer serves to underline the difficulties involved in separating economic and political power. Despite this there are three main groups which can wield considerable economic power apart from the government. These are:

1. Industrial combines (including multi-national companies);
2. trades unions;
3. financial institutions.

Before proceeding to a further examination of these, it is worth noting that there are numerous external organizations which from time to time exert economic pressures on governments, from beyond national

boundaries. When considering the internal economic situation it is worth remembering the constraints upon governments imposed by such organizations as the International Monetary Fund, the European Economic Community, and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries.

Industrial combines

Through their control of employment and production and their central position in the wealth creation process, industrialists are able to wield great power. Most of the wealth producing sector of the economy (mainly the privately owned sector) has as its main aim the making of profit. If industrialists do not feel that there is sufficient prospect of reasonable profits they can exercise their judgement and limit investment and employment. On these sort of commercial decisions the well-being of the nation depends. If, on the other hand, there are good prospects for profit and efficiency then the nation benefits from having more goods and higher employment coupled perhaps with rising living standards.

This type of argument is often put forward by groups such as the Confederation of British Industry to explain why industrialists are such a vital sector of the community that they should receive as much encouragement as possible with as few restraints as possible. This view of industrialists as working in the national interest has led some politicians, often Conservative, to argue that the growth of trades union power has so reduced the ability of British industry to retain a competitive edge in international markets, that the result has been frustration and a dilution of incentive among industrialists. They go on to argue that it is necessary to stem the growth of trades union power in order to release the productive forces of the economy. This view stresses the way in which industrialists benefit the whole nation while trades unions act just for a sector of the community.

Although the above argument presents industrialists in a favourable light it is questionable whether they always act in the national interest or even whether it is their primary intention to do so. Many companies are now multi-nationals whose interests extend over much of the world, and are not linked with the well-being of one country, but with the firm. Multi-nationals are now in a position where many smaller countries, and from time to time, larger countries, are almost powerless to hinder their activities. A more wide-ranging criticism has come from people like Professor R. Miliband who has argued that the controllers of industry are able to exert permanent pressure on government because of their

power to make decisions which will affect the way the economy expands. According to Miliband, trades unions often seem to have more power because their dealings with government, and hence their successes, are more public. Industrialists, he argues, have more power, and this is strengthened by their social and economic backgrounds, which tend to be similar to those of politicians and top civil servants. It seems likely, then, that politicians may be more in tune with the ideas of industry than of labour.

Trades unions

Trades unions seek to represent, and improve, the conditions of workers. They grew up to represent mainly manual workers and this is still where their main strength lies.

Trades unions gain their power from their high membership. An old trades union slogan is 'Unity is strength' and this reflects union attitudes. An individual worker has little power or influence but when he joins a union he and his colleagues can have great power. This visible type of power that unions have tends to be of a negative sort. They can disrupt industry by taking various kinds of action, the most extreme kind of which the strike. This ability to disrupt not only affects the industry concerned, but also the general public. Impact may be immediate – for example, the dock strikes in 1984 – or cumulative, such as the miners' strike from March 1984 to March 1985. The violence associated with picketing during the miners' strike, not only incensed many members of the public, but also caused tension between the leadership of the TUC and the Labour Party on the one hand, and militant elements of the NUM on the other. This was brought to the fore when Mr Norman Willis, General Secretary of the TUC, expressed the organization's condemnation of all violence from whatever quarter it comes, in November 1985.

However, there is a positive side to union power which operates unobtrusively to keep the economic system functioning. Unions prevent many worker problems reaching a serious level through their routine work; yet such work receives little publicity. Employers recognize, from a practical point of view, the value of continuing consultation with a single committee of workers' representatives, and some favour the closed shop for this reason. Under such an arrangement a worker would not be accepted for employment unless he belonged to a relevant union. In Britain the right of an individual to refuse trades union membership where a closed shop applies was reinforced by the passing of the Employment Act in August 1980. Accordingly a worker can reject trades

union membership if he/she genuinely objects on grounds of conscience.

As trades unions exist to further their members' aims, one of their main tasks is to try to increase the wages of their members. It is in this field that economic and political forces often collide. Many governments have tried in some way to control incomes in order to control inflation. Unions have, at various stages, been willing to support the government or been wholly antagonistic to such policy. The relative failure of incomes policies has often been used as an illustration of the extent of union power - there has grown a feeling that unions have too much power. Many feel that the unions' power to cripple the country has led to a stage where governments lose if they confront unions.

It was largely to control this perceived abuse of power that the 1979 Conservative Government introduced a number of pieces of legislation to restrict union power. The 1980 Employment Act placed limits on picketing, the 1982 Employment Act restricted the existence of closed shops, and the 1984 Trades Union Act insisted on secret ballots before industrial action and the need to ballot members in order to allow some union funds to be used for political activity. This latter provision was seen, by the Labour Party, as a party political action aimed at weakening the Labour Party.

The trades unions have had long and close links with the Labour Party; indeed, some were instrumental in the foundation of the Labour Party. Even now, much of Labour Party finance comes from subscriptions from the unions which are affiliated to the party. In such unions part of the members subscription goes towards Labour Party finance unless an individual chooses to 'contract' out; in return delegates from the unions can attend the Labour Party Annual Conference (the governing body of the Labour Party) and have one for each union member, which can be cast in a block - hence the term 'block voting'. The block vote means that unions can outvote individual members, about 6 to 1 and have their policies accepted as Labour Party policy. They can also affect the membership of the National Executive committee which deals with the day-to-day running of the Party, by voting on their nominees.

It would be quite wrong to assume that the Labour Party is dominated by the unions; the parliamentary party has consistently fought for its right to pursue the policies not of conference but of the parliamentary party. The power struggle within the Labour Party which led to the expulsion of leading members of the Militant Tendency indicates the extent to which there is a divide between members of the parliamentary party and some members of the party outside parliament.

