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Power – A Natural Phenomenon or a Form of Hegemony?

For Marxists, power is structural rather than individual and operates through material, cultural and intellectual 'hegemony.'

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As discussed in yesterday's podcast, traditional interpretations of power have lost some of their explanatory power. Indeed, if we are to believe constructivists such as Stefano Guzzini, one of the main defects of liberal and realist conceptions of power is that they treat it as a "natural" phenomenon. By typically emphasizing the acquisition or imposition of power on others, we fail to appreciate it for what it truly is – a social construct. Power has no durable or observable basis in some detached or objective reality, argue the constructivists. To them, the real source of power is the *perception* that something is a source of power. It is, in short, what we make of it.

Too often, however, this is as far as constructivist analyses go. Yes, they effectively critique traditional realist and liberal conceptions of power, but they typically do so without offering a clear alternative. This tendency occurs often enough in the social sciences, but it does beg an inevitable question – if our working definitions of power are now too narrow, where do we go from here? Well, during the rest of this week we will look at some possible answers, starting with Marxist-inspired views of power today.

Structural power

One of the central insights of traditional Marxist analysis is that social relationships produce different kinds of actors, not vice versa. "Men make their own history," Marx conceded, but "they do not make it as they please." An important implication of this belief is that power is not solely personal. It is not just the expression of an actor's intentions. It is also a result of the position the actor has within a given social structure. Different social positions generate different social privileges, capacities and advantages. In classical Marxism, as we've all been taught, this means that those who control the means of production have greater opportunities (higher education, income, social standing, etc.) than those who do not. Power is thus structural; it is not merely an expression of individual intent.

This traditional Marxist approach towards structural power became so familiar to us that it became a common cliché. So much so, in fact, that neo-Marxists such as Antonio Gramsci eventually broadened the meaning of "social structure" to include cultural and intellectual factors. As Gramsci saw it,

culture and thought were not near-trivial sources of power, as traditional materialists would have us believe. They too were a profound source of hegemony, but of a different kind. Social position not only permitted materially-based dominance over others, but social dominance as well. This social dominance was indeed cultural and intellectual and, most insidiously, prevented disadvantaged social classes from becoming fully aware of their own inferior social position. Structural power, it turns out, thus has two wellsprings: 1) material domination and 2) the ability to shape one's basic self-understanding – a self-understanding that, if left undeveloped, leaves you willing to accept your pre-assigned role in the already-established order of things. And there, Gramsci concludes, lies the ultimately hegemonic nature of power.

Gramsci, power and world order

Gramsci's concept of cultural-intellectual hegemony was subsequently applied to international relations by other neo-Marxist thinkers such as Robert Cox, who has argued that THE source of power in any socio-political order is a constellation of *ideas*, *institutions* and *material capabilities* that endlessly intertwine with each other. The various ways these constellations then configure themselves will determine a society's or political order's "historical structure," and thus the "pressures and constraints" it imposes on its own people.

Further echoing Gramsci, Cox argues that the hegemony enjoyed by a particular socio-political order will prevail if "the power basis of the structure tends to recede into the background of consciousness." The implications of this are pretty clear. Any order, whether it is local, national or international, is a hegemonic one as long as its basic institutions and ideas are not being seriously questioned and/or challenged. Indeed, in hegemonic orders the economically and politically weak accept prevailing power relationships as legitimate ones, which then reinforces them. In non-hegemonic orders, in contrast, ideas, institutions and material capabilities are out of sync. As a result, challenges to prevailing ideas and institutions arise, and those social forces that were previously in the background gain sufficient momentum to come to the fore. (This process does ultimately require a parallel shift in the distribution of material capabilities, however.)

US and European "hegemony" and the idea of national self-determination

Perhaps the international role the United States and its European allies have played since World War II best reflects the cluster of assumptions that comprise the Marxist view of power we've just described – i.e., that power is synonymous with material and mental hegemony and represents the intertwined influence of ideas, institutions and material capabilities on different body politics. Indeed, since 1945 the transatlantic nations have collectively enjoyed greater *material capabilities* than any other challengers. This has then enabled them to create and shape *institutions* such as the United Nations, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank on terms favorable to their interests. Moreover, the US and its partners facilitated the institutionalization of *ideas* such as national self-determination, free market and trade liberalism, and multilateralism in the international system.

Taken together, the structural power of this particular constellation of ideas, institutions and material capabilities has been there for all to see. It has profoundly shaped the capabilities and self-perceptions of state and non-state actors throughout the second half of the 20th century. Take the idea of national self-determination, for example. Neo-Marxists such as Cox might argue that since 1945 the principle of national self-determination has been a defining feature of the world's "historical structure." Indeed, the number of formally independent states in the international system increased in the last six decades from 71 to 194. This happened, however, not only because cash-strapped empires disintegrated before our eyes, but also because of the institutionalization of *the idea* of national self-determination through the UN Charter, which then helped define the international "historical structure." This historical structure not only constrained actors with imperialistic agendas,

it also raised the consciousness of those who wanted independence and statehood and then acted on it.

Is today's historical structure undergoing fundamental change?

Marxism's evolving emphasis on the power latent in material- and non-materially-based structures may help to explain the seismic changes we are currently witnessing across the international system. Contemporary constellations of ideas, institutions and material capabilities can shed light on how (and to what extent) power is seemingly shifting from the West to emerging powers such as China and India. In relative terms, material capabilities have been shifting eastwards for a number of years now. Perhaps more importantly, however, the idea that democracies and free markets go hand in hand is being increasingly contested in the realm of ideas, with the concept of "authoritarian capitalism" emerging as a rival model to the neo-liberal free-market "consensus." So far, institutions have remained more or less unchanged, but calls for the UN Security Council, World Bank and IMF to reflect new material and therefore political realities are getting louder and louder. These challenges reflect the underlying capacities of "emerging powers" to resist the pressures and constraints of structure – and to shape their own fate. They also suggest that (neo-)Marxist critiques and characterizations of power are not ready for the dustbin of history, at least not yet.

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