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Q7(c)

Discuss the dimensions of power in the construction and maintenance of social hierarchies in a society

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Politics and Society

Politics and Society: Sociological theories of power; Power elite, bureaucracy, pressure groups, and political parties; Nation, state, citizenship, democracy, civil society, ideology; Protest, agitation, social movements, collective action, revolution.

Core demand of the question

- **State dimensions of power:** economic, political, ideological, status and everyday
- Show how they construct and maintain social hierarchies of class, caste, gender and organisation
- Use **Marx**, **Weber**, Gramsci, **Foucault** or Bourdieu as tools

Revision summary

Power has economic, political, ideological and status dimensions.

Marx stressed property; **Weber** added status and party; Gramsci stressed **hegemony**.

Foucault and Bourdieu highlight discipline, capital forms and **symbolic violence**.

Hierarchies of class, caste and gender are built when these dimensions align.

Maintenance is both spectacular force and daily honour, schooling and family rule.

Splits among dimensions, such as legal equality versus ritual rank, create change.

Introduction

A social hierarchy is a ranked order of groups and persons that lasts beyond one encounter. Power is what builds that order and what keeps it standing. Power is not only the police. It has several dimensions: control of resources, control of office and force, control of meaning and honour, and control of everyday conduct. These dimensions work together in class, caste, gender and bureaucracy.

Body

Dimensions of power

- **Karl Marx emphasised economic power:** ownership of the means of production and extraction of surplus. Those who command capital construct a class hierarchy and maintain it through the state's legal protection of property. **Max Weber** added **status** honour and **party** or organisational power, so that hierarchy is three-dimensional. **Antonio Gramsci's hegemony** names ideological power: the capacity to make a hierarchy seem common sense. Michel **Foucault** described disciplinary power in schools, prisons and clinics, which trains bodies and does not only forbid. Pierre Bourdieu spoke of economic, cultural and social capital, and of **symbolic violence** that makes the dominated collude in their ranking. Steven Lukes distinguished overt conflict, agenda-setting and preference-shaping as faces of power.

Construction and maintenance of hierarchies

Hierarchies are constructed when these dimensions crystallise into durable positions. Caste hierarchy is maintained by endogamy, ritual honour, economic dependence and, historically, religious ideology. **Ambedkar** and Uma Chakravarti show that gender control is inside that maintenance. Class hierarchy is maintained by inheritance, elite schools, and the conversion of money into cultural capital. Gender hierarchy is maintained by unpaid care, violence, law and the naturalisation of roles. In organisations, Weberian bureaucracy constructs official ranks, while informal cliques maintain them through patronage.

Maintenance is daily. It happens in language, in who interrupts whom, in residential segregation, and in the fear of falling. It also happens in crisis, when force is used. A hierarchy that loses ideological consent becomes expensive to police. That is why schools, temples, media and the family are sites of power, not only parliaments.

A full answer therefore refuses a single-factor story. Economic power is fundamental in **Marx's** sense for class. Status and symbolic power are fundamental for caste and gender. Political and organisational power lock the structure into the state. The dimensions construct hierarchy when they align, and they open a chance of change when they split, as when legal citizenship contradicts ritual rank.

Flow diagram

Economic power -> Hierarchy
Political organisational power -> Hierarchy
Ideological hegemonic power -> Hierarchy
Status and symbolic power -> Hierarchy
Hierarchy -> Endogamy inheritance everyday discipline

Conclusion

Power constructs and maintains hierarchy through property, office, honour and everyday discipline. **Marx**, **Weber**, Gramsci, **Foucault** and Bourdieu name different dimensions of that work. Hierarchies last when these dimensions support one another. They shake when law, economy and meaning fall out of line.

Facts & figures

Hegemony

Gramsci's term for leadership that wins consent, so that hierarchy is lived as common sense.

Symbolic violence

Bourdieu's term for the misrecognised power that makes people accept their place as natural.

Three dimensions of stratification

Weber's class, status and party, which prevent a purely economic map of hierarchy.

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