

< Compare and contrast the treatment of the concept of power. Construct an argument in support of one approach over and relative to the other.>



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## 1. Introduction

The word 'power' is inferred from the Latin word 'potere' which means the ability to act or do (Patton, 1989). This implies power can be taken as something with the capacity or potential to perform specific things. Power is also examined as some exercise over others or in cooperation with others. For example, the ability of institutions, groups or individuals can considerably affect the actions of others. The concept of power is always debatable, especially political power which is always difficult to conceptualise and measure. This is because different scholars have conceptualised 'power' in different ways. For example, Lukes (1974) provides the explanation of power in the sense that not always an individual or group exercises power directly, but rather power is indirectly utilised to force or persuade others so that their actions are changed in the manner in which they would not have done otherwise.

This essay intends to describe and critically analyse the treatment of the concept of power by in-depth discussion revolving around two key theorists Bourdieu and Foucault. I intend to explain that both Bourdieu and Foucault have offered insightful, fruitful and almost similar ways of exploring the concept and treatment of power in relation to social field and habitus. Both offer a hidden or pre-conscious element that is strong enough to shape people's preferences and actions. However, I think the conceptualisation and treatment of power as stipulated by Bourdieu is more detailed, more authentic, more applicable and more understandable compared to Foucault. The essay sets out with the explanation of Bourdieu's concept of power by focusing on habitus, fields, capital and their relationship with power. Then the essay explains the Foucault conceptualisation of power focusing on social unconscious and how individuals construct and shape their preferences. Then the essay provides a critical examination of the power structures of Doxa in Bourdieu's power concept by relating it to the debacle of famous American company "Enron". Further, power is analysed from the perspective of Bourdieu's pre-conscious Habitus which is somewhat similar to Foucault's conceptualisation of power. The essay discusses that Foucault does not eliminate the subject or agency in conceptualising power. To support or prove my argument that the conceptualisation and treatment of power described by Bourdieu is relatively more authentic than Foucault, I have provided my personal observations under different sections throughout the essay.

## **2. Essay body**

### **2.1 Bourdieu's concept of power (Habitus, Field and Capital)**

According to Bourdieu (1977; p. 174), habitus is defined as systems of transposable, durable dispositions, where dispositions are termed as “the result of an organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure” (p. 191). Broadly speaking, Habitus reflects our overall way of being in the world, our overall orientation to, our predisposed way of moving, acting, and thinking within our social environment that encircles our tastes, expectations, outlook and demeanour.

Bourdieu's concept of power with reference to habitus and its association with power has received great attention from the scholarly community. For example, Mark Huggard (2008) explores the association between habitus and social power by discussing the complex association between power, legitimacy and habitus. On the other hand, Harrits (2011) discusses that power exists simultaneously in the shape of inclusion/empowerment and exclusion/dominance by keeping itself inside the practices of the habitus.

Bourdieu provides a wider theoretical approach to explain power dynamics in which the key concepts relate to Habitus, Field and Capital. According to Bourdieu, power is created symbolically and culturally, and the interaction between agency and structure in habitus continuously re-legitimise power (Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986). Now, the habitus is associated with fields, since the different behaviour of power in fields takes place through habitus. Here Fields are termed as several institutional and social arenas within which different dispositions are expressed and reproduced by people, and where people contest for the distribution of various types of capital. It can be said that fields are the places of struggle in which some kind of capital is considered interesting and superior compared to others. Different types of fields can be classified such as media field or education field, and on these sites, people compete for power. Therefore, fields can be taken as sites of struggle, institutional and social arenas that involve dominant and subordinate positions, within which, people compete for power.

Based on which field, people are in at a specific time, people experience power in different ways. The power relations can have tensed and contradiction areas when people tend to accept power in one field while resist power in some other field. So, for instance, different types of power

relations might be experienced by women in private or public fields. At home, they would feel subdued but in workplace settings, their work might be significantly acknowledged; their individual and group habitus can explain these power experiences and the manner in which the field is built.

## **2.2 Foucault conceptualisation of power (The role of social unconscious in shaping individuals' preferences)**

Power is also conceptualised and explained by Foucault from which important insights can be gained. Foucault was more concerned with how individuals construct their preferences. Specifically, how the social unconscious informs individuals about the rules, customs, norms, based on which, they shape their preferences. Patton (1989) argues that relations of power in Foucault's definition is extremely broad. Whenever there is an action upon the action of others, power is exercised. According to Foucault, there are no pre-constituted set of purposes, interests or desires on the agent's part. Foucault (1982) writes that perhaps power can be comprehended better by understanding the concept of sixteenth-century government: to govern is to "structure the possible field of action of others" (p. 790).

