

The conceptions of  
power and  
domination found in  
the works of karl  
marx, max webe...



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The notion of power can be looked at as a definite degree control of the individuals and others showing itself through different ways. Whether those individual notice it or not, the majority of them are subject to a variety of power types on a daily basis and are likely to recognize it as a normal occurrence.

Throughout the history, the concept of power arose in many different approaches from many ideologies. However, the modern understanding of power has been influenced with the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Michael Foucault who attempted to introduce various perceptions of what power is and how it is formed and the way it works.

Karl Marx provides dominance to the macro sphere, dealing with the major socio class that own mode of production. Weber concept's of power base in bureaucracy that empower individual, whereas, Michel Foucault highlights the need for micro theory dealing with discourse and power and knowledge (Goodwin & Scimecca 2005, p. 184).

Karl Marx concept of power and domination is founded on his proposition that defines distinctions of class possessions. The state is capable of deriving power when it can guarantee provisions to address the diverse needs of the populace. According to this concept social classes exist because of possessions that eventually define and establish domination.

Social classes have characteristic political power. This defines the strength possessed by these classes. These groups will use such strength to take control of their interests. This defines a facet of domination derived from possessing material things.

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However, the process of domination also relates to influence in an ideological sense. Generally Marx postulated that material possessions are pertinent determinants that shape and provide identity to a particular social class. This also determines the group's culture and behavior.

It is pertinent to note at this point that existing variations in possessions in terms of material determines the levels of domination although this will vary for different social groupings or classes. These variations are a typical feature within the Marxian theory that indicates that class struggles define the power and domination within this theory (Collins 1974).

Another aspect to understand in the concept of domination and power according to Karl Marx is related to labor power. Characteristically Karl Marx defines domination in which the bourgeois exploit the proletariat. In this light the most fundamental struggle against domination would involve freeing the society from exploitation by one class.

This in a way explains the communist concept, where according to Marx power is transferred to the proletariat. In this view Marx formulated various stages to the so-called liberation of the proletariat. According to Karl Marx the initial step of revolution involves the proletariat gaining power.

However, the struggle is not over until the proletariat in power has established his class as the ruling class thereby extorting the capital from the bourgeois. Karl Marx's view on power and domination involved the struggle between social classes (Seidman 2008, p. 83). The ruling class would dominate the subordinate class that was typically relegated to the production sector.

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In this view Marx postulated that the end of such domination was the objective of the communist struggle. Marx has indicated clearly the duality to power and domination by, including materialism and intellectualism as a means of dominance (Marx, Engels & McLellan 1998, p. 207; Marx 1999, p. 66). As such philosophers can dominate and control the affairs of the time.

Generally Karl Marx has based his conception of power and domination on a perpetual struggle between social classes fighting for the control of ideologies and material. The primary objective of this struggle according to this conception is to promote the subordinate class to rulership.

Foucault's understanding of power is viewed from two points of view. One understanding denotes power as the constriction and restraint imposed by state machinery over a people. In this understanding the power holders in the state are considered the noble or elite.

Alternative consideration by Foucault perceives power as a creation intended to set free people from the burdens and bondages of the society. Foucault in his second view explains that power rests on the belief on influence of human souls over the body.

Based on this understanding the human soul ensures that an individual builds successful relationships with others regardless of all other factors (Foucault 1975, p. 122). Additionally Foucault disputes the common perception that people have dominance inclinations over others further disputing the inequity prevalent in relationships.

Based on this understanding Foucault suggests that power is practiced rather than owned. A distinction that can be drawn from Foucault and Marx conceptions relates to the perception of power itself. According to Foucault power is viewed as an unclear concept (Gutting 1994, p. 78).

However, from Marx's view power is defined and wielded by a social class. In addition Foucault suggests that power is dependent on relationships indicating that everyone at some time is empowered. However, the traditional view differs from this concept by Foucault instead proposing that power is held by a dominant social class.

Further distinction is drawn from Foucault's understanding of domination that according to him is the result of a particular act rather than a defined role by an authority. Basing on such understanding empowerment ideologies like feminism has gained currently from this postulation.

However, the feminist movement may not be a universally accepted phenomenon because of the diversity in the women class from different countries. As such what empowerment in the west is may not be exactly as what is in China or India. Accordingly Foucault does not propose a clear definition of power as indicated by other theorists like Karl Marx.

Foucault indeed proposes that power can be employed by different people during different times and dependent on particular situation (Foucault 1988, p. 34).

