

The Three Faces of Power

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Stephen Lukes has described 'three faces of power' (also called the 'three dimensions of power') in his work studying politics and society. The basic principle is that the power and consequent effectiveness of a group is based on three distinct aspects.

Issue

The first face (or dimension), as proposed by such theorists as Dahl who saw power as a 'relation among people'. It is the ability of one person to achieve compliance by others who change how they behave as a result of the power being exerted. It can be seen in systems of ruling elites, where few people have significant power. As such, power is direct, with identification of an issue and a singular response to this. It is, in essence, about making decisions.

In governmental power, this can be seen when the government makes a decision, typically through law-making, that requires obedience by the broader population. Such decisions may be debated openly with opportunity for consultation and challenge along the way. Despite this openness, the focus is still on decision.

This can be seen as an 'open face', where it is clear who is making the decision and why they are making it. As this can be seen, it is more likely to be trusted and consequently obeyed with little question.

Agenda

The second face, as proposed by theorists such as Bachrach and Baratz, adds the more subtle system of power, where decision is made within a complex system. In this situation, power is not just about making decisions, but also about setting the agenda that leads to decisions. In other words, if you can control the context within which decisions are made, then you can influence those decisions.

In governmental power, this can be seen in decisions made 'behind closed doors' and in the 'corridors of power', where who is deciding and why is seldom clear. In such contexts, power is held not only by elected officials but also by the whisperers and assistants who set up meetings, shape agendas and write the minutes.

This can be seen as a 'secretive face', where it is not clear who is making the decision. This can lead to problems as other people suspect that there are corrupt elements to the choice, such as those based on political agendas and personal gain.

Manipulation

Lukes adds a third face, that of even more subtle aspect of manipulating the psychology of anyone and everyone affected. This can be seen as similar to the Marxist view of ideological power, where the ability to control what people think of as being 'right' can lead to acceptance of biased decisions without question.

In governmental power, this appears in propaganda, spin and crafting of speeches that are deliberately designed to change minds before the decision is announced. For example if legislation against trade unions is planned, then a provocative rhetoric of how these unions cause problems may be started some time beforehand. Any union action then plays directly into the government's hands.

This can be seen as a 'deceptive face', where trickery and psychological methods are the primary tool in shifting values and changing what people consider to be important. The problem with this method is that when it is discovered, it can lead to a sharp loss in trust and consequent betrayal effects.

So what?

The three levels of power illustrate the descent into corruption that tempts many politicians. A typical political situation is that other politicians will only support your legislative attempts if you support theirs, even if this means going against your values. Such horse-trading is common and, while expedient, can cause politicians to lose credibility over the longer term.

When you seek to understand power, take account of these three faces. Also beware of your own cynicism in suspecting trickery everywhere. When you exercise power, you can consider all three faces, but beware of the dangers of corruption and betrayal when working at the deeper levels.

References

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