

# 12

## Social Organization and Power

### Chapter Outline

- The Search for the Laws of Social Organization
  - The Arbitrariness of Social Organization
- The Power to Act
  - The Role of the State
  - Coercion: With and without Traditional State Institutions
    - Domination and Hegemony
    - Biopower and Governmentality
    - The Ambiguity of Power
- Power as an Independent Entity
- The Power of the Imagination
  - Bargaining for Reality
- History as a Prototype of and for Political Action
- Negotiating the Meaning of History

### Key Points

1. **Social organization** refers to the patterning of human interdependence in a given society through the actions and decisions of its members. Unlike biological determinists, environmental determinists, and unilineal evolutionists, anthropologists understand that the complexities of human social organizations can never be reduced to a single cause. The **power** that human beings have to reproduce or to change their social organization is an important focus of anthropological study. Ultimately, the social relations in any society are arbitrary.
2. Human beings actively work to reshape the environments in which they live to suit themselves. The ability to act implies power. The study of **social power** in human society is the domain of **political anthropology**. In most societies, at most times, power can never be reduced to physical force, although this is the Western prototype of power. Power in society operates according to principles that are cultural creations. As such, those principles are basically arbitrary, are affected by history, and may differ from one society to another.
3. Many early academics assumed that the state was the prototype of “civilized” social power. This is because Western thinkers traditionally assumed that without a state, social life would be cha-

otic, if not impossible. They believed that people were, by nature, self-interested **free agents** who would not co-operate unless forced to do so. Anthropologists have demonstrated that power is exercised both by coercive and by persuasive means. Civilization has been born and sustained in violence. People may submit to institutionalized power because they fear punishment, but they may also submit because they believe it is the right thing to do.

4. The works of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault have influenced anthropologists who are interested in how power is exercised in states. In the 1930s, Gramsci argued that coercion alone is rarely sufficient for social control as it is expensive and unstable. He distinguished coercive **domination** from **hegemony**. Successful hegemonic practice deflects challenges to the coercive power of the ruling group, but hegemony is always the outcome of struggle, and success is never guaranteed. Hegemony is never absolute. Foucault's concept of **governmentality**, which is the art of governing appropriate to biopolitics, addresses practices developed in Western nation-states in the nineteenth century that aimed to create and sustain peaceful and prosperous social life by exercising power over persons who could be counted, whose physical attributes could be measured statistically, and whose sexual and reproductive behaviours could be shaped by the exercise of state power.
5. Anthropological research in societies without states has shown how social obligations can restrict individuals from pursuing their own self-interest to the detriment of the group. In those societies, power is usually seen to be an independent entity to which one may gain access by supplication, not coercion. Likewise, individuals cannot be coerced but must be persuaded to co-operate. They are not free agents in the modern Western sense, but they are empowered to resist conforming to another's wishes. The power of individuals to resist emphasizes the importance of **consensus**, which requires **persuasion**.
6. All human activities, including growth and self-identity, take place in a social, cultural, and historical context. Each individual retains the power to interpret that context from his or her vantage point, in terms of his or her unique experiences.
7. All human beings possess the "power to invest the world with meaning." Many anthropologists feel that a discussion of social power is incomplete if it does not also pay attention to the ways individuals make sense of and use the constraints and opportunities for action open to them, however limited they may be. Rulers always face the risk that those they dominate may create new, persuasive accounts of their experience of being dominated, organize themselves to defend and disseminate their account, acquire a following, and unseat their rulers.
8. When people bargain for reality, they draw on elements of a shared culture and shared history in order to persuade others of the validity of their position. But they must often bargain over not merely which part of an agreed-on tradition is relevant, but also which version of the tradition ought to be agreed on. Much political debate concerns which lessons from the past are relevant to the present. When disputes are settled in this manner, experience is transformed.

## Key Terms

**Alienation** The deep separation that individuals experience between their innermost sense of identity and the labour they are forced to perform in order to survive.

