

21st Century Sociology

Political Sociology

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Chapter 30: Political Sociology

[p. 1-305 ↓]

Political sociology is the study of power and the intersection of society and politics. Power is a pervasive, fundamental dimension of social relations and institutions, while politics refers to institutionalized processes by which social groups (i.e., classes, genders, and races) acquire, extend, apply, maintain, and struggle over power. The field's relevance extends beyond explaining political behavior to generating broad understandings of power, and it is more a perspective that cuts across many diverse topics than a fixed content area. It is a dynamic field that has periodically reinvented itself. Orum (1996) remarked, "Political sociology in the past fifteen years or so has come to look vastly different from a generation ago" (p. 142), and others (Nash 2000) see a "new" political sociology emerging. Other areas of sociology borrow from political sociology forging links across diverse subfields (Dobratz, Buzzell, and Waldner 2003).

Political sociology is interdisciplinary—where political science and sociology intersect. Like other interdisciplinary fields (e.g., social psychology, historical sociology, political philosophy), the boundary line shifts and is permeable, allowing for interchange and creativity (see Hicks 1995). Political scientists and political sociologists may study the same phenomena (e.g., voting processes, public policy development, and protest) but tend to concentrate on different issues, ask, different questions, and apply distinct analytic perspectives. Thus, political sociologists and political scientists both study elections, but the political scientist asks, Who won and by how much? Who voted for which candidate? How did a political party mobilize its supporters? By contrast, a political sociologist asks, How does voting compare to other means of gaining power? Does an election outcome influence life chances for various social sectors? Can elections alter the distribution of power among the major classes/groups/sectors of a society?

Political scientists focus the operation of political institutions (empirical political science) or consider ideal forms of governing (normative political science). They might examine the committee structure of legislative body, study how alternative voting rules affect

election outcomes, or consider what makes a law “just” or “fair” relative to a set of political principles. Political scientists concentrate on the “front stage” of the “game of politics” in government at local, national, or international levels and map out their operations (e.g., voting in elections, passing new laws, administering policy). They focus on government's internal structure (e.g., unified or divided, centralized or decentralized, tall or flat hierarchy) and mechanics (e.g., who gets elected, what laws are passed, which agency budget grew).

By contrast, political sociologists see government as one of the multiple sites of concentrated power—simultaneously a site of power and an apparatus over which groups contest for control. They examine how social institutions/groups/forces interface with the political sphere of governing and struggles for power. They see “the political” permeating society—evident as sexual politics, cultural politics, racial politics, religious politics, educational politics, or environmental politics. Political sociologists synthesize ideas, issues, and research techniques with traditional sociological concerns by focusing on power relations wherever they appear. While a few areas of political sociology are applied (e.g., voting outcomes, policy contests), most effort is directed at developing a critical understanding of fundamental power dynamics.

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Historical Development of the Field

Political sociology emerged out of late-nineteenth-century German and Italian social and political thought. Its founders include Karl Marx (1818–1883), Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), Max Weber (1864–1920), Robert Michels (1876–1936), and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). They tried to explain how capitalist industrialization displaced feudal institutions/relations and sparked clashes among peasants, merchants, workers, and owners, and how the nation-state altered the consolidation of elite power and sparked demands for democratic citizen participation.

After World War II, political sociology's center shifted from Western Europe to the United States, and the “classic era” of contemporary political sociology began. With the defeat of fascism, the onset of the Cold War, and the demise of colonialism, Americans saw

themselves as the undisputed world leader of industrial capitalism with democratic politics and economic freedom. Strong domestic economic growth and social stability fostered a mood of optimism and self-assurance. One central question became, Why do some societies become democratic while others become totalitarian (e.g., the fascist regimes of Germany, Japan, Italy, and Spain or the communist regimes of Soviet Union, Cuba, China, and North Korea)? As Janowitz (1968) summarized, “Political sociology has come to be linked to the analysis of the economic, social, and psychological preconditions for political democracy” (p. 306). Political sociologists applied modernization theory to outline the societal conditions that reinforced or threatened democracy (Almond and Verba 1963; Apter 1965; Bendix 1964; Deutsch 1966; Huntington 1968; Lipset 1959b, 1963; Moore 1966). To them, liberal democracy emerged from advancing industrial capitalism, an expanding secular and educated middle class, and a defeat of traditional ruling elites. Democratic government required “modern” social-political institutions and values that favored popular participation, rule of law, and tolerance for dissent.