When critically analysing Foucault's concept of power, agents (people) do not instrumentally possess power. But rather, power pervades the social field by a defaced setting. Just like Bourdieu, Foucault also favours the opinion that relative to the social field, people's preferences are shaped. Foucault's concept of power is also linked with Bourdieu's Habitus in the sense that deep down the intentional practices and beliefs, lie socially accepted and socially reproduced, deeper norms that shape the preferences and allow the formation of activities and interests, thereby letting the power pervading and diffusing throughout society. The habitus also relates to the historic construction of norms regarding how the social field allows and accepts the suitable ways of being and behaving. For example, African American workers had been marginalised in the US society for centuries. Therefore, the earlier set of the legacy of discrimination and economic decisions shaped the agency and preferences of African-American workers (Hayward, 1998). Here, power is not exercised by the agents to control the powerless people, rather power acted through a set of historic norms embedded in social boundaries to define how black people should think and act. This means power is not exercised by focusing on the real interests of people, rather power is actually exercised on the background conditions or norms in



society so that people expect and accept those norms. Their preferences are shaped in total compliance with the set norms.

### **2.3 Critical analysis: Power structures of Doxa in Bourdieu's power concept in relation to Famous American Company Enron**

When critically analysing Bourdieu's power concept, one cannot ignore the very source of 'Doxa' that is also called hidden structures of power that people might be ignorant of, and which might affect their preferences and limit choices as well. Grenfell (2014) highlights that "for Bourdieu, Doxa refers to "pre-reflexive intuitive knowledge shaped by experience, to unconscious inherited physical and relational predispositions" (p. 3). Bourdieu further explains that Doxa is a set of fundamental beliefs and there is even no requirement to emphasise it in the shape of a self-conscious, explicit principle (Bourdieu, 2000). Doxa can be understood in the sense that different positions will be present in any given field within which some positions would be associated with the 'universe of discourse', whereas some positions would be linked with the 'universe of the undiscussed' (Bourdieu, 1994). So, the 'Doxa' lies in the latter i.e. 'universe of the undiscussed' that reflects the hidden, taken-for-granted or unstated assumptions behind which people operate for transmitting power relations.

**Personal Observation-1:** I would like to quote the famous case of Enron Bankruptcy in 2001, the company was awarded "America's Most Innovative Company" for six consecutive years by Fortune magazine from 1996 to 2001 (Dobson, 2006). There has been a continuous struggle of power at Enron between those who were powerful managers and those who were resisting employees. However, the misuse and exercise of power had not been forced directly, but through hidden measures (such as Bourdieu's Doxa I perceive). Power was demonstrated even through non-decisions to make it fit in employee's activities within the boundaries of what is acceptable. For example, managers at Enron started the "spending culture" throughout the company with almost unlimited rewards and bonuses for employees such as lavish travelling, luxury cars, and even promoting illicit sex. All those rewards were given so that no employee resist the financial misconducts within Enron. Therefore, a hidden culture or Bourdieu's 'universe of the undiscussed' or 'Doxa' was indirectly created in power relations within Enron. Ultimately that Doxa resulted in its debacle.

So, Bourdieu's Doxa concepts are often undisputed, remain beyond question, and includes aspects of the social world and fields in which people operate. It can be said that people are generally equipped with a real sense of what their actions should be in a given social field through the important role of habitus. However, the doxic (hidden) relationship between the field and the habitus can be strong enough to restrict the process of sense-making (just like Enron employees). Bourdieu names it as a “sense of limits”. Bourdieu puts it (as cited in Moi, 1991; p. 1027) “what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent, not least about itself as tradition”. If the field is in a society, there is no space for transformation or change. Social power that is completely doxic prevails and rules without opposition, even without any question of legitimacy.

One can understand the conceptualisation of power relations and how power functions within any given field as per Bourdieu by identifying how discourses are acknowledged explicitly and whether there is any hidden, undiscussed or misrecognised discourse. This implies that habitus and fields are interconnected with each other and the Doxa/misrecognition in the field assist us to understand how power can become invisible or indirect, yet it manages to influence people.

**Personal observation-2:** I observe that despite having different theoretical approaches for conceptualising power, Bourdieu and Foucault share a similar understanding that preferences of people are shaped by pre-conscious dimensions of which they are not essentially aware. The autonomy of people is not undermined in these approaches but how power operates to affect them by shaping their preferences is acknowledged. This kind of unawareness might be the reason that a social system, despite clear disadvantages and inequalities, manages to survive without frequently needing the explicit forms of power utilisation to maintain order.

#### **2.4 Power in the shape of Bourdieu's pre-conscious Habitus**

The pre-conscious aspect of Habitus is also visible in Bourdieu's conceptualisation where he mostly talks about the unconscious part of human action, explaining that actions of agents (humans) are not conscious, but unconscious. Bourdieu (1977; p. 178) writes:

in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday's man; it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we, were formed and from which we result. Yet we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us; he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves (p. 178)

While critically analysing this aspect of preconscious and its relation with habitus, it can be said that the functioning of habitus is integrated with the pre-conscious. This is where I perceive that power can be observed by exploring this aspect. Let's take habitus as a structure within which we (agents) acknowledge the way of our being and perform our actions. This is where the preconscious part of our habitus influences us as a powerful agency, and we act upon it, follow its commands without filtering through our more conscious capacities. This does not mean that we as agents cannot reflect, conflict or contradict within the habitus. But rather, most of the time, we are not reflective and often perform our actions in an unconscious manner, habitually or in a non-reflexive way. I perceive that our pre-conscious habitus, in this sense, turns into the controlling power that actually controls us, while our reaction against habitus is but one aspect of our agential characteristics that does not often come into action. By contrast, most of our actions are performed frequently through the controlling power of pre-conscious habitus. I would like to further add that the powerful groups in society who want to be dominant and powerful in the fields, might often promote the discourses, not directly observable, but doxa like hidden tactics so that people (agents) in different fields unconsciously comply with these discourses.

