

# Justice and Power: Understanding the linkages Among Society, Economics and Politics from a Multi-Level Perspective

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## Abstract

Power is often so ubiquitous that it equally becomes elusive. Since time immemorial, questions have been asked regarding who exercises power, who grants the legitimacy for the exercise of such power, and how such power will be distributed fairly among many contenders. This paper deals with these age-old questions but in a non-conventional manner. The argument is that until we understand the intercourse among society, politics, and economics (what I refer to as 'multi-level linkage'), we will not have a sound appreciation of what constitutes "just power." The multi-level perspective, as will be explained in this paper, reveals not only the relational aspects of power, but also the need to develop a consensual interaction among society, economics and politics. The ordinary and often parochial definition of power does not factor in justice; this means that justice will have to be built into the existing framework. This paper moves beyond these traditional definitions to arrive at a conception of power that is not power over but rather power to and power with. It is this conception that reveals the potential for a just distribution of power.

## Keywords

Power, politics, society, market, justice

## I. Introduction

"Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Acton, 1887). Since the medieval or perhaps pre-medieval times, concepts such as 'power', 'justice', 'fairness', and 'legitimacy' have taken center-stage in both socio-political and legal discussions. It was the desire to protect and secure both life and property, and escape the brutish life in the state of nature that the people at the time, we are told, entered the social contract. Yet, even under this contract the specifics of 'just power' were questionable. The ubiquity of these concepts does not erase the basic fact of our existence, that is, some people have more power than others. Presently, there is ample evidence of the suboptimal returns of the distribution of power and wealth; social justice and equity remain the preserve of a select few in society. This discussion of the legitimate distribution of power has become even more relevant today as there is widespread evidence of poverty around the world. Collier's (2007) *The Bottom Billion* continually reminds our generation that power and economic resources are often not justly distributed, leaving many people on the fringes of life fighting to survive. It is easy to blame the state or the market for the current state of affairs. However, the panacea is beyond pointing fingers. Corporations have power and sometimes misuse this power but it does not mean we should do away with them. For instance, can we say that because motor vehicles get involved in accidents and kill people we should eliminate car companies such as GM, Ford, and Suzuki among others? Rather, there is a continuous need to keep working with these companies to ensure some degree of proportionality in their operations—a point where the negative aspects of their

operations will not outweigh the positive impact they seek to make in both society and the market. Additionally, the state also needs to be continually checked so it remains accountable to its citizens and does not relinquish its role to the market. The case to bring the state back in (see Evans et al eds. 1985) for instance does not sound particularly innovative anymore since the state has always been central in the discussion of power and the just distribution of resources. Even under the neo-invisible hand of the market, the state becomes useful when things go wrong. The recent global financial downturn attests to the increasing relevance of the state (in terms of its regulatory power) in averting crisis that can obstruct both the economy and society from gaining from the rents of power. The argument I shall pursue here is not just to bring the state back in; but rather to bring it in more carefully to play an interlocking role with both society and market. This reveals not only the idea of a "limited state" (Migdal 1997, 227) but also, a state that is embedded in a variety of social and economic forces. I insist that it is mainly by this multi-level interchange among society, economics and politics that we can begin to conceptualize the perimeters of just power.

