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<b>Serial No.</b>	
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<b>Title</b>	Power: Its Concept
<b>Keywords</b>	
<b>Description</b>	Power: Its Concept
<b>Category</b>	Social Sciences
<b>Publisher</b>	Anampoly Printing and Publishing Company
<b>Publication Date</b>	
<b>Signature</b>	

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

### POWER: ITS CONCEPT

by O.A.C Anigbo

Power as a word appears so simple and common and indeed very suggestive of general understanding. But in fact, power is extremely complex when analyzed. It is this apparent commonness and simplicity that often-times led so many scholars and thinkers to give it applications which are either misleading or confusing. For power even though it has the connotation of force shades off into so many meanings.

One can broadly distinguish two kinds of power — power as used in the sciences and power as used in the Arts and Social Sciences. In the sciences (World Book Encyclopaedia, Vol. 13), power measures outputs or the amount of work done. This is much more precise than the use of power in the Arts and Social Sciences.

Right from the time of Plato and Aristotle, various attempts have been made to give the term power some precise definition. For Plato (American Peoples Encyclopaedia, Vol. 5), power rests on objectification. According to him:

Anything which possesses any sort of power to affect another, or to be affected by another if only for a single moment, however trifling the cause and however slight the effect, has real existence and I hold that the definition of being is simply power.

North Whitehead (American Peoples Encyclopaedia, Vol. 5) made an enriching contribution which explains power sociologically. For him power is the way "in which any organism objectifies its environment during its process of becoming".

Some theorists on political power equate might with right. Hegel, for example, maintains that the State has absolute power. This lacks clarity. If for him, the State has the monopoly of force, then, that would be so obvious. But if his claim means that the State is right in all its transactions, then, that would be State Absolutism which makes a God of the State and which is wrong from all empirical perceptions.

Karl Marx wrote on the economic aspect of power and asserted that the domination of man by man is secured by those who have the means of production. Communists would uphold this view. But it should be noted that whether in capitalism or communism, there are always some men who control the means of production; "those who controlled the economic institutions of the

nation controlled the nation itself." (American Peoples Encyclopaedia, Vol. 5).

Morgenthau (1973) refers to political power as the mutual relations of control among the holders of public authority and between the latter and the people at large. All these references to power do not really discuss sociological implication of power. But for sociological explanation to be adequate and complete it must harmonize the physical, psychological, political and economic explanations of power under its own umbrella. This makes it the least tangible and most complex aspect of power as a general concept. American sociologists have approached the study of power from three dimensions. In the first approach the institutionalists maintain that national institutions acquire power to shape the individuals. The other approach is the other way round. It is the individuals within a nation that mould the institutions. The third approach appreciates the truths in the former positions and summarizes its stand thus (American Peoples Encyclopaedia, Vol. 15):

The source of social power is the social structure itself but the expression of that power reflects the dynamics of the elite group.

Perhaps it is the difficulties arising from power as a concept that pushed some authors to discuss it without proffering a definition. Lenski (1969), for example, discusses the dynamics of power without attempting a definition. His assumption that everyone knows what power is could be misleading and at the same time detrimental to sociological insight.

Mill's (1956) definition of power, even though confusing, is nevertheless fruitful. He defines the powerful as those "who are able to realize their will even if others resist it, Bell (1958) criticizes Mill's view of power and rejects his claim that power rests on domination:

But we do not need an elaborate discussion to see that this view of power avoids more problems than it answers — particularly once one moves away from the outer boundary of power as violence to institutionalized power, with which Mill is concerned. For, in society, particularly constitutional regimes and within associations, where violence is not the rule, we are in the realm of norms, values, traditions, legitimacy, consensus, leadership and identification — all the modes and mechanisms of command and authority, their acceptance or denial, which shape action in the day-to-day world without violence.

The power with which we are concerned is not violence nor physical force nor even sheer domination. We are concerned with power as a shared bilateral responsive human relationship. As such it concerns the distribution and response to power in human societies.

If the state means the totality of its members and the summation of their authorities, the state can then be said to have absolute power. But everyday experience shows us that individuals within a state occupy some positions of power and this is what we mean by authority. Authority is then a delegated power to accomplish a given business. It is the failure to distinguish between power and authority that has generated most of the confusions in the sociological appraisals of power.

Institutionalized power is the property of the nation or the body politic. Presidents or military men are simply actors on the nation's stage. To be regarded as good, their aspirations and their sentiments must harmonize with the cultural milieu of the people who put them in power. It is the nation therefore that owns power and distributes it through the various institutions.

Gawin (1958) has this to say about various organs of government of the American peoples:

With the establishment of the Department of Defense in 1947, an additional layer of civilian management was placed above the services. Furthermore by the law, military officers were forbidden to hold executive positions in the Department of Defense. As a result the assistant secretaries of Defense relied heavily on hundreds of civil service employees, who probably have more impact on decision making in the Department of Defense than any other group of individuals, military or civilian.

In a democratic state and in point of fact, in most states, the assertion that no man is an island holds true even in the sphere of decision making. To fight like a rhino is not a good quality for men in power. The society must be taken into consideration before decisions are taken. These factors circumvent the men in power and make authority and power even more distributive. Bell (1958) writes:

Rovere points to the few persons other than the president involved in these decisions on the atom bomb, Stimson, Churchill, and a few physicists, on Kosca, a small group of men like Acheson and Bradley, whose counsel was divided, on Quemoy and Mutsu, specifically by Eisenhower; and on Dienbienphu, the military and the cabinet, and in this instance, the power elite narrowly defined were for intervention, while Eisenhower along decided against principally says Rovere because of Public Opinion.

Responsible people, even men of power, must bend the knee to public opinion. I will hasten to add that where we find public opinion expressed, there we are likely to locate various sources of power.

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