

Elites and the masses

Sociology



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Elites and the Masses There are many theories pertaining to the nature of power in society. In modern society, it is important to identify where and when power is exercised, who benefits and who suffers from it being exerted upon them. In this tradition, it is useful to examine the managerialist perspective. Managerialism focuses on organizations as the basis, or unit of analysis of society, to which all other aspects of society are subordinate to. These organizations use their resources in an attempt to dominate each other and society. Managerialism tells us that power is concentrated among a group of elites who control organizations, and use them as an instrument to gain more power and expand their realm of control. Organizational power is increasingly the most important force that explains the direction of change in both state and society (Alford and Friedland, p. 174). Thus, elites are becoming the most important factor that determines our society, and do not serve the full interests of society, but rather attempt to manipulate the masses to better serve itself. Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy lends itself to the notion of the managerialism. He claims that as society becomes more integrated and complex, organizational elites come to be more dependent on specialists and experts, or bureaucracies to advise and influence them on decisions. Bureaucracies are groups of individuals doing specialized tasks which blend into a cohesive and efficient unit. Power becomes increasingly centralized within bureaucracies and the elites who control them because as they grow, becoming more powerful, they use that power to gain more control over the masses. Weber saw the historical development of societies as a movement toward rational forms of organization, that is, groups organized not on the basis of the authority of personalities and traditions but on the basis of specific functions to perform or objectives to meet (Marger p. <https://assignbuster.com/elites-and-the-masses/>)

72). Weber often used the notion of a machine to illustrate what he meant by modern organizations, referring to people as “cogs” that serve the machine, losing their identity and creativity in the process. Although Weber admitted that both mechanization and bureaucracy together created an extremely efficient and productive economic system, they also worked to build an iron cage around the individual. The iron cage is the idea that increased mechanization and bureaucracy alienates and removes the individual from direct control over their environment and depersonalizes them to the point of being like machines. The increased use of assembly lines in production is a prime example of depersonalization within bureaucracy. Weber identifies several different types of authority. One is traditional legitimacy, which states that authority is bestowed upon someone based on traditional roles of authority, such as the pope or even the parents of children. Charismatic authority tells us that some are granted legitimacy to have authority over our lives by sheer charisma, such as Martin Luther King jr., Adolf Hitler and Gandhi. The third type of authority is rational-legal authority. This states that we grant legitimacy based upon the office they serve. An example of this is the inherent authority of Jesse Ventura over the people of Minnesota, simply because he holds the title of governor. In the managerial perspective, the economy is seen as a process of three different factors: industrialization, elite competition and bureaucratic rationalization. Industrialization is characterized by the increased role of technology as an integral factor of production. As industrialization and science further blend together, the economy becomes increasingly large and complex, making bureaucratic organizations more and more of a necessary function to the advancement of the economy and society at large. The advance of large scale corporations

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with more coordination within markets forces our government to become more bureaucratized to efficiently regulate the economy. The seeming inevitability of bureaucracies to handle increased industrialization reflect the functional emphasis within managerialism. In the managerial perspective, democracy is seen as a consequence of elite competition (Alford and Friedland, p. 176). Organizations such as political parties and interest groups are dependent upon mass membership and participation, but participation is mobilized by the elites of these organizations, who compete for more power. They gain power by accumulating more popular support, and could further use their power to manipulate information that gets filtered down to the masses to benefit themselves. The interests of elites to undermine mass participation illustrates the political emphasis of managerialism.

Rationalization of the state is a necessary accompaniment to both industrialization and elite competition. As the modern economy becomes more complex and infiltrated with large corporations, it is essential for the state to increasingly regulate it, which forces the government to become more rationalized. Rationalization of the state occurs in many ways. Planning agencies staffed by experts attempt to develop long-range plans to deal with problems that may not be the current objects of interest group demands (Alford and Friedland, p. 178). Rationalization is facilitated by elite competition. Elites must gain strength by building popular support and can manipulate information to gain more power. It protects elites from outside mass interference and ultimately makes political participation less necessary for rational decision making. The managerial world view contains two images of the bureaucratic state. The functional emphasis explains that society creates bureaucracies because they are necessary to modern society.

