
UNIT 14 POWER AND AUTHORITY

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit deals with the most significant area of fundamental research; namely, Power and Authority. It is the central theme of political ideology. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the concept of power in its varied ramifications
- Differentiate between power and related themes
- Explain the concept of authority and identify its types
- Understand the relative meaning of Power and Authority

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Recently, the idea of power has assumed an importance of its own, in the realm of political theory. This is so because the meaning of politics has changed from one of being a 'study of state and government' to that of being a 'study of power'. Power is the primary objective of foreign policy. In international relations, power is the capacity of a state to influence or control the behaviour of other states for the purpose of promoting its own vital interest. Power capacity includes skills and techniques in the use of consent and constraint, as well as the ability to persuade, threaten or coerce to gain ascendancy over other states. States vary notably in power capacity. Belgium and Switzerland are probably evenly matched, but the mismatch between Belgium and United States is apparent. Some states are characterized as 'haves' and the others as 'have-nots'. The former are well endowed with the assets of power, while the latter seek to better their position at the expense of the "haves". This situation gives power struggle its essential character.

We all know what power is, in a broader sense. Although we see it everywhere in our lives, it is hard to define. While doing social and political theory, we try, however, to make the concepts of power and authority more precise and clear. It is with these basic concepts and definitions, we can later understand the other complex concepts in the realm of national and international politics.

14.2 POWER: MEANING OF THE CONCEPT

Power is seen in different walks of life— in the structures of government administration, bureaucracy, elections, family and society. In the instances of a teacher scolding an erring student in school, to a powerful state making war against its neighbor or any terrorist organization bombing a target, power is used. So it becomes imperative to see what exactly is common in these examples and how they justify the concept.

In political theory, power is the central issue, whether it is clothed in law that qualifies it or whether authority that renders obedience to it voluntarily sustains it. Power is force, exercised by the state in the name of law. Power is central to political theory, because it is concerned about the state, which is force. This is a school of thought belonging to the Realists. On the other hand, the Jurists who regard the state as a legal association argue that the notion of imperative and superior force associated with the state is not arbitrary; but it is qualified force; to put it more simply, it is force exercised 'in the name of law'. For the state is closely associated with the notion of power exercised in accordance with definite procedures and with rules that are known. Thus, power is force expressed in terms of law; it is force qualified and expressed in a regular and uniform manner.

To further substantiate the concept of power, the jurists have refined the concept of the state by identifying it with certain essential attributes. Now according to this, the state is a political community and in any given political community, there exists a supreme power (*Summa potestas* as the Roman jurist Cicero calls it) from which the law emanates. This supreme power which John Austin describes as 'sovereignty', distinguishes the state from other associations. The conception of sovereignty implies that the final authority is the state. The important point here is that there is in the state a sovereign power which, whether held by the people or by the prince, is the source of law. It is power conditioned by law, whether from the point of view of those over whom it is exercised or from the point of view of the actual holder of power.

Another significant point which needs to be explained here is that sovereign power converts the rule of force into a rule of law. Thus, Hobbes does not consider the state a phenomenon of force; but a phenomenon of power, of which sovereignty is the highest and the most complete expression. The transition from the 'state of nature' to the 'civil state' is the transition from the rule of force where there is no security, to that of law, where human relations are secure. Also, just as the state is not pure force, so sovereignty is not arbitrary will according to Hobbes. The sovereign representative is entrusted with the power to procure safety of the people. Hence, it cannot violate the very reason for which it was entrusted with sovereign power. Thus, authorization, not habitual obedience, is what makes the sovereign, which converts force into power.

Two centuries later, Alexander Hamilton asked, 'What is power, but the ability or faculty of doing a thing?' During the mid-20th century, Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan construed exercises of power as 'acts... affecting or determining other acts'. Shortly thereafter, Robert Dahl defined power as one actor's ability to make another do something that the latter 'would not otherwise do'. At the same time, however, Hannah Arendt argued that power is not the property of lone agents or actors, but of groups or collectivities acting together.

