

Power: Interpersonal, Organizational, and Global Dimensions

Wednesday, 14 December 2005

TOPIC: concluding observations, comments.

To **exercise power** requires **resources** that you can mobilize: economic resources, organizational resources, shared norms (e.g. legitimate authority) etc. What seem to be currently the most effective resources and forms of power that we can identify? Mass communication, control of the public discourse.

The **most powerful form of manipulation** is create the **illusion of choice**, such as what the local news does, what the media does when it offers hundreds of channels. We all have the illusions of exercising free choice – but we all look amazingly alike, same clothes, etc.

Consider the situation of the ordinary citizen today: Both parents are working so we don't notice that family incomes are falling. But conservatives argue that family life is falling apart, not that economic conditions for families are precarious. The nation is polarized by images of good vs. evil, no middle road. We focus on abortion rather than health care, global warming, or environmental degradation. Politics nowadays doesn't seem to focus on first amendment rights or consolidated corporate power but on women's bodies. This concentrated attention on issues which are not central to the welfare of the masses of people is created through manipulation and deception, repeated, over and over again through the mass media.

The language of deception:
environmental regulation under the "Clear Skies" act – misleading
Clear Channel owns > 90% of radio stations

Consider what is known about world politics and history. How many American students actually study history? Or current events? If you pick up European mainstream news (like BBC, which is government not private), you will find that the proportion of news outside of domestic news is much higher than American news sources. In mainstream American media, information about the world is limited.

Yet, consumer power matters. But how do you *organize* consumers, people so that they can exercise consumer power? Examples of historical mobilization:

- We have historical examples of organized movements. We had much higher rates of voting in the 19th century up through the beginning of the 20th century. We had more political parties before, organized labor from 1880-1970s. We had organized fascist groups even.
- Most political scientists and sociologists (e.g. Putnam at Harvard) would say we had more **organized ways of participating**. They'd be cautious about saying it's always been bad – the question is, is this a mechanism that will prevent us from asserting differences and struggling if we want to?

A popular theory posited by those like Seymour Martin Lipset and Robert Dahl claims it was an okay thing that most Americans did not vote. If there were ever a real **threat to democracy**, we had this **reservoir of untapped voter population** that could be mobilized.

- For the Democrats, the most efficient form is to mobilize African-American voters because they have a low rate of voting, but when they do vote, are most likely to vote Democratic.
- The Republican counter-strategy is to contain voting in black neighborhoods. (The newly mobilized Hispanic voters are voting heavily Republican.)
- The key is **organization**. They are playing the “Christmas” instead of the “holidays” songs in the stores because of the lobbying organization.
- We have a **model of networked organization** from the 70s – universities made the anti-war movement. It takes time energy, human resources. Why did it work then and not now? Under the **rhetoric of choice and freedom**, we don’t have the draft anymore and we aren’t vulnerable. The peace movement didn’t come out of altruism, it was because kids were vulnerable. By making a professional military, the state does not need the people’s permission to go to war. We do not have the threat that would mobilize opposition. Notice how the pursuit of self-interested freedom, (no draft) ends up concentrating power --- because opposition to policy is difficult to mobilize. The consequences are diffuse, except for those already in the military (National Guard). BUT, notice also, that the military is becoming increasingly weakened because they cannot recruit. Those who would volunteer (less educated, poorer looking for a route of mobility) now will not serve...
- How about mandatory civil service? Some would complain of a “lack of freedom.” Why is it that we are **accused of not caring about family and community** but we destroy the things that would support them? (See Jimmy Carter's new book, Our Endangered Values).

Recognizing great inequalities of power should not become disabling. We should not think we can’t know anything. These are empirical questions that *can be* researched, understood. We must trace out the contradictions – you can get information, it just takes more work. Organization matters. “I wish you great resistance.”