Summary

Power is a complex topic that is viewed in entirely different ways by different writers. Power can be seen as a property of agents, with some agents having more power than others. It can also be seen as a property of social systems, where structures hold power. It can also be seen in terms of specific actions by people to coerce or dominate, or it can be regarded as a subliminal force that leads people to think and behave in one way rather than another. It can be analyzed descriptively to try to explain how it is distributed, and critically to argue for changing structures to provide a more egalitarian and fairer distribution.

Power studies flourished in the great community power studies of the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these works suggested that democratic nations were controlled by powerful elites who ruled in their own interests; some that power was more widely distributed and elites could not simply rule for themselves; others that in capitalist societies, despite some counterexamples, elites generally ruled in favor of developers and capitalists. Later studies examined how people’s interests are defined in terms of the structural positions in which they find themselves, and how the very ways in which we think and express ourselves affect our individual powers.

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