Organizations act as an organism, where to sustain life it must grow more specialized and efficient. This notion tells us that only the most efficient bureaucracies will survive and adapt to the ever growing complexities of society. The political emphasizes that elites create structures for their own advantage, despite the best interest of society. Organizations will strategize to increase their own power, and only listen to the masses when their own power as an elite gets threatened. An organization will use its power to manipulate information to benefit itself at the expense of society.

Organizations are out to gain power, and they will use that power to suppress others. One theorist in the functional tradition is George Ritzer, and his essay “ The McDonaldization of Society”. McDonaldization refers to the process which the world is governed by formal rationality. To Weber, formal rationality means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures (Ritzer, p. 19). This means that people are not left on their own to find the best means of achieving a goal, rather it is all mapped out for them already and if they follow the rules it will come. An important aspect of formal rationality is that it allows less room for an individual to be creative and independent, and leaves no room for doing a task “ our own way”. Rules and regulations are institutionalized into bureaucracies and exercised by the masses consistently, and are necessary to the smooth functioning of society. Weber saw bureaucracy as utilizing four elements of formal rationality, the first being efficiency. That is, bureaucracies are the most efficient structure to handle a large number of tasks. Second, bureaucracies are highly predictable because of all their rules and regulations. Third, bureaucracies emphasize quantity of production, with little or no concern for the actual

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quality of what is being produced. Lastly, bureaucracies emphasize control over people through the replacement of human with non-human technology (Ritzer, p. 22). Employees are controlled to the point where they only do a specific set of well defined tasks, and having reduced people to this status makes them easier to be replaced with machines. Ritzer, in the Weberian tradition argues that a system designed to be highly rational often grows to become irrational. The bureaucracies that utilize the above four elements often dehumanize the worker and the consumer, fixing them into a highly rigid, machine like state. Bureaucracies can also degenerate into inefficiency because of its own complexity, namely, “ red tape”. The emphasis on quantity can also lead to a lot of poor quality work. This leads to Weber’s notion of the iron cage, where people would be locked into a series of rational structures, and would bounce back and forth from one rational system to another, with no escape. The writings of C. Wright Mills reflect the political bias within the managerialist perspective. Mills argues that the power of elites, specifically elites within the political, military and economic realm are the decision makers in society to which all other areas of society are subordinate to. Each of the three are interrelated and have tended to come together to form “ the power elite”. Although the three do work together to form a sort of coalition of interests, Mills sees the economic elite as the most influential, because the political and the military are controlled to a degree by the money supplied to them by the economic realm. The most common interpretation of the American system of power suggests the image of balance and compromise, which Mills contends has become a part of the middle level of power, with the elites at the top levels. The many competing forces making up the middle levels of political decisions are often

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concerned with issues that involve the specified interests of specific groups, not concerning the upper echelon of politics. The actions of such middle-level powers may indeed have consequence for top-level policy; certainly at times they hamper these policies. But they are not truly concerned with them, which means of course that their influence tends to be quite irresponsible (Farganis, p. 295). Thus the middle level of politics is not where the big decisions of national and international concerns are made. Interest group cannot affect decisions made by elites, but merely react to them. Mills also believes that the dimensions of the middle class have changed from small businessmen and farmers to white-collar employees working for large corporate bureaucracies. The old middle class was an independent power base within society and the new middle class is not unified enough to be an important factor for social change. The public often becomes an administrative fact (Farganis, p. 298). There are many big differences which set pluralism and managerialism apart. One major one is the role of the individual. Pluralism holds the values of the individual as a paramount force in society, where managerialism states that the values of the mere individual are inconsequential because they are not powerful enough to affect the will of the elite. Power is decentralized in pluralism, spread out among individuals with common interests who join together for a common goal, while managerialism believes that power is centralized among a small group of elites who work to get more power, and will even manipulate the masses in their own best interest. Pluralism believes that the citizens dictate to our government the proper policies to enact, when managerialism says that people in a position of power dictate policies to the public. In addition, pluralism assumes a consensus of values among individuals, while

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managerialism sees society working by conflict and coercion Bibliography
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