So far as the views of different authors are concerned, it surely help us to understand the meaning of the concept in various perspectives. For Friedrich, power is 'a certain kind of human relationship', while for Tawney, 'it is the capacity of an individual or a group to modify others' conduct as one desires'. While communist leader Mao-Zedong thought of power as "flowing from the barrel of the gun", Gandhi, an apostle of peace, regarded it as the power of love and truth. Power is ascribed to different things on different grounds. For instance, we speak of economic power, military power, power of the brain, political/ executive power and social power. The common thread in all these power manifestations means "ability" or 'capacity'. However, we come to one common generalization that power is the sum total of those external influences and pressures which can make an individual or a body of individuals to move in a required direction.

14.2.1 Distinction Between Power and Related Themes

The precise connotation of power became difficult, when the term became interchangeable with several related themes like control, influence, authority, force, domination, coercion and the like. Keeping this in mind, that it might create confusion for students of Political Science, it is necessary to highlight the important points of distinction between power and related themes.

Power as discussed earlier is the capacity to conquer, or one's ability to control others. In doing so, power could be based on elements like fraud, tactics, manipulation, or even be derived from legal and constitutional procedures. International politics is nothing but a manifestation of power struggle.

Force, on the other hand, is different from power. It is the most brutal manifestation of power. The techniques involved in physical force are restraint, coercion, threat, intimidation, blackmail, terrorism and military domination. So power can be called latent force, while force is manifest power.

If force stands on one extreme, **influence** stands on the other. It represents the sublimation of power. It may be due to social prestige, intellectual and spiritual eminence, high morality and the like. So, while influence is persuasive, power is coercive.

Coming to the notion of **authority**, it implies moralization and legitimization of power through legal or traditional sanctions. It is essentially the institutional code within which the use of power as a medium is organized and is made legal. An elaborate analysis of the concept of authority will be done later in this unit.

Finally, speaking of **control** as a theme related to power also has its own distinct feature, different from power. It is more comprehensive and less concentrated than power. Control could be of a different nature like legislative, executive, judicial, financial and the like. Power is more intense, when compared to control.

Thus, we see that because of this diversity in the meaning of the term 'power', its comprehensive study becomes necessary.

14.2.2 Implications of Power

From what has been discussed so far, certain implications may be gathered about the concept of power.

- Power cannot be merely encircled in a political or economic framework; it is broadly a social phenomenon.

- The distinctness of power with the other concepts like influence, control, authority, prestige, rights and the like, enables us to understand the concept of power more precisely and in a subtle way, which becomes useful for students of political science.
- Power is latent force, force is manifest power, and authority is institutionalized power.
- Power appears in different ways on different occasions, be it either in a formal organization, or in an informal organization or in organized/unorganized community.
- Power resides in a combination of numbers (especially majorities), social organization and resources. This is the source of power.

14.3 THE POWER THEORY

To say that the state is a sovereign power is to say that its rules, regulations and laws have final authority. There is no appeal against them to any more ultimate set of rules. In other words, within the state the rules made by other associations are subordinate to the authority of the state's rule. This power theory of sovereignty is regarded by political theorists, believing in democracy, as of no relevance to politics for which we need the concept of political sovereignty to be defined in terms of power instead of legal authority. Legal sovereignty treats the state as a final legal authority.

From the *moral* point of view, one may say that the laws of the state do not have final authority. If the conscience of the individual tells him that he ought not to obey some particular law, then from a moral point of view, he is entitled to disobey; for in most matters of morals, the final authority is conscience, when he appeals to a higher law, the natural law. For example, when the Greek tyrant, Creon, forbade Antigone to bury her dead brother, she disobeyed his order on the ground that the higher law, the natural law, required that the dead should be respected. The discussion on conscientious objection illustrates that 'power' means not only the ability to have one's will carried out, but the ability to do so by the threat of force.

In conclusion, we may say that the sovereignty of the state, for the purpose of politics, should be defined as the supremacy of coercive power rather than that of legal authority. Because, the one that is sovereign is the one that can *substantiate* its claim, and the state certainly does so because it possesses the power of armed force.

