



Mechanics,
Opportunities
+ Perils

DEMOCRACY 2020

REED Alumni College



REED COLLEGE

“POWER IN AMERICA, TODAY”

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DISCUSSION OUTLINE

1. 4 models of power: key concepts, with examples

2. Social media?

3. Climate change?

4. Current developments and issues



4 MODELS OF POWER: KEY CONCEPTS, WITH EXAMPLES

1. One-dimensional model: public conflict with winners and losers

Black Lives Matter; police brutality

2. Two-dimensional model: agenda-setting, controlling what comes up for decision- making

De-funding police departments; universal
health care



4 MODELS OF POWER: KEY CONCEPTS, WITH EXAMPLES

3. Three-dimensional model: ideological power -- shaping the thinking of the powerless to support the interests of the powerful

promotion of fossil fuels; NFL on concussions

4. Disciplinary power: normalizing judgment

gender norms



SOCIAL MEDIA: A New World or Simply New Vehicles of Power?

New World

“In February 2017, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s creator, stated that social network could establish ‘a new process for citizens worldwide to participate in collective decision-making.’” (*Euroactiv*)

e.g., Yellow Vests:

“The yellow vests of France are the latest example of how social media empowers people who have long felt ignored by political leaders.

“The yellow vests have been effective even without a recognized leader or an affiliation with a political party. French President Macron has offered to reverse the gas tax hike, and to increase the minimum wage to boot.

“It is hard to imagine how 1.7 million people who have until now been ignored by both the left and the right could have found their voice were it not for Facebook.” (Ken Kam, “Yellow Vests Show Unexpected Social Upside to Facebook,” *Forbes*, 12/18/18)

New Vehicles

“The central vein for reporters, producers, activists and a vast national audience was Twitter, which had already begun subtly shifting the power dynamic in news. It steered coverage. When John Eligon of *The Times* published a largely sympathetic profile of Mr. Brown that described him as ‘no angel,’ it set off outrage on Twitter, as a symbol of a style of journalism that seemed too ready to explain away police violence.

“‘They had a point’ about the phrase, Mr. Eligon recalled last week. **Twitter ‘did make it feel like you’re more accountable to a broader audience and a more diverse audience.’**” (Inside the Revolts Erupting in America’s Big Newsrooms,” NYT, 6/7/20)

POWER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

***In Re-Assembling the Social*, Bruno Latour (2005) observes:**

...In addition to ‘determining’ and serving as a ‘backdrop for human action’, things [that is, objects and other non-human things] might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. [It] is not the empty claim that objects do things ‘instead’ of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans.... (p. 72)



QUESTIONS ABOUT POWER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

1. Do we need a new model, like the one described, to understand climate change?

2. Do non-human things possess a kind of power that affects us? Or more provocatively: Do objects, non-human things have power over us?

If they do, does understanding and knowing this change anything? Or does it not because it is not possible to hold carbon dioxide, meteorological phenomena, a virus, to account? That is, may it make sense to extend agency to non-humans, but not power?



Current Developments & Issues: Murder of George Floyd; Police Brutality against Black Men; Racism; De-Funding Police...

2 discussion questions:

1. If you were a political scientist going out to study power using current developments as a case study, which model of power would you use to identify what to focus on?

--1-dimensional model focuses on direct conflict; between individuals and police; movement, like Black Lives Matter, and authorities

--2-dimensional model focuses on agenda-setting: how current developments are shifting the political agenda

--3-dimensional model focuses on ideological hegemony, shaping of the powerless to suit the interests of the powerful: e.g, racism as a tool of class oppression

--disciplinary power: racism as social norm that needs to be confronted and exposed if it is to be combatted

A final question

Are current developments altering your view of power in America today?

Foucault*: Disciplinary power (internalization of norms; use of surveillance to produce internalized self-discipline): dominant form of power in the “modern” work

Cf. violent oppression of people of color (Foucault: the “medieval” method)

Is U.S. a “modern” country??

**(Discipline and Punish)*