

Is power central to
our understanding of
politics?



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“ The right of nature, which writers commonly call jus naturale, is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.” – Thomas Hobbes

“... that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man” – Thomas Hobbes

The etymology of politics is from a word of Greek origin, polis, which means the state or a group. Its idea was based on the perfect city state, and it was the work of Plato and Aristotle. Plato's book ' The Republic' precisely defines the meaning and objectives of this city state. Hence, the word politics, came in being, with the idea of making a perfect society. But it may be near to impossible to achieve an utopian society, than what it is now. During their observations Plato and Aristotle found some faultlines or weaknesses in the human society and therefore they started to have their own political philosophies.

The book “ The Politics”, by Aristotle describes that “ Man is by nature a political

animal”(The Politics, 1) or simply put, it is a inherent characteristic of man. Because of this, man should try to get a position within the city state. As per Aristotle, Political science is not a theoretical concept, but an inborn trait of human beings.

The most fundamental meaning of politics is that, human beings are selfish creatures and all his acts, are towards the promulgation of his own interests and preserve himself. He likes to have his own beliefs and strategy which may differ from others in the society or group. Therefore there is a high chance of conflict, not only due to clash of various ideologies, but as our world had finite resources, people will try to get the maximum share for themselves, and if this were to happen, it would be a very difficult to live in. Politics will be very much required to prevent the society from collapse.

Some people must be able to control the others in the society in order to enforce the code of conduct. We have also seen in our day to day lives that some people are able to exert more coercion, than others in the group, and it is because they have the confidence of others in the group.

Earlier we saw that by primitive nature man looks after his benefit first, than those of other members in the society, so even the people in power will try to achieve some of their personal goals. Politics is essentially a struggle for power between the people who have some authority, and getting this power is only possible from help by the others. It will be by way of trying to mitigate the conflicts, by genuine or improper ways. They will try to reach out to the aggrieved parties with some promise of solutions and benefits, in such a way, to get their necessary support, and ultimately control over them. Therefore, politics is the way of achieving new power and retaining it, by honest or dishonest means, and this way, can be in between individuals, groups, state and its subjects, or even with in a family.

We always think that government is the ultimate form of power. It is the politicians who manage the government and it is their plan of action which ultimately governs the society. Does it mean, that groups, societies or countries, where there is no government, there is no politics. Power is omnipresent in our actions and relations, with others. The very functioning of a society depends upon the power mechanisms with in it. The most common form of power known to us, is through the punishments by a group or a state to its subjects. But this may not be the case in all relationships, power is not expressed always through subjugation.

Wherever there are various levels of governance, politics has to be there. For eg, in a family, the power is divided between the father, the mother, and various other family members, or in a bank between the manager and the clerks. This power is used the ultimate authority to get what he wants to and effectively manage grievances and disagreements. Therefore, power and authority are the most basic features of politics. With the struggle for power, there can be no politics. But at the same time, politics is the innate characteristic of humans, as per Aristotle.

The writings of Foucault show us power may reside in certain traditions, and which makes these power relationship acceptable. For example – the caste system which stills exists in India without the use of force. Power is also incorporated in beliefs and values, and through which humans experience their lives, and this authorizes various power relationships and it's inter dependancies.

Lukes asks to view power in three dimensions. The one dimensional power as per Lukes is that power is related to our behavior and it is up to the man as to how much he can change the actions of other men, in a decision oriented process. The man with the most authority will be the winner in this process.

The second dimension that Lukes discusses is about the ability to shape the agenda is a vital form of power to further one's interests.

The three-dimensional theory of power by Lukes states that a person may behave or think in a particular way, which is not in his self interest. This dimension is a process in which the person with most power is able to change the weak in a way, in which he acts as per the whims of the powerful, on his own motivation, and without any imposition or forcible constraint — for example, by creating a deep rooted ideology.

But for Weber, power is the ability through which, an individual in a society, can achieve his or her own wish even against the opposition of others.