A second concern was to analyze the social bases of voting. This grew from a belief that formal democratic processes facilitated a peaceful resolution of conflicts among contenting groups. Two paradigmatic works of the 1960s, Lipset's *Political Man* and Campbell et al.'s *The American Voter*, emphasized societal consensus and an absence of irreparable social divisions or polarizing ideologies. Both argued that Americans were only modestly interested in politics and voted to advance the interests of their social group. After Lenski (1966) outlined a theory of multidimensional stratification, the impact of status inconsistency on political behavior occupied attention (Rush 1967; Segal 1969; Segal and Knoke 1968), but the issue proved to be a dead end. Expanding social programs of the era were seen as responsive democratic governments addressing the changing demography and evolving social needs of an industrial society (Cutright 1963, 1965; Wilensky 1975; Wilensky and Lebeaux 1958).

A third issue was to identify supporters of right-wing or left-wing political extremism and to discover why others were tolerant and defended civil liberties (Bell 1964; Rush 1967; Stouffer 1955). The intolerant were a mass of uneducated, low-income, marginal people who did not embrace establishment norms. Kornhauser (1959) warned, “The main danger to political order and civil liberty is the domination of elites by masses” (p. 228). Lane (1962) found that while few people were intensively involved in politics, most

embraced basic democratic values. By implication, a well-educated middle class of professional white-collar workers, business owners, and upper-level managers were the bastion of a stable democratic society.

Political sociologists also examined Michels's "iron law of oligarchy," that is, large-scale bureaucratic organizations that spread in modern industrial society and produced antidemocratic tendencies. This contradicted the idea that modern industrial societies were becoming more democratic. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) examined blue-collar workers in a large bureaucratic union setting and discovered that they operated on democratic principles, contradicting both the iron law of oligarchy and distrust of "marginal" blue-collar workers. Yet the union was atypical; it had well-educated, high-skill workers who strongly held professional norms and had an intense sense of community. Thus, the findings reinforced the thesis that middle-class values sustained democratic politics.

In this period, political sociology shared structural functionalist assumptions about a societal value consensus. Bell (1960) argued that rising living standards, an expanding middle class, and increased education levels would weaken ideological thinking and strengthen democratic values. At the same time, studies found few Americans informed or involved in politics, and most people lacked consistent, stable political views (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). The apparent contradiction between widespread apathy and participatory democracy was reconciled by arguing that people were uninvolved because they were satisfied. This reinforced the idea that slow evolution was preferable to rapid, disruptive social change that might generate social strains or disturb the equilibrium of a smooth-functioning social system (Smelser 1963).

A few classic-era mavericks rejected mainstream views and questioned the prevailing democratic image (Domhoff 1967; Hunter 1953; Mills 1956; Williams 1964), and found an American "power structure" of elites with great power. Others (Edelman 1964; Gusfield 1963) emphasized symbols in politics and saw political actors using emotional appeals or manipulating symbols to distract people and advance their own political goals. Still others (Downs 1957; Olson 1965) applied economic models, now called rational choice theory, to politics. At its zenith in the mid-1960s, classic era political sociology had become a well-established field with sophisticated theory, critical

questions, and an established body of knowledge (see Bendix 1968; Bendix and Lipset 1957; Janowitz 1968; Lipset 1959a; see also Hall 1981).

[p. I-307 ↓] Political sociology sharply changed direction in the 1970s because it had failed to anticipate and could not explain a dramatic turn in political events. Theoretical breakthroughs transformed the field just as graduate programs expanded, producing a flood of new scholars without a commitment to previous concerns. Attention shifted to protest movements. In the classic era, protest was understood as irrational outbursts by isolated malcontents. New research contradicted such a view. It found that most protesters were socially integrated with a deep commitment to democratic ideals but wrestling power from entrenched elites (Gamson 1968; Lipsky 1968; Orum 1966; Piven and Cloward 1971, 1977; Ransford 1968). Others showed how parts of the American government were engaged in antidemocratic actions against its citizens who questioned political elites (Wolfe 1973). More than conformity to American values, democracy advanced when a range of social groups competed and fought (Paige 1975; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1975; Wolf 1969). All nations were not inevitably progressing toward industrialism and democracy. Instead of spreading democracy, First World governments and corporations worked with local dictators to suppress grassroots pro-democracy worker and peasant movements (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Frank 1967; Petras 1969; Wallerstein 1976; Zeitlin 1967).

Many questioned the prevailing classic-era assumptions and asked whether America has a ruling class. At the same time, Europeans debated the larger capitalism-state relationship and how capitalism shaped state forms and actions (Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1973). Others (e.g., Korpi 1978) saw social welfare programs as hard-won concessions only granted by rulers facing demands by politically mobilized and militant workers. Historically oriented studies said that early popular democratic impulses in America were squashed (Goodwin 1976), large corporations controlled Progressive Era business regulation (Kolko 1963; Weinstein 1968), and corporate elites dominated U.S. foreign policy (Shoup and Minter 1977). Meanwhile, classic-era thinkers continued to blame the social unrest of the 1960s era on “excessive democracy” (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975).