The limits to union power or influence appear to be the extent to which their power remains a negative one – to disrupt rather than to build it is this type of highly visible action which gives the unions at least the appearance of having greater power than is possessed by employers. The period of Mrs Thatcher's administrations were marked by a radical reduction in trades union power and influence. Trades unions have been kept very much at arm's length on matters of industrial and economic policy.

Financial institutions

In any country which relies heavily upon trade and industry those institutions which control the flow of funds and credit will have great power. In Britain the City plays a large part in determining the business confidence people feel and the likelihood of success being enjoyed by a new venture. At the same time it is not easy to see how the power of finance is used; certainly there does not appear to be any type of conspiracy of individuals wanting to use their power, although one might believe there was if one listened to certain left-wing Labour supporters. Again, it can be seen as individuals and groups reinforcing each other's ideas and creating a situation in which financial confidence is high, leading to a feeling of success; or where financial confidence is low, leading to an unwillingness to finance new ventures. In the 1970s, with high inflation rates, high interest rates, and curbs on profits, confidence was very low – and this had some effect on the prosperity enjoyed by Britain. In addition, the need for Britain to seek support from bodies such as the International Monetary Fund badly affected the willingness of banks to take risks. The Conservative Government White Paper on the economy, published in 1980, set out monetarist policies to remove the cancer of inflation. Restriction of the money supply was a key feature of inflation control in the 1980s. Government spending on welfare provision and private company subsidies was curtailed. However, it seems that no radical measure is without cost – in this case the cost of high unemployment.

The ability to influence, in whatever way, the economy of an advanced industrial society gives individuals and groups very great power. The power, though, does not rest exclusively with any one group at any one time. Each group has some power and at different times the balance of power may shift. Arguments which suggest that one group or other has too much power must be examined to determine what is meant by too much power and whether a diminution of power would favour another group.

Military power

In many ways military power is the easiest type to see and to understand. TV pictures of British troops fighting in the Falklands, exercising at the London airports, or even RAF aeroplanes flying overhead, demonstrate to us that there are organizations in our society which can use force should the need arise. The armed forces control the major part of the weaponry of Britain and, indeed, of most countries. This gives them tremendous potential power, but this power is seldom used directly. The threat of force is often sufficient deterrent. In many developing countries military power has been an active element in political struggle. The armed forces have been instrumental in replacing one government with another. The intervention of military personnel has led, in some Third World countries, to the establishing of military governments.

The armed forces in most Western industrial nations seem unwilling to become involved directly in political struggles – they see their role as being subservient to those who control the government of the country. Military power gives way to political authority. Whether this deference to political authority is absolute is doubtful. In 1981 officers of the Spanish army took over the Cortes in an attempted coup because they objected to government policy. Both Portugal and Greece must also be seen as potentially somewhat unstable in this respect.

Without a doubt the military in Britain could seize control since it has the expertise and the technology to do so, but the armed forces accept that the government has the authority (given by the people) to rule without direct military interference. This is not to say, however, that the military is without influence. Defence spending is one of the major items of expenditure of any British government, and the leaders of the military use their influence on government to gain the funds they require for weaponry. Fears of external threat can lead governments to very high levels of expenditure.

The secondary position of the military in liberal democracies means that they should only act when authorized to do so by the political leaders of the country. The Falklands war of 1982 illustrates this point. The decision to defend the islands by the use of force was taken by the government, not by the military. Only when government approval was given could the task force be sent and even then the rules of engagement were partly drawn up by politicians. It was a political decision as to when diplomatic initiatives had failed and when military options should be exercised.

The stability of parliamentary democracy in Britain has removed the

need for direct military involvement in politics, except on rare occasions when instructed by the civil authorities to take action. Such stability allows the military to retain its traditional role, in reserve, ready to repel external aggression and to assist the police in the maintenance of internal law and order as, for example, in Northern Ireland.

Although the major task of the armed forces of most countries is to defend the nation against others and respond to political or military attacks, in some countries the prime purpose of the armed forces is to keep the civilian population subdued. Marxists would argue that the armed forces of all liberal democracies are part of the Repressive State Apparatus which also includes the legal system and the police. This Repressive State Apparatus exists to bolster up the Ruling Class by controlling, either directly or by threat, the majority of the population. The involvement of troops in industrial disputes is seen as a sign that the military is not neutral but exists to support a class society. It cannot be denied that at times the armed forces are used by the government to mitigate the effects of emergencies, both civil and industrial; but those in government would say that this is for the benefit of the population as a whole, not as a way of protecting their position.

Discussion point

Externally the armed forces of most countries share the same tasks, to defend the nation against others and to respond to political or military attacks. War is the ultimate test of a country's power and it is for this purpose that armed forces are kept (although in some countries it could be said that the prime purpose of the armed forces is to keep the civilian population subdued).

It is only in times of war and occasional civil unrest that military power is of great relevance in the advanced countries, but the possibility of the military defending the civil order adds strength to a political system.

In addition to these centres of power – political, economic, and military – other institutions exert great influence and also have some degree of power. The education system acts to spread knowledge and to train young minds, and, to considerable extent, to ensure conformity. With the mass media, the education system controls the flow of ideas and information we consider. This gives them great control over what ideas and information are seen as legitimate. Organized religion still exerts some power, and much authority, though over a declining proportion of the population. Pronouncements of leading churchmen are still of great importance and are widely reported.

Leading members of the judiciary have both great power and authority, for their pronouncements are also listened to with interest and presented as authoritative. Once again it becomes clear that one cannot point to one group of people and say they alone have power. In Democratic countries power seems to be spread among many people.
