

Paper #1: Rethinking power in Marx

Many Marxian thinkers have critically argued the domination of capitalists on the premise that capitalists possess power over workers or a society. However, as far as my impression goes, heads of firms and owners of factories were the most miserable figures in Japan both during the rapid development of its economy and during the severe recession. A president of the Daiei Incorporation, a major Japanese supermarket, said “I do not get why my company went bankrupt, although I devoted myself to the company 24 hours a day.” Often, the capitalists looked more like ‘slave laborers’ of capitalism than proletariats, who do not need to die with companies; hence, I have long been unsatisfied with Marxian view of power. However, Marx’s notion of power gives sufficient explanation why not only workers but also capitalists severely suffered in a capitalist society.

In this essay, I will argue the notion of power in Marx through a comparison with Foucault and Weber. It can be argued that Marx, similar to Foucault, sees that power is discursive and cannot be possessed; however, close to Weber’s argument, Marx’s logic of power resides in an abstract structure that governs the subjects, while Foucault refuses to presuppose any overall structure. In my view, this leads capitalists to suffer. My discussion relies on Brown, Janmohamed, Ollman, Postone, and Sayer, besides Marx, Weber, and Foucault. Before I go into the detail I will review the notions of power in each scholar.

First of all, we need to be aware that Marx treats power in a distinct way from both Foucault and Weber. First, Marx argues power as a peculiar phenomenon which appears in capitalism, whereas both Weber and Foucault argue that power in the modern period is different from other power arrangements that were prevalent in preceding periods. Second, in Marx,

different elements constitute power from that in Foucault and Weber. According to Brown, Marx aims to replace political, institutional, and ideological power with “social forces”; thus, his notion of power includes “productive force” and “real material life” as well as “labor” and “capital” (Brown; 186). As I will discuss later, Marx conceives power as such forces that are generated and circulated in the whole logic of an abstract system of capitalism. Put another way, Marx’s notion of power means force, or energy, rather than control and command—however, it is a force which is hard to resist.

In contrast, Weber and Foucault use power as domination and control, which more directly resonates with a conventional usage in sociological discussion. Weber’s often cited definition says that power is “the possibility of imposing one’s own will upon the behavior of others” and discusses domination (authority) as a special instance of power (Weber 1978a)¹. In the case of Foucault, he considers power relations those that do not necessary entail relations of violence or consent—i.e. the ones that are neither slavery nor contractual relations (Janmohamed; 43). However, as seen in his works of *Discipline and Punish* or *The History of Sexuality*, the power Foucault problematizes is a coercive force which controls our bodies and minds.

Despite those differences between Marx and Foucault, as Brown and Janmohamed argue, Marx’s view of power is very close to Foucault in the senses that both argue out discursive power. According to Brown, Marx argues that power is generated through logical entailment and is traveling along the circuit of logic (Brown: 6). Let me explain the circuit logic of power simply. First, power originates with abstract labor, where people lose their personality and sell their labor power, giving up their whole life. People produce the products not for themselves but

¹ Similarly, domination (authority) is defined as “the probability that certain specific commands will be obeyed by a given group of persons” (Weber 1978b: 213). Interestingly enough, those definitions of power and domination seem to be often adopted in Marxist arguments.

for the capitalists, being alienated from their activities and their product. These products gain value from labor and are turned into commodities, which express more value than the amount with which the labor is inscribed. Surplus value, then, are invested into the capital that is “the means of production transformed into capital” (Brown: 14). In Marx’s logic, the commodity is the motive for capitalism and also the “crystallization of power relations” (Janmohamed: 42-4).

As Postone adequately points out, Marx’s interest lies in domination in terms of value and capital which are beyond the control of the individual (Postone: 31). The power—in the form of value for Marx—is generated from the bottom, and this view is close to Foucault, who considers multiple and mobile relations (Foucault 1980: 98). Foucault argues that power comes from below and is exercised from innumerable points (ibid: 94).