**Anomie** A pervasive sense of rootlessness and normlessness in a society.

**Biopower** Power held by a modern government over the bodies of its individual citizens and over the “body” of all its citizens.

**Consensus** An agreement to which all parties collectively give their assent.

**Domination** Coercive rule.

**Essentially negotiable concepts** Culturally recognized concepts that evoke a wide range of meanings and whose relevance in any particular context must be negotiated.

**Free agency** The freedom of self-contained individuals to pursue their own interests above everything else and to challenge one another for dominance.

**Governmentality** The art of governing appropriate to promoting the welfare of populations within a state.

**Hegemony** A system of leadership in which rulers persuade subordinates to accept the ideology of the dominant group by offering mutual accommodations that nevertheless preserve the rulers’ privileged position.

**Persuasion** Power based on verbal argument.

**Political anthropology** The study of social power in human society.

**Political power** Social power held by a group that is in a position to affect the lives of many people.

**Power** Transformative capacity; the ability to transform a given situation.

**Resistance** The power to refuse being forced against one’s will to conform to someone else’s wishes.

**Social organization** The patterning of human interdependence in a given society through the actions and decisions of its members.

**Social power** The ability to transform a situation that affects an entire social group.

## Review Questions

1. What is hegemony? How does hegemony operate in Canadian society?
2. Discuss biopower and governmentality using examples such as military training, physical education, quarantines, hygiene initiatives, etc.
3. States rule through a combination of force, incentives, and ideology. Discuss the ways these factors play out in Canadian society.
4. Work through James Scott's ideas about 'peasant resistance' and assess his claims.
5. Discuss what is meant by the arbitrariness of social organization.
6. Explain some of the key differences between social power and political power.
7. Is coercion and coercive power inevitable in state level societies?
8. Discuss the concept of biopower or biopolitics, the forms of power preoccupied with managing bodies.
9. What forms of resistance might we find at work in Canadian politics?
10. Do you think alienation still plays a prominent role in the politics of Canadian society?
11. Are Canadians negotiating the meaning of history through our current truth and reconciliation process with our First Nations people?
12. Do we have an adequate separation of political power from economic power in Canada?

## Additional Resources

### Films

- *Blue Gold: World Water Wars*. Directed by Sam Bozzo. Purple Turtle Films. 2008.

This documentary investigates the political and ecological consequences of our rampant use of fresh water. A number of water activists are profiled.

<http://www.bluegold-worldwaterwars.com/>

- *Following Antigone: Forensic Anthropology and Human Rights Investigations*. Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense/WITNESS. 2002.

This film covers the various aspects of forensic anthropology as applied to human rights investigations, including investigative methods, relationships with local judiciaries, impacts on victims' families, and the process of mourning and reburial.

[http://eaaf.typepad.com/following\\_antigone\\_forens/](http://eaaf.typepad.com/following_antigone_forens/)

### Annotated Video Links

- *Edward Said - Framed: The Politics of Stereotypes in News*  
In this brief yet powerful presentation, Palestinian-American literary historian Edward Said shows how the West had the power to represent the colonial other while simultaneously leaving them silent.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QYrAqrpshw>
- *Bands, Tribes, Chiefdoms, and States*  
This short film explores these standard characterizations of political organization using good ethnographic examples.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-F8R9oPILI>
- Keith Hart- Engaged Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century (part1)  
A compelling lecture on the anthropology of politics in the twenty-first century. Hart looks at how we need to retool our anthropological concepts of the past to stay relevant as we move into the twenty-first century.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETrkndegGEC>
- What is Political Ecology? | Culture, Power, and Global Environment  
Excellent brief lecture with good visuals and ethnographic examples that explains and explores political ecology.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUVHIVDANiY>
- Political theory: Karl Marx  
An excellent short that runs through the basics of Marx's ideas and discusses how aspects of those ideas are still very relevant today.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSQgCy\\_iIcc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSQgCy_iIcc)

### Websites

- Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation

The Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation conducts rural research with the goal of improving the lives of rural Canadians.