**Personal observation:** I perceive that Bourdieu's conceptualisation of power is more supportive and authentic than Foucault. This is because Bourdieu's concept isolates fields such as institutions and social arenas—the commercial field, the artistic field, the education field—through which a more authentic picture of society is observed. By contrast, Foucault's concept of power is extremely broad in which the unit of analysis to understand power is not clearly manifested. Although Bourdieu talks about Doxa: pre-conscious or hidden, he also explains the “universe of discourse”, in which fields are sites of struggles and people experience power in different ways. The power relations can have tensioned and contradiction areas when people tend to accept power in one field while resist power in some other field. This means Bourdieu does not express power only as relational (hidden Doxa), but also operational and exercisable. Power is not merely taken as a function of a network of relations between people. Rather, power is operational, can be exercised by specific institutions or agents.

## **2.5 Critical analysis: Foucault does not eliminate subject or agency in conceptualising power**

Apparently, it seems like Foucault also constructs the concept of power behind habitus, away from the agency or subject (subject can be a nation, class or an individual). It can be argued that Foucault only believes in power from a structuralist viewpoint without taking a close look at the agency or subject. However, I personally think that this is not the case. The power focus of Foucault is not away from the subject. He takes a close look at the subject by understanding how power operates on the subjects and how the subject is constituted through power. Obviously, the subject is at the centre of the attention because the subject does not precede the operation of power and an examination cannot be started if it does. However, the subject is indeed examined by interrogating the norms that govern several practices in the social field, producing subjects and shaping their preferences. This examination needs an interpretivist approach by investigating the habitus; the overall way of being in the world, the overall orientation to, the predisposed way of moving, acting, and thinking within the social environment that encircles people's tastes, expectations, outlook and demeanour.

**Personal observation:** I think to draw the formation and consequences of power on people, Bourdieu's concept is more credible because different institutions can be observed separately to closely examine whether the people show resistance or compliance when power is exercised. On the other hand, it is hard to determine and classify the social location of people (in relation to different institutions or social arenas) and to closely examine power in contemporary times in Foucault's concept. This is because a historical examination of habitus is the key way to understand the formation and results of power on people. Thirdly, Bourdieu's concept of power is not only linked to pre-conscious or Doxa but power is also associated with the capital (resources) that agents possess and compete for. Therefore, the habitus of agents, fields, and capital can be identified and explored as a site of analysis.

Given these facts, Bourdieu's conceptualisation and treatment of power is more supportive and has a more in-depth analytical framework to understand and examine power compared to Foucault. Consequently, an individual's agency and preferences can be examined in more detail rather than performing a deep historical investigation on people and their preferences as in the case of Foucault. Lastly, the concept of power does not exclude the hidden doxa or the "universe of the

undiscussed”, therefore, Foucault’s dimensions are also present in Bourdieu’s model. Although Foucault does not eliminate subject or agency in conceptualising power, its methodological framework does not pay close attention to agency or subject, but only observes power from a structuralist viewpoint away from the subject.

### **3. Conclusion**

This essay acknowledges that the conceptualisation and treatment of power is subject to debate because several scholars have conceptualised ‘power’ in different ways. There are many similarities and contrasts between Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s concepts of power. Habitus is conceptualised almost the same by both scholars. Regarding Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, the key elements on which power is conceptualised are Habitus, Field and Capital. Different behaviours of power take place in fields, therefore, fields are considered as sites of struggle, while habitus is linked with fields. So, people compete for power in those sites of struggle. Bourdieu’s Power structures of Doxa are somewhat similar to Foucault’s conceptualisation of social unconsciousness, the historic construction of norms that shape the preferences and allow the formation of activities and interests. Doxa also relates to the hidden, taken-for-granted or unstated assumptions behind which people operate for transmitting power relations. Similarly, Bourdieu’s pre-conscious habitus also relates to Foucault in the sense that it also explains the unconscious part of human action, explaining that actions of agents (humans) are not conscious, but unconscious.

Despite the similarities between Bourdieu and Foucault concepts of power, Foucault’s conceptualisation is different because he strongly believes that social unconscious informs individuals about the rules, customs, norms, based on which, they shape their preferences. The habitus also relates to the historic construction of norms regarding how the social field allows and accepts the suitable ways of being and behaving. Given this inadequacy in Foucault’s conceptualisation of power, where power is relational to social unconsciousness, and a historical examination of habitus is the key way to understand the formation and results of power on people, the essay concludes that Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of power is more supportive, detailed and authentic than Foucault. Foucault’s power is only relational, whereas Bourdieu’s power is both relational and operational.

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