Therefore, the distinction drawn from Foucault's understanding of power with other theorists relates to this explanation that power holders within a society

are not specific, but the process is circumstantial. This view is radically contradictory to those views that currently define societal power, including the Marxism theory.

The divergent from other theories is further amplified by the notion that power is not constrained and does not restrict, and that the aspect of domination is not identifiable within this conception by Foucault on power and domination (Thorpe n. d).

Max Weber's concept of power proposes it as something vague that cannot be easily categorized. Accordingly power from Weber's point of view involves man's realization of his own will in the society albeit meeting resistance from that particular society. Weber suggests that power can be typically identified and is sourced from different sources and value for its own sake.

Generally Weber indicates that power is determined by social honor that comes with prestige. Additionally power drawn from a legal order is feasible under this conception although the legal order is not considered the primary source. Max Weber considered money power as unethical and unjustifiable.

On the issue of domination Weber underscores that this is an indication of some degree of voluntary submission by the subject of power based on some genuinely vested interests (Bodley 2002, p. 67).

However, exceptions would be with modern world cases like the Hitler domination that was generally intended to propagate Germany domination of the world. Thus domination and obedience can only be viewed dependently for the former to be considered legitimate.

This is based on the understanding that obedience shows acceptance to the content of a command. Weber further postulated that authority can be categorized into three areas (Rhienstein 1954; Weber 1978; Weber 1958; Weber 2001, p. 117). Legally owned authority relates to power with the officialdom of the day.

The orders or commands propagated here are obeyed by virtue of one being the office bearer. Such is the power held by different governmental systems of the day whether presidential or parliamentary. The other category of authority defined by Weber is the legitimate authority (Gerth & Mills 1946, p. 217).

This is founded on conventionally accepted structures that propagate a belief of the legitimacy of a system and those within the system. Such is the case with monarchies and thus Queen Elizabeth II has authority defined by traditions that have remained for a long time and are held in loyalty by her.

Power can also come from compelling authority where such person exercise dominance based on his or her exceptional qualities. From Weber's point of view domination is thus maintained through perpetual governance that promotes obedience to the power holders by the public or society.

A typical resultant feature of such an arrangement is bureaucracy that continually propagates domination (Goodsell 1994, p. 190). Thus Weber postulates that governments uphold control through bureaucracy prevalent in subsidiary instruments of governance like the army and police force used to enforce state order (Hummel 1998, p. 307; Merton 1952; Wilson 1989, p. 77).

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When looking at Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Max Weber theories on power and domination, it is visibly true that these theories show variations in their ideology, understanding, and practicability. The theories by these three are considered as the most influential politically in modern time.

However, they also continue to draw much debate. Max Weber and Karl Marx postulations have gained increased acceptance in comparison to Foucault's theories. Perhaps an area currently benefiting from Foucault's theories that are inclined toward societal and moral wellbeing are activist groups that continue to agitate for individual rights. Such include the gender and gay activist groups.

Therefore, it can be inferred that Foucault theories have gained wider acceptance in the western world where levels of activism are on the rise. According to Karl Marx power and domination are founded on the economic arrangements of the day.

Predominantly the industrial and agricultural arrangement gives forth two distinct social classes the bourgeois and the proletariat. Domination can be explained from a social class perspective. From this theory the origins of power are clearly linked to its creation through labor as a cost of production giving forth the relationship between work and power.

Karl Marx's views propelled the Soviet Union to world superpower base on the enthronement of the proletariat class. However, the demise of the union in the 1990s was because of the failure by the Marxists to uphold his beliefs that maintained that means of production must be hurriedly enhanced.



Whereas Foucault and Marx share conception on the view of power as held and exercised by the elite class in the society the distinction arises from the empowerment and disempowerment source where Marx relates it to economic differentiation whereas Foucault bases it on political and state arrangements.

Therefore, Foucault assumes that everyone has power relative to the role they are playing within society. Therefore, there are no universal rights that are class specific as postulated by Marx rather domination is circumstantial and not absolute.

Weber's understanding of power and domination significantly diverges from that of Foucault and Marx. In his theory Weber indicates that power is a political happening that results from social honor and prestige and not economic strength as proposed by Marx. With instruments of authority in place domination is attained through command and obedience typical of the bureaucratic arrangements in many governments today.

The former Soviet Union is a classical model of how the three theories of power and domination apply. The union was a product of Marxist revolution with Russian proletariats wresting power from the Czarist bourgeois of that time.

In the 1990s Foucault's postulations on individualism account for the eventual disintegration of the union into independent states (Foucault 1994, p. 136). Finally each of these states is established on Max Weber's propositions that indicate bureaucratic state machinery that governs each of the states.

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