Dispersion and Fragmentation

By the 1980s, unrest had faded and politics shifted rightward in much of the Western world (Kourvetaris and Dobratz 1982, 1983). Simultaneously, funding for social science research declined, graduate programs shrank, and student interest waned. New academic fields (i.e., environmental studies, urban studies, race and ethnic studies, cultural studies, women's studies) grew and borrowed heavily from political sociology. By the end of the twentieth century, Orum (1996) observed, "There no longer is any kind of coherent paradigm that guides the work of political sociology in America" (p. 132). This is not a negative assessment. As Hicks, Janoski, and Schwartz (2005) observed, "the field's great diversity of theoretical arguments is a sign of health, stimulating vigorous debate and self examination" (p. 30).

Current Theoretical Approaches and Content Areas

Political sociologists apply several theories to substantive issues. While each theory claims to be comprehensive, they were developed to address specific issues and rarely directly compete. They also operate at different levels of analysis, and what one treats as a major issue, another may view as peripheral (Alford and Friedland 1985).

Theoretical Approaches

The approaches were developed and gained adherents in different eras. Pluralism was dominant in the classic era but waned by the 1970s. It sees politics primarily as a contest among competing interest groups, and the emphasis is on the first (most overt, visible) dimension of power (Lukes 1974). Pluralism shares the assumption of societal consensus with structural functionalism and treats the state as a neutral apparatus that balances competing popular demands that people expressed through elections and public opinion. Although much stronger in political science, a few sociologists (see Burstein 1981, 1998; Burstein and Linton 2002) embrace pluralist theory.

A managerial (Alford and Friedland 1985) or the state-centered approach (Amenta 1998; Clemens 1993; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol 1985; Finegold and Skocpol 1995; Orloff and Skocpol 1984; Skocpol 1985; Skocpol and Amenta 1985) grew from organizational and classic elite theory (e.g., Michels, Mosca, and Pareto). In it, nation-states are “conceived as organizations claiming control over territories and people” with “goals that are not simply reflective of the demands of interests of social groups, classes, or society” (Skocpol 1985:9). It explains state actions by looking at constraints from organizational structure, semiautonomous state managers, and interests that arise from the state as a unique, power-concentrating organization, including the state's role in an international system of nation-states.

A third major approach, class analysis, gained dominance from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s. Two versions were outlined in the structuralist-instrumentalist debate of the 1970s (see Barrow 1993): an Anglo-American power structure model (called instrumentalist by detractors) (see Domhoff 1970, 1974, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1990; Miliband 1969, 1977, 1982) and French structuralism (represented by Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Claude Lévi-Strauss). The power structure model posited a ruling class of capitalists and a powerful “inner circle” (Useem 1984) who are class-conscious political actors. Common socialization, internal cohesion, class awareness, and collective action by mobilized class actors created a class that directly rules. By contrast, structuralist theory (Block 1981, 1987; Clark and Dear 1984; Jessop 1982, 1990; O'Connor 1973, 1984; Poulantzas 1973, 1974, 1978; Wright 1978) saw little need for active, direct rule by capitalist class actors. This is because a functional relationship (i.e., the state's structural position in capitalism) [p. 1-308 ↓] requires the state to satisfy system needs for capital accumulation and political legitimation. Thus, the structure of capitalism, not class members actively using the state as an instrument, assures capitalist dominance. A key mechanism is structural dependency (see Swank 1992) in which the state's reliance on a capitalist economy for revenue forces conformity to capitalist system requirements. Structuralists explained stagflation (high inflation with slow growth) and welfare state growth of the 1970s with the concept “fiscal crisis of the state” (Block 1981; O'Connor 1973). The crisis arose from a contradiction between the requirement to advance capital accumulation and to provide political legitimation (i.e., being responsive to the popular demands and providing tax-absorbing social programs).

As taxes rose to satisfy legitimation demands, they slowed capital accumulation and economic growth, creating serious fiscal problems.

Another class analysis model moved beyond the structural-instrumentalist impasse to emphasize class struggles and relative autonomy. State-relative autonomy means that while the state cannot contradict core capitalist economic principles, state actions are not strictly predetermined. State managers have maneuvering room, but the mobilization and struggles among classes, subgroups within classes, and nonclass groupings can shape state actions in specific historical contexts (Gilbert and Howe 1991; Hooks 1990a; Zeitlin, Neuman, and Ratcliff 1976). The degree of autonomy expands or contracts based on domestic and external factors. Thus, attention shifted from issues of capitalist class cohesion, the class background of state managers, and economic functionalism toward explaining political conflicts and class alliances in specific historical conditions.