The power theory as said earlier, had its first brilliant expression in the 'Leviathan' of Thomas Hobbes. He tells us that man desires power and even greater power, which becomes the root cause of competition among individuals. But at the same time, men like to live in peace in order to enjoy the power that they possess. So they are disposed to live under a common power. After Hobbes, Hegel absolutised sovereign power of the state to the extent of discarding all ethics of international morality. Among the leading advocates of this theory in the present century, mention may be made of Prof. H. J. Morganthau, who says that politics is nothing but a struggle for power. The power theory found its concrete manifestation, when the Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini declared 'nothing against the state, nothing above it' giving birth to the ideology of Fascism.

In all the above analyses of power theory, power is spoken only in a political sense. However, power includes much more, within itself, like the power of soul, mind and the power of one's ideas. Reference in this context may be made from Buddha to Gandhi who had displayed their power of thought and ideology to the world.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) Explain how power is conceptualised in political theory.

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2) Does power always involve coercion?

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14.3.1 Liberal Democratic Theory

In liberal democratic theory, power has been identified with developmental and extractive capacities. In other words, power means ability of use and development of human capacities. It has two aspects, extractive and developmental, which can be called ethical and empirical dimensions, respectively. Since a man’s ability to use and develop his capacities becomes the “power”, it is called man’s developmental power and it has a qualitative character. Besides, man should use his capacities in a way so that he may extract benefits from others. It leads to the idea of extractive power. Here, we see that the liberal theory of power integrates the idea of political power with the power of money. Elections, propaganda, persuasion, control- all are governed by the role of money power. This is why the destiny of millions is often controlled by a dozen families having monopoly over the money of the nation. However, the theory also emphasizes the maximization of democracy, so that values of humanism are not destroyed.

14.3.2 Marxian Theory

The Marxian view, links politics and economics through the instrument of power. Karl Marx viewed political power as being possessed by those who control the means of production as compared to the labour force which has little or no control over such means of production. This “relation of production”, therefore, determines the distribution of political power. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels state that political power, so called, is merely the organized form of one class oppressing another, and that political power is the general and pervasive power which a dominant class exercises in order to maintain and defend its predominance in a civil society.

Further, class power “does tend to be taken over by the state itself, and gladly surrenders to it; even in normal circumstance of advanced capitalism, the state takes over more and more functions performed by the dominant class having a greater share in the performance of these functions”.

Thus, Marx sees a close integration between political power and the prevailing socio-economic system and regards it as transient — it shall disappear with the rise of the stateless and classless society.

14.3.3 Michael Foucault on Power

There are many misconceptions and confusions about ‘power’ as a discourse and a practice. In this connection, Michael Foucault’s path-breaking analysis of power needs to be invoked to illuminate the deeper implications of power as a flow, manifested in relations at multiple locations.

Foucault’s approach to the social phenomenon of ‘power’ is clearly revealed in the following quotation:

“Let us not ask why certain people want to dominate, what they seek, what is their overall strategy. Let us ask, instead, how things work at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours etc. In other words, rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc.”

Foucault, thus, moves away from the sovereignty-centric (Hobbesian) conception of power toward what he calls “disciplinary power” or the micro mechanisms of power—the techniques and tactics of domination—that, as a closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions, keeps the social body in a steady state (**a society of normalization**).

The state in this situation, becomes a superstructural meta power, rooted in a whole series of multiple and indefinite power relations, and as Foucault argues, “The state consists in the codification of a whole number of power relations which render its functioning possible...”.

Foucault’s analysis has opened up new ways of looking at power in society, not so much as a juridical concept as a socially networked relations of domination and subjugation.

According to Foucault, in common parlance, power has been viewed in reductionist term. It is the top-down vision that has always looked at power as a striking force and a visible and effective meat-power. Those who hold power at the top are favourably stationed to take advantage of a number of apparatuses and devices—particular techniques, knowledge, modalities of political power. In other words, they have the means of power to which they have access because of the strategic positions they occupy. A senior bureaucrat, because of his position, can easily accord sanction to a project or stop it when things are not working out to his satisfaction.

In Foucault’s analysis, to ascribe all phenomena of power to the prevailing power apparatuses is a form of unrealistic reductionism. Power, in this view, is not what and where people think it is. In reality, it is the expression of hundreds of micro-processes defining various currents coming from a multitude of different sources. The reductionist view ignores that “the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further... the state can only operate, on the basis of other, already existing power relations.”

