

Cultural Studies Theorists on Power, Psyche and Society

Cultural Studies Theorists on Power, Psyche and Society:

The Political Animal

By

Arthur Asa Berger

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-8968-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8968-1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to my production editor, Sophie Edminson, and the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their efforts on my behalf in publishing this book. I also appreciate the scholars and authors, many named in the Takeaway below, whose books and articles I used in writing this book. I like to use quotations so my readers can see what the authors from whom I quote had to say and how they expressed themselves. Several of the discussions in this book draw upon enhanced and revised previously published material. I've also used many of my drawings and some photographs to give the book more visual appeal.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS BOOK

This book offers brief quotations from key texts written by some of the most important thinkers who have concerned themselves with politics, in the broadest sense of the term. You will not only have learned about their ideas, but also been able to see how they expressed themselves. Here are some of the most important takeaways:

1.

The unusual format of the book, based on a novel by Machado de Assis, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, and a book by Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. I have changed the format slightly and organized the discussions into groups of related topics.

2.

The ideas of Valeri Modebadze, a professor at Georgian Technical University in Tbilisi, Georgia, about reconsidering the term “politics” which suggests that it not be confined to governmental matters but involves all human relationships in which there are power differentials. Power is thus understood to be involved in many more areas of our life than those involving laws, regulations, and rules.

3.