## II. What is Power? Can it be Just?

The way we define power is contingent on how we define politics. If we see politics as an arena or structure, it becomes difficult to conceptualize how just power would be; but if politics is seen as a process, then the state itself does not solely become a 'black box' that makes decisions without knowing what goes into such decisions. Politics entails the use of power; however, I argue that power and politics should be conceived of both as arenas and processes. In this way, we can begin to unpack certain notions built into the terms in order to outline how productive and sustainable it can be. Justice is simply fairness (Rawls 1958), and fairness is the most equitable way of distributing power. To be just is to ensure that all (or at least most) partakers of the social contract are both equal and fair participants and benefactors of the legitimate distribution of power. It is difficult to imagine that power will serve everyone's particular needs but 'just power' would often serve the needs of a greater percentage of the populace. In fact, "every act is an exercise of power, every social relationship is a power equation, and every social group or system is an organization of power" (Hawley 1963, 433 cf. Brodie 1999, 4). Yet, understanding this ubiquity of power should make us separate 'power to' from 'power over' (ibid.), the former having a greater potential of making power just through the aggregation of several interests while the latter simply denotes disenfranchisement. If we parochially define power as A having the ability to cause B to do something that B would otherwise not do (Dahl 1951, 1961, 203), it becomes problematic trying to introduce justice into the equation. This is because actor B is always in a disempowered position of fulfilling actor A's whims; it remains a zero-sum game where only one (the one who possesses and distributes power) wins. Of course, motorists are expected to obey the direction of the

traffic warden who has the power to stop some cars and cause others to move, and a doctor has the power (even legitimate power) to prescribe drugs for his/her patients most of whom will follow the doctor's advice for fear of death. Also, power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, 948). These scenarios, however, present a limited understanding of power. Power should not be about this kind of control; it should be an avenue for freedom, choice, and consensus (sometimes, non-violent conflicts). And to be able to make power just, we need to explore both the implicit and explicit (or manifest) aspects of power. We need to appreciate the multiple faces of power. The multi-level linkage idea that will be expanded on below goes beyond the limited scope of 'power over' and adds to 'power to', the idea of 'power with' which emphasizes the notion of many actors sharing a common political/power space. As it guards against the tendency of pluralism turning into elitism, it is by this perspective that power can potentially be just.

### III. Bridging the Divide between Power and Justice

The main consideration here will be an enlightened consciousness to the needs of society, in terms of how to merge economics and politics. There has been a trend to separate these two arenas which nonetheless continually engage in interchange. Karl Marx, for instance, is noted for giving too much attention to the economic as the main determinant of exploitation (see the Communist Manifesto). But in essence, both the so-called substructure and superstructure are in constant intercourse and cannot be de-linked. We need politics in the same way as we need economics (capital, business and entrepreneurs). Some people separate these two fields so as to ascertain axes of domination/oppression; but none of these can effectively be evaluated as separate fields. However, in bringing them together it is vital to ensure the power they possess and distribute is just. Corporations have enormous economic power and some would even suggest that they sometimes can set the agenda for politics (see Lindblom 1977). This is evident in how some corporations sponsor political parties, lobbies and other groups that pursue interests they identify with. In doing so, there is the need to be constantly conscious of what society needs and how the usage of this power will benefit the whole body politic. A second aspect of bridging the gap will be institutions. Capable and effective institutions are decisive in making sure the distribution of power is legitimate and fair. The note of caution, however, is that institutions cannot necessarily ensure that every individual benefits per se, but they have the potential of giving to a majority of the populace just returns for the power they have vested in them under the social contract, a way of bringing power and justice to the grassroots. Bridging the gap means bringing together the cleavages of power and economics with the goal of ensuring that corporate power, investments and processes result in a just, productive and sustainable socio-economic and political environment.

### IV. The Case for Multi-level exchanges

A third way of ensuring a legitimate distribution of power will involve diluting the 'top-bottom' nature of politics and economics. By diluting it, it does not only become 'bottom-up' but it grows into multi-level exchanges among all stakeholders of justice. This might sound difficult to do if we conceptualize politics as the authoritative allocation of resources, where the main authority is always the state. The challenge with such a conception is that it eludes certain aspects of politics that are