To understand the real nature of power, one has to move away from the juridical edifice of sovereignty, the state apparatuses and the accompanying ideologies. Instead attention should be paid to domination and the material operators of power. One should focus on the form of subjection and the inflection and utilizations of their localized systems and on the strategic apparatuses.

Foucault calls this power 'non-sovereign power, lying outside the form of sovereignty. It is disciplinary power taking the shape of closely linked grid of disciplinary coercions intended to assure the cohesion of the social body. As Foucault exhorted : "we must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power. We must escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and state institutions and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination...."

14.4 WHAT IS AUTHORITY?

To understand political realities, we should be knowing the three aspects of state—force, power and authority. The notion of state recalls to our mind, power, which is exercised in accordance with definite procedures and known rules. The state is force exercised in the name of law. Force become power, when the element of arbitrariness is removed from its exercise by definite procedures laid down by the laws of the state. The recognition of this power exercised as per definite rules implies the recognition of an obligation to submit to these rules. The word 'state' in this sense provides a term of reference for these obligations. It refers not merely to a force which exists in actual fact, or to power which makes itself felt in accordance with certain rules, but to an authority which is recognized as warranted and justified in practice.

14.5 CLASSIFICATION OF AUTHORITY

The German sociologist Max Weber suggested a three fold classification of the sources of authority in a modern state. They are rational-legal, traditional and charismatic authority.

Rational-legal authority is explicit and has the right to give orders and to have them obeyed by virtue of an office held within a system of deliberately framed rules which set out rights and duties. Bureaucracy is the best example of rational-legal authority. When a citizen accepts the authority of a bureaucrat, he does so not because of anything else but due to the powers allocated to the official by a legal system. The office, the individual holds, is important and not the individual himself or herself.

Traditional authority exists where a person, such as a king or a tribal chief, holds a superior position of command in accordance with long tradition and is obeyed, because everyone accepts the sanctity of the tradition. Religious authority is of this kind.

Charismatic authority rests on the possession of exceptional personal qualities that cause a person to be accepted as a leader. There may be qualities of saintly virtue giving their possessor religious authority or qualities of outstanding heroism, intellect, oratory that bring a following of loyal devotion in politics, in wars and other kinds of enterprise. The charismatic leader has the gift of divine grace and extraordinary qualities. Lenin or Mahatma Gandhi got their position on account of their charisma and qualities. Of the three sources, the first two belong to one group – where the agent and the source of authority are different. Here, the source can be criticised without criticising the agent and the agent, therefore, enjoys a relatively stable position. But in the case of charismatic authority, the source and the agent of authority are the same. Hence, any criticism against the source can be directed against the agent

as well. So the agent does not enjoy a stable position. A charismatic authority tends to be institutionalised. This is what Weber calls ‘routinization of charisma’.

Weber, however, recognised that none of these categories existed in pure form. The British system is a mixture of traditional and rational-legal sources of authority. India, according to Weber was a combination of rational-legal and charismatic authority.

Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What are the different types of authority?

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2) How do the Liberal and Marxist views of the power theory differ?

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14.6 DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE CONCEPTS OF POWER AND AUTHORITY

The concepts of “power” and “authority” are related ones. But a distinction between them is necessary. Both the terms refer to different properties. But because of their logical grammar being commonly misconstrued, unnecessary difficulty has arisen. However, they are the names of not different, but related entities of which one somehow depends on the other.

When we speak of an act giving a minister the power to do this or that, we mean giving him authority. Jean Bodin in his work, *The Six Books of Republic* says, “Sovereignty is the absolute and perpetual power of a state, that is to say, the supreme power to command”. His discussion gives the impression that sovereignty means power in the ordinary sense of the word. If by absolute power, Bodin means the ability to issue effective commands, it would be *power*, properly speaking. If he means the entitlement or the right to issue commands and have them obeyed, it would be *authority*. His account of sovereignty makes it clear that he means authority, whereas his use of the expression, “absolute power” suggests the first.

