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Q6(b)

What are the theoretical models of societal power ? Which one of them is most applicable in advanced industrial societies ?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- What are the theoretical models of societal power? Which one of them is most applicable in advanced industrial societies?
- Keep the discussion within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Power models:** class, elite, pluralism, **Lukes's** three faces, **Foucault**, and gender order.

Advanced industrial societies concentrate corporate-state elites, as **Mills** argued.

Pluralism fits some issue areas, not the core.

Lukes adds agenda and preference shaping.

Foucault fits audit and surveillance.

A **Mills-Lukes** bundle is the most applicable, not a single saint.

Introduction

Societal power is the capacity to shape outcomes against resistance and to set the agenda. Models disagree on who holds it: a ruling class, competing elites, a plural field, or a capillary discipline. Advanced industrial societies fit a mix, with elite-institutional and agenda models doing the most work.

Body

Marxist and neo-Marxist models

- **Karl Marx** located power in class ownership and the state as a committee of capital in the strong reading.
- **Antonio Gramsci** added hegemony in civil society. Nicos Poulantzas stressed the state's relative autonomy.

Elite models

- Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels saw organised minorities. C. Wright **Mills's** power elite fused corporation, military, and political directorates in the United States.

Pluralist and elite-pluralist

- Robert **Dahl's** polyarchy pictured shifting veto groups. Critics said this ignored non-decisions.

Steven Lukes and Foucault

- **Lukes's three dimensions:** visible conflict, agenda-setting, and preference-shaping.
- Michel **Foucault's** disciplinary and later governmentality models disperse power into experts, clinics, and the self.

Feminist models

- Sylvia Walby and R. W. Connell treat gender order as societal power, not a private leftover.

Applicability in advanced industrial societies

- Pure pluralism under-describes concentrated corporate and state power, which **Mills** still illuminates.
- Pure class reduction misses status, parties, and expert rule, which **Max Weber** and Bourdieu's fields capture.
- **Lukes plus a Millsian elite core is most applicable:** visible elections, hidden agendas, and institutional fusion.
- **Foucault** explains surveillance and audit culture in firms and welfare states, not the whole of capital.
- Gendered power remains structural in care and pay gaps, as labour-force files show.

Verdict

- No single classic model is enough.
- The most applicable bundle is elite-institutional power with **Lukes's** quiet dimensions, checked by residual pluralism in some issue areas.

Flow diagram

Marx class -> Societal power
 Mills elite -> Societal power
 Dahl pluralism -> Societal power
 Lukes dimensions -> Societal power
 Foucault discipline -> Societal power
 Advanced industrial -> Mills elite
 Advanced industrial -> Lukes dimensions

Conclusion

Models of societal power run from **Marx's** class to **Mills's** elite, **Dahl's** pluralism, **Lukes's** faces, and **Foucault's** discipline. Advanced industrial societies are not town-meeting polyarchies. **Mills** and **Lukes** travel best, with **Gramsci** and feminist theory for consent and gender. Use **Foucault** for the office, not as a replacement for who owns the office.

Facts & figures

Mills

The Power Elite: interlocking corporate, military, and political directorates.

Lukes

Three-dimensional power including non-decision and shaping of wants.

Dahl

Polyarchy: dispersed, shifting minorities in observable decisions.

Gramsci

Hegemony: consent organised in civil society, not only coercion.

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