Other sociological theories (rational choice, constructionism, and new institutionalism) influence political sociology. Rational choice is strongly embraced by political scientists and used by some political sociologists (e.g., Brustein 1996; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997; Kiser and Hechter 1991; Marwell and Oliver 1993). Social constructionism adds a cultural dimension and is used at the micro and macro levels (Eliasoph 1998; Gamson 1992; Neuman 1998; Steinmetz 1999). Lastly, “new” institutionalism (Amenta and Zylan 1991; Campbell 2004; Clemens and Cook 1999; Immergut 1998) emphasizes how institutional arrangements shape political context while incorporating rational choice and organizational and cultural factors.

Content Areas

The substantive issues of contemporary political sociology fall into six major areas: (1) State, citizenship and civil society, (2) social cleavages and politics, (3) protest movements and revolutions, (4) surveillance and control, (5) state-economy relations, and (6) the welfare state.

After Esping-Andersen's (1990) pathbreaking work, the notion of multiple welfare state regimes spread and has been elaborated on (Castles and Mitchell 1992, 1993;

Ferrara 1996; Jones 1993) and extended to identify alternative pathways of welfare state expansion (Hicks 1999). Despite initial assumptions, poverty reduction has not been a major outcome of the welfare state (Korpi and Palme 1998; Moller et al. 2003). During the 1990s, studies documented how the specific structure and operation of a welfare state reinforced particular gender relations, household patterns, and intrafamily labor allocations (Gornick and Jacobs 1998; Huber and Stephens 2000; Korpi 2000; Orloff 1993, 1996), and in the United States, built on past programs (Skocpol 1992) and reinforced racial inequalities (Lieberman 1998; Manza. 2000; Quadagno 1990, 1992, 1994; Soule and Zylan 1997). The major welfare state regimes (liberal-market, Christian democratic, social democratic) were found to have different effects. Thus, over time, attention moved from welfare state expansion, to alternative welfare state forms, to ways welfare state operations affected a range of social and economic relations. More recently, what had appeared to be an inevitable expansion of the welfare state since World War II stalled in most countries during the 1990s. Debates over causes of stagnation have focused on neoliberal ideological dominance, domestic political outcomes or institutions, and the economic effect of globalization (Iversen 2001; Iversen and Cusack 2000; King and Wood 1999; Korpi 2003; Pierson 2001; Stephens, Huber, and Ray 1999; Swank 2002).

Future Directions

As political sociology advances into the twenty-first century, four lines of inquiry are posed for further development: (1) legitimacy and identity, (2) governmentality, (3) politics beyond the nation-state, and (4) a synthesis of new institutionalism, rational choice, and constructionism.

Political sociologists examined legitimacy since the nineteenth century, but issues of social identity and culture are increasingly a concern. Racial-ethnic, sexuality, lifestyle, religious, and other value-based cultural identity affirmations are potential sources of political division that can be triggered under certain conditions. The ways such identities evolve, get expressed, and overlap take place within political structures and involve power/dominance relations. Nation-states and other political structures try to regulate and prevent conflicts among the identities to uphold their legitimacy. This suggests reviving or adjusting Gramsci's notion of hegemony.

Repressive social control and state surveillance continue to interest political sociologists. Their attention has shifted to more subtle forms of domination and coercion, such as that captured by Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence or Foucault's of governmentality. There is also a shift from treating the state apparatus as the sole site of concentrated power and domination to examining how power gets accumulated and exercised throughout numerous social institutions and relationships. In addition to examining the state's policing, taxing, and other powers, interest is turning to how coercion and power are embedded in the relations of a workplace, courtroom, classroom, shopping mall, hospital, television programming, religious community, and so forth. This moves attention to the symbolic-cultural-idea realm. It includes how collective memories, communication messages, and institutional arrangements impose social-ideational dominance and constrain free and autonomous public sphere for open participation and discourse, an idea elaborated by Habermas.

Few political sociologists expect the nation-state to disappear in the twenty-first century, but they expect changes and greater salience for nonstate politics. New global political structures are arising from accelerating cross-national border flows of information, investments, culture, and people in governments and nongovernment institutions (e.g., corporations, NGOs, social movements). New local multicultural or hybrid forms are emerging both in cities and small-scale units as well as in global institutions larger than the nation-state (see Boli and Thomas 1997; Meyer et al. 1997; Soysal 1994).

Political sociology emerged as a distinct field only since 1950 with its theories built on three core ideas: democratic participation and civic sphere for citizens, domination by elites in state and nonstate bureaucracies, and owner power in capitalist social-economic formations. These mid-twentieth-century concerns correspond to the pluralist, managerial, and class paradigms cogently outlined by Alford and Friedland (1985). As we begin the twenty-first century, political sociology is focusing on institutions and trying to incorporate more sophisticated and cross-discipline modeling as well as integrate emotive-cognitive-symbolic dimensions of social-cultural life.

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