not designed to redistribute power justly. Recent socio-economic protests in Europe (particularly in Greece, France, Ireland and England) depict the unjust distribution of power. Recently in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and ongoing in Syria and Yemen, we have seen what 'citizen power' can do. These public uproars and demonstrations indicate that the mechanisms of subjection (Foucault 1982) by the state can longer be contained. The old institutionalist approaches as propounded by political theorists such as John Locke and Rousseau suggest that society and its members, in their quest not to enter the 'state of nature' delegate some of its powers to a governing body that can be considered as 'philosopher king' (in Plato), 'the prince' (in Machiavelli) or an authority that legislates, implements and adjudicates. Under this old conception, although we are born free, we are constantly constrained by the laws of this authoritative body. The reason why this old idea has lost its fervour is that in our current generation citizens no longer just want to delegate power to ensure their freedom and protection; they actually seek to be a part and parcel of the processes of politics. Excluding them from politics means an exclusion from the very process that defines their existence, their needs, and their security. By introducing a multi-level exchange, there will be other axes of power beyond the state and in cases where the state is unable or unwilling to fulfill its mandate, other stakeholders will step in as legitimate authorities to distribute power in a sustainable manner. Some may want to call this exchange a public-private partnership (PPP) but I call it multi-level exchanges because this illuminates all the multivariate forces involved in this interaction. PPPs have the implication that it is mainly the public (official state agents and agencies) and the private sector (businesses, entrepreneurs and the corporate executives) engaged in this dialogue, but it should be more than that. What about society members who belong to neither of these two main groups? How can we ensure that power gets to them or that it is distributed with their interests in mind?

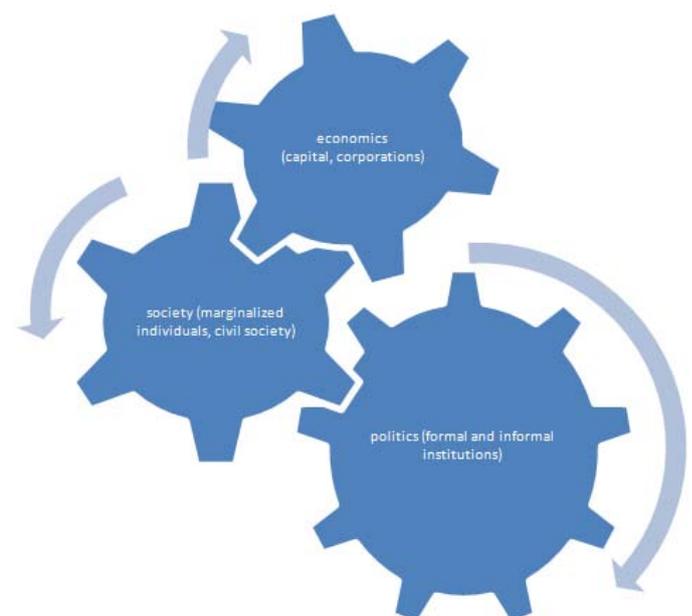


Fig. 1: Multi-Level Exchanges of Politics, Economics and Society

The case being made here is that it is not useful to conceive of power as residing solely in the state because this kind of power is both individualizing and totalizing (Foucault 1982, 782). It is

more susceptible to domination by one group over the other, and more unlikely to reveal the possibility of justice. The idea explained above may sound rather utilitarian but as indicated, it is the most practicable way of revealing what to expect when we begin unpacking notions of justice and power. My initial quotation from Lord Acton epitomizes how power can run away from its distributive intent if conscious efforts are not made to make it work for the betterment of society and economics.

## V. Conclusion

It remains dicey trying to find the appropriate and legitimate means of distributing power. Simply, there are no short-cuts. A point worthy of note is that the approach outlined above will not work until each aspect of the exchange makes the effort towards its fruition. This is not just ideal; it is how power is normally expected to be distributed. The challenge, however, is that since we have not fully pursued it and evaluated how it will be effective, there are many members of the system who feel relegated to the margins of justice and equity. Corporations or businesses (in this case the economy) have enormous power; so do state institutions. But, as I have argued here, a legitimate distribution of power will involve those who are often left on the peripheries of power; societal forces. This is why in our contemporary generation, I suggest we take a critical look at how all these three forces (politics, economy and society) can coalesce to find a common ground, and arrive at a consensual understanding and acceptance of what constitutes just power.

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