Prof. Raphael in his *Problems of Political Philosophy* distinguishes three meanings of the term “power”. First, the most general meaning of power is simply *ability*. We use the same word for the power of a dynamo, political power or will power. Secondly, we speak of power in a social context, when we think of power as a specific kind of ability i.e. *the ability to make other people do what one wants them to do*. A man may be able to get others to do what he wants, because he holds a special office, or because he has the strength to make things difficult for them, if they refuse. The two examples illustrate the exercise of political power and the second is prominent in situations of conflict. Thirdly, there is *coercive power* which is using the threat of superior force to make others do what one wants them to do when they are unwilling. Because coercive power is so prominent in political conflict, the word “power” which at first meant ability of any kind, has come to be associated with enforcement.

Thus, the term power has three meanings mentioned above, and it can be used either with or without association of empowerment. Power is often used to mean authority when we speak of giving someone legal powers. A person with power holds a special office (e.g. a minister or a President); this means that he has authority and is able by virtue of that position to get others to do what he tells them to do; his power is the exercise of authority. That is why the word power can be used to mean authority.

14.6.1 Implications of Authority

Authority is the right to do a thing. The two meanings of right are a) the right here of action and b) the right of recipience. The right of action is the right to do something; for instance, the right of the worker to strike and the right of the employer to lock out. In this sense, a right is a freedom. The right of recipience is a claim to do something; for example, if A has the right to fifty rupees that B owes him, it is A’s right to receive fifty rupees from B. It is A’s right against B and it corresponds to B’s obligations to pay up.

Now, the authority to give orders is the right of recipience. For example, when a minister is authorized (or empowered) by a statute to make regulations, this not only allows him to do something (i.e. he has the right of action) but also imposes an obligation on citizens to conform to the regulations that he may make. Thus, his authority gives him a right to issue them.

In both senses - the right to something and the right to receive obedience – a right of being authorized is a facility and so, a power. The power to make other people do what a person requires may depend on the fact that he holds a special office. By virtue of holding that office, that person has the authority to ask certain requirements of other people, and they do what he requires, because they acknowledge his authority. His authority and others’ acceptance of it are what he requires. We can, therefore, think of authority as a specific kind of ability or power to make other people do what one wants them to do. This specific ability or power is coordinate with coercive power. The possession of coercive force is one way of getting people to do what a person requires; it is one specific form of power. The possession of authority, provided it is acknowledged, is another.

Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with that given at the end of the unit.

1) What is the implication of authority in politics?

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2) Are the terms power and authority related? Explain their relationship and highlight the distinction between the two.

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14.7 LET US SUM UP

Power is thus, one of the key concepts in political theory. It is the ability to control others and make them do what one wants. It is both normative and empirical; i.e. it is also a fact as well as a value to be pursued. It is a very comprehensive term, identified with related themes like authority, influence, control and the like. It is integrally connected with the case of political legitimacy. Legitimate power is authority. On the other hand, influence is a wider term where sanctions may not be used. Power is then a special case of influence.

14.8 KEY WORDS

- Empirical** : based on facts and on activities of everyday life.
Sublimation : to change, having noble qualities.
Arbitrary : exercise of power over the others without considering their opinion.
Coercive : compelling, forcing.

14.9 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

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14.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Power in political theory is a comprehensive term. Power may be physical, political, economic, spiritual, moral or intellectual. Broadly speaking, it is one's ability to control others.
- 2) Power can be called latent force, while force is manifest power.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Traditional, Rational-Legal, and Charismatic.
- 2) The liberal view presupposes the state as an institution serving all the sections of the people. It also grants equality to all citizens; in law, in voting and rights. It considers the state to be an impartial institution. The Marxist theory of state believes in historical evolution of the state, which is a product of the society in which it exists. It reflects the class character of the rulers. It also believes in class division of the society. The state for them is not an impartial arbiter of disputes, as it is partial to the ruling class.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Authority is the right to do a thing. The two meanings of right are:
 - i) the right of action and ii) the right of recipience.
- 2) Power and Authority are the names of two different, but related entities of which one somehow depends on the other. "Power" is often used to mean "authority" when we speak of giving someone legal powers.