<http://www.crrf.ca/>

## A Critical Look

BY ROBERTA ROBIN DODS

### Interpretations of War

In our modern, technologically connected world, we are continually bombarded with descriptions and images of intense power struggles that are taking place around the globe. Newspapers, TV news broadcasts, and online news sites of all sorts bring us graphic reports and photographs depicting armed uprisings, terrorist attacks, military invasions, and other large-scale acts of violence. These depictions both draw our attention to and mediate the reality of those conflicts. Through the lens of Western media, wars lose much of the intense meaning they hold for those participating in the conflict. Most often, they filter through to us as remote, depersonalized experiences in which lost human lives are nothing more than “collateral damage.”

German linguist Uwe Poerksen (1995) would define *collateral damage* as a “plastic” phrase—a phrase made up of words that are malleable (like plastic) and that, through their malleability, can shape aspects of our reality by disguising their true nature. More common examples of plastic words include “development,” “project,” “strategy,” and “problem.” Plastic words are often used by hegemonies of various forms—governments, economic organizations, military forces, and so on. They are the real-world realization of the “newspeak” described by George Orwell in his dystopian, oddly prophetic novel *1984*: “war is peace,” “freedom is slavery,” “ignorance is strength.” Such words and phrases warp our perceptions, hiding the true consequences of war.

Images can have an equally distorting effect. Filmmaker and political activist Susan Sontag (2003) challenges us to think deeply about how we use and interpret photographs of “hellish events” such as war. She notes that the stories and descriptions that accompany photographs give these visual representations most of their meaning. In turn, we assume that pictures give credibility to the stories they accompany. Yet through this relationship, the truth is open to manipulation. Imagine, for example, a photograph of a building that has been destroyed in an explosion. On its own, the photograph carries little meaning; it simply reveals that a building, somewhere, has been destroyed by someone for some reason. Now imagine that the photograph is accompanied by a caption telling

you that the building was an elementary school, and that the school was bombed by enemy forces in an attempt to scare locals into submission. This caption makes sense of the image, and it implicitly encourages you to side with the locals. Now imagine that the photograph is accompanied by a caption declaring that the building was an abandoned warehouse, and that members of the local community destroyed it in order to frame their enemies for an attack. This caption also makes sense of the image, but it offers a very different explanation. Which caption describes what really happened? Without access to additional information, it is impossible to be sure.

Whenever we are faced with a representation of reality, we must remember that someone *created* that representation. People write stories and take pictures, and people always leave their mark on their creations, even if only subtly. Whether or not they intend to have an impact, creators always have the power to influence the minds of those who encounter their creations. In addition, we must be aware that in reading or viewing a representation, we are making our own interpretations. Thus, the information contained within a representation of any human experience—including, but not limited to, war—passes through three cultural filters: that of the culture of the people being represented, that of the culture of the photographer, and that of the culture of the reader or observer. Each filter adds a perspective that is based on certain beliefs, interests, and experiences.

Now take a moment to reflect. What stories and images of war flood your view of today? More importantly, what concepts can you rely on to inform how you interpret those representations? Anthropologist R. Brian Ferguson (2008) suggests 10 points that can help us interpret modern wars in a meaningful way:

1. “Our species is not biologically destined for war.”
2. “War is not an inescapable part of social existence.”
3. “Understanding war involves a nested hierarchy of constraints.”
4. “War expresses both pan-human practicalities and culturally specific values.”
5. “War shapes society to its own ends.”
6. “War exists in multiple contexts.”
7. “Opponents are constructed in conflict.”
8. “War is a continuation of domestic politics by other means.”
9. “Leaders favour war because war favours leaders.”
10. “Peace is more than the absence of war.”

These points give us an alternative way of understanding the large-scale violent conflicts often simplified by the news media as unavoidable and unresolvable. Peace is created—it does not just happen. It is hard to achieve and hard to keep. And it begins with each of us working toward building an open and inclusive society in which all members respect and value one another.