Critical Analysis 1

POS/ES 356: Race, Power, and Politics

Fall Semester 2009

9/28/09

By

Brian Cullinan

Introduction

This essay will discuss what power is, and provide examples of who has power and what they have power over. It will discuss the characteristics of power such as self-interest, limited resources, competition, and values. It will attempt to explain why some political actors have a disproportionate amount of limited resources, and relate to the question “Who gets what, when, and how?” This essay will also discuss democracy in the context of dominant ideology and the exercise of power.

Define and Characterize Power

Politics is the interaction between actors and benefits or resources, through a certain process over some amount of time. One of the most important resources that actors can obtain is power. Power is the ability for one actor to affect another actor (as described on page 8 of “What is Politics”). This has a much broader implication than actor “A” getting actor “B” to do what “B” would not otherwise do. The implication here is that actor “A” can simply have power, then use this power is some way that is not directly related to actor “B”, but still largely affects actor “B”. For example, we as Americans don’t intentionally require actors such as immigrants to change their core values and ways of living. We embrace people’s differences and have a melting pot of culture. Nevertheless, peoples way of living does change because, the American society as a whole, is a very powerful society. Another example is a clothing company’s primary goal is to sell their product, but they have created a market that is built around making people feel inadequate if they do not have the latest fashion. The clothing company wants power by attaining more legal tender but has also taken power over the media. The power in both cases has been obtained and intended for some purpose but affected actors in multiple ways, some of which are unintentional. The first example is also an example of self interest. The company does not care how their trends may affect a single person’s financial status, but only cares about taking that person’s money.

Discuss Power

Different actors in a political system obtain different amounts of power and other resources. Such resources may include the tangible gold, land, fossil fuels, as well as, intangible resources such as power, legitimacy, education, and authority. The process of attaining power depends on what perspective you look at it from (as discussed in “What is Power?”). Power can be attained by groups acting for a common goal. In pluralism, a group of actors may have power over a particular resource but not another resource. Elitists, on the other hand, attain power by determining what values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms are important. They also have the power of determining what decisions are not made by the political system.

Political actors can attain power using different types of coercion such as physical, institutional, and symbolic. In many cases, children are raised to believe certain ideologies. Children are raised with similar core values as their parents, and taught what proper behavior is in school. In this case, the institution is exercising its power. This is also an example of family and schools being the main agent of power (as discussed in the Cultural Hegemony article). Referring back to the clothing companies goals; media is another agent that has power over people and can affect our way of thinking. Media tells us how people should act and how they should think.

Discuss Democracy placing it within

Context of Dominant Ideology and

In democracy, every person has an equal opportunity to affect the political decisions made for the good of everyone. When actors conform to the dominant ideology, there are certain advantages (as discussed in “Cultural Hegemony”). Our democracy has less need for strict, rigid enforcement, and less oppressive ways of achieving enforcement. For example, when immigrants come to America, the drinking age is well known. Although the drinking age in their country may be younger, it is automatically assumed that it is “the way it is and should be”, and therefore that rule is immediately obeyed without question. In contrast, in a perfect democracy one would vote to change such a norm to match their beliefs. For example, if thirty percent of the population was made up of Mexican immigrants, then that would be reflected in the dominant ideology; there would be as much as 30 percent of our democracies law that aligned with their beliefs and values. Because of Cultural Hegemony, people conform to the values that are already set up by our democracy and culture. But in our democracy there is the issue of power; people coming from other cultures automatically have less power because they are considered “different”.

The Exercise of Power

In a perfect democracy power is divided evenly between the people that it rules. All beliefs and values have an even affect on the outcomes of decisions made in the political society. As discussed in the “Democracy Conditions”, all citizens participate in the democracy. This means that every citizen would exercise their power, and this would be reflected in the decision making. Although the individual actors may have different beliefs and values, they would be able to comply with all rules made by the democracy. Similarly, this notion is also discussed in “What is Power?” referring to the elitists, there is a consensus on what values, and beliefs are important and they “play according to the rules”. A democracy should follow these same guidelines. This however, is not the way America’s democracy necessarily works. We have an indirect democracy because we indirectly vote on leaders that then vote on important decisions. The general public could be considered “outsiders” and the decision makers are the “insiders” (discussed in “What is Power?”). Different actors have different amounts of power. As mentioned in the section about “coalitional bias”, our political system is greatly interested in the actors with the most resources. Large companies can affect the decisions made in the political system. Therefore, actors in the democracy can be overlooked and have very little influence in the political system.

Conclusion

We have discussed the characteristics of power, and different perspectives of power, including pluralism and elitism. We have also discussed the way that power is obtained by different actors in a political system. Finally, how democracy is placed within the context of dominant ideology. We found that in a perfect democracy all ideologies from all actors (such as people with different cultures) would be reflected in the all-encompassing dominant ideology. But because of our imperfect democracy, this is not always necessarily found to be true. We also discussed the exercise of power.