

Four Faces of Power

Political theorists have debated the meaning and role of power in politics for most of the last century. One of the oldest and most well-known discourse on political power comes from Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) who was a philosopher, diplomat, writer, and an official in the Florentine Republic.

In his work *The Prince*, he asked whether it was better to be feared or loved as a ruler. He said it was better to be both, but given the choice, it was better to be feared. He believed that leaders should have the capacity to be ruthless, shrewd, and manipulative when necessary to maintain order and stability. He believe that fear was a more effective motivational tool than love. He said that women, nature, and fortune (which he groups together) all secretly wish to be dominated through violence by strong leaders. His ideas and arguments about politics operate to this day.

Theorists in the 20th century have made the distinction between "power over," which is about control and imposition of one's will, and "power to," which is framed as increasing capacity of people to take action for themselves, what we commonly call today, "empowerment."

In discussing power, these theorists have identified four dimensions or ways in which power shapes our relationships and society. Most see these dimensions as negative. But there is an argument that using "power over" can expand justice, create a healthier society, and empower people to lead the lives they want. Here's a summary

Face 1 - Controlling the outcome

Principle: A makes B do something B doesn't want to do, like drink Pepsi instead of Coke or join the army or pay taxes.

Negative aspect: Typically, thought about as coercion through violence or the threat of violence. Some might argue that A knows B's interests better than B does. Even when true this is paternalistic.

Positive aspect: This type of power can operate when both A and B create a system to decide who will be in control, such as an election. Both A and B have to agree to the rules and believe result is true. Note that elections must happen regularly otherwise, if B loses, they'll never have the chance to gain control and power and will try to undermine the system. Note also that the possibility that the winner now will be the loser later, checks the power of the winner and his or her supporters and forces consideration of the well-being of the loser. This approach can make society more stable and prosperous. It's counterintuitive, but submitting to the power of the system can make you more free.

Face 2 - Controlling the choices or agenda

Principle: A lets B decide but only provides B with certain choices, like Pepsi and 7-UP instead of Coke. Other examples include all manner of government regulations, party leaders deciding what comes up for a vote in Congress, and the press only reporting on certain issues.

Negative aspect: This describes the current state of affairs in Russia where there are elections but Vladimir Putin has banned or imprisoned his political opposition and controls the media. The temptation will always exist for those in power to set up rules so they can stay in power and marginalize their opposition. This system ultimately results in coercion.

Positive aspect: A and B can also set up a system to determine choices that explicitly protects against bias and allows equal opportunity for all voices to be heard. This is John Rawls' argument idea of designing a system behind a "veil of ignorance" so no one gains systematic advantage. There are also two other arguments in favor of this use of power. that regulations protect people and society at large from harm, that mining companies, for example, shouldn't have the freedom to dump in the river. But, more importantly, Finally, you also must consider that if no one has the power to set the agenda for a meeting, the Congress, or an election, the result might be chaos where nothing gets done (anarchists would not agree with this argument).

Face 3: Conscious manipulation of desires, norms, and expectations

Principle: A uses education and the media to convince B that instead of Coke they should have Pepsi. Examples here include almost all advertising, mass schooling, and manufactured political outrage.

Negative aspect: The extreme cases of socialization include The Cultural Revolution in China and re-education camps in Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime. But Hitler was a master at using propaganda and blame to inflate the expectations of the German people and warp the norms of their society. Some would argue that school is simply a tool of the state to "domesticate" people away from resistance and questioning the norms that benefit those in power.

Positive aspect: Having established norms and desires within a society creates social cohesion. Knowing what to expect from one another empowers people to take on more complex and satisfying tasks and enjoy a richer life. A and B can set up a system that allows norms and desires to arise naturally through individual decisions, public debate, and the free flow of information rather than determined by a central authority. Part of this system can be guarantees, such as the freedom of religion, that promote tolerance. Schools can teach students to question norms and empower them to think for themselves. As long as norms and desires are subject to reasoned debate, there will be room for a wide array of desires

Face 4: Controlling paradigm

Principle: A and B both accept the basic assumptions that soda is a private good that requires to money to procure and should come in aluminum cans. A paradigm is an unquestioned set of basic beliefs that shape the reality of everyone in society. Neither A nor B controls the paradigm; the paradigm controls them.

Negative aspect: If socialization keeps us from asking certain questions, paradigms keep us from even knowing what the questions could be. They limit what counts as knowledge and serve to define fundamental social constructions such as gender and the nature of reality and the individual. Those who don't fit within the paradigm are often subject to violence. In the modern society, paradigms typically depend on science and to lesser extent, spirituality.

Positive aspect: Paradigms change when society runs out of productive ways to address their most pressing problems or there is a technological innovation, such as the computer, that opens up new perspectives and understanding of the universe. A and B can set up a political system that encourages innovation, imagination, creativity, and spiritual insight. In such a system, freedom of thought and experimentation would be central to ideas of progress and empowerment.