Looking at the above notions of politics and power and the quotes by Hobbes at the start of this essay, it is very clear that man lives only for himself, and he has every right, to look after his self preservation, and without a common power to govern the society, man is always at war against other men. This shows how politics and power are deeply intertwined and complex, and as per Locke it is human nature to be selfish. Out of this selfishness, comes out the desire to have more and more for oneself, and which can be achieved only by art of politics, to use soft and hard power, for capturing the minds and imagination of others. Therefore, power is central to our understanding of politics.

In what does Foucault's concept of power alter conventional understanding of politics ?

Decentralization of the position of power as suggested by Foucault is a very new way of looking at the concept of power. He has given us a new way to look at power, and taking us away from the observation of persons, who use power only as a tool of imposition, and also even away from the institutions from which these persons function, and guides us to the idea that ' power is everywhere and part of knowledge and truth. Foucault says what we are, it is because of power.

Foucault's view of power is totally different from the previous ways of viewing power, in a way that, power is diffuse, not concentrated, embodied rather than possessed, discursive, rather than coercive. (Gaventa)

He is against the notion that power is controlled and executed by a group of people, by way of acts of force, instead it is spread out. ' Power is everywhere' and ' comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault). It is like beyond power or system of truth that is diffused in the society, and it is in a state of constant change and bargaining. Foucault uses the term ' power/knowledge' to show us the power is made of accepted forms of knowledge, scientific observations and truth.

Truth is made in this world, and is a result of different types of coercion. It causes power to take various forms. Our society has its administration of truth, which is politicized, that is the forms of sermons, which it considers and makes it true, the structure which enables us to differentiate truth from falsity, the process by which each is approved, the methodology considered

fine, in getting to this truth, that position of people who have the power of declaring the truth (Foucault).

Administration of truth and rules of politics are a product of scientific enquiry and agencies, and forced on the society regularly through educational institutes and radio/newspapers/televisions, and the dynamics of political ideas. The quest for truth, is not to find out the ultimate truth, that can be acquired by society, but it is about the guidelines, which differentiate between truth and falsity, and precise factors of power are attached to the truth, an endeavor about the position of truth and it's politico economic functions. (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991).

Power enforces social discipline and standardization. Foucault moved his insight from the exercise of power by the state, as found in feudalism, to force their people, towards a new kind of disciplinary power as evidenced in the eighteenth century European society, such as jails, educational establishments and mental asylums. Their structures of monitoring did not have the need for coercion, as the subjects automatically performed in desired ways.

Foucault was intrigued by the systems of prison vigilance, school regimen, administration setup, and demographic control, and accepted criteria about body conduct, inclusive of sex. He studied medicine, psychology, and criminology and their roles as departments of knowledge that describe the accepted patterns of behavior and aberration. Our bodies are dominated and made to function in a particular style, as a world of societal control of the general population, through what he called ' bio-power'. Disciplinary and bio-

power create a ' discursive practice' or a body of knowledge and behavior that defines what is normal, acceptable, deviant, etc. – but it is a discursive practice that is nonetheless in constant flux (Foucault).

One of the central themes of Foucault's power is that it goes beyond politics and it is something which is there in day to day practices of society. Due to this, state centered power jams, including rebellions, don't bring in the necessary change in societies. He has also pointed out, how deeply norms are implanted in our minds, that we don't even recognize them, and it makes adhere to discipline ourselves without any willful imposition from others.

It has a direct and creative role in our lives. It comes from various places, and operates from the top down and from the bottom up (Foucault). Power is at its zenith when it is inside specific institutions such as schools, prisons or hospitals, we should be careful about locating forms of power with particular institutions, because power is neither a superstructure nor a quality of an institution (Foucault).

Politics was usually seen in the conventional sense as an external force trying to subjugate it's subjects, and the subjects, feel coerced as they are not in a position to negotiate or for want of greater good of the society. It follows from the earlier points that power is not just applicable to political institutions as has been thought traditionally. For Foucault politics is not just limited to state politics, it has a wide range of system for domination, and is applicable to a plethora of techniques, from the subjects control of himself to the " bio political" control of people (Foucault). Therefore, Foucault's view of power changes the traditional way of looking at politics.