Furthermore, Marx and Foucault share the view that power cannot be possessed by individuals. Janmohamed claims that in Marx’s logic value can exist as a ‘possession’ within-the-circuit (48) and argues that Foucault’s logic would fail if Foucault did not presuppose the possession of power (55). However, in my reading, this point is not valid. In the circuit of exchange values in Marx’s theory it is important that capitalists as well as workers are alienated; as Ollman argues, capitalists are alienated from the products of workers (Ollman: 155-6). Therefore, it is more appropriate to say that capitalists appear to hold power (value), but not in the sense that they are able to control and exercise it at their will. It is the system of capitalism, or the logic of capital, which requires capitalists, to possess value, and they are just “passive exploiters” (Ollman: 155). In the case of Foucault he clearly states that “power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 1980: 94)². Power is not a thing that subjects can possess at their will.

² Janmohamed’s point is that discursive practice cannot empower subjects if the latter do not possess some aspects of power, and power can be possessed in terms of subject’s view point (55). However, there are many examples that

Marx, in a way, assumes a systematic structure which generates power, and this is the point where Marx distinguishes himself from Foucault and brings himself close to Weber. In Marx's theory, both capitalists and workers can be considered as the agents of capitalism. According to Postone, Marx argues that social domination in capitalism does not consist in the domination by other people, but in the domination by abstract social structure (30). Capitalism is a mode of production which incessantly attempts to maximize value and capital. And, Marx focuses on domination in terms of value and capital, which are beyond the control of individual (Postone: 31). As seen before, power is generated and circulates in this abstract system of capitalism, and capitalists are empowered by the structure of capitalism.

Similarly, Weber argues that the rational system, such as bureaucracy, legitimizes power and power holders in the modern era, and that this way of domination is different from traditional or charismatic authority, where power is legitimized in and by people. To put it another way, in Weber's argument, it is a structure which generates power and empowers subjects in the modern period. In contrast, Foucault does not seem to presuppose any systematic structure (this point probably makes him "post-modernist," although his lifetime theme has been modernism). In addition, Foucault does neither clearly identify the source generating power; power exists in the nexus of knowledge/power³. Therefore, Marx is more close to Weber than Foucault in the argument of empowerment.

are not the cases—e.g. the notion of sex division (female and male) constrains behaviors and thoughts of homosexual people. But the detailed discussion of Foucault notion of power is beyond the scope of my paper.

³ "If sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because relations of power had established it as a possible object; and conversely, if power was able to take it as a target, this was because techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investing it" (Foucault 1980: 98). In Foucault, modern form of power exists and is exercised through the networks of people (and sometimes in and through institutions).

Another similarity of Marx and Weber is the point that both see that an abstract structure is dehumanizing human beings⁴. Capitalism is the abstract structure which alienates people from the species being, and similarly, the ‘iron cage’ of rationalism develops ruling out humanistic elements. Under such a system people are not able to live as human beings but are governed by the system and live for the system. As Sayer correctly points out, both scholars argue that individuals are ruled by abstractions (Sayer: 143), and those systems dreadfully dehumanize people.

This will be a minor point in this essay; however, a significant difference exists between Marx and Weber’s view of abstract systems. On the one hand, Marx is able to hope for an alternative society where people live neither for others nor for the system. On the other, Weber is very pessimistic about the future of modernity⁵.

Overall, Marx, like Foucault, sees that power is discursive and that it is generated and circulated in a society. However, Marx, like Weber, argues that an abstract system i.e.—the logic of the capital—brings empower to agents. Capitalists may appear to holds power; but, in fact, they are empowered, for temporally, by the system of capitalism. Despite that power flows discursively, the reason why Japanese capitalists look more suffering is that the capitalists are the core agent of capitalism⁶.

References:

⁴ To use ‘structure’ in describing Marx and Weber may cause misunderstanding since this is very loaded term. I am using this word meaning a system which presuppose a logic govern a society.

⁵ In my view, the view toward human nature largely affects in imagining a ‘better’ society. In *On the Jewish Question*, Marx argues that capitalism that makes people greedy. I wonder why on earth he can believe in a ‘good’ human nature. In contrast, Weber seems to restrain from making judgment about human nature.

⁶ Foucault power is more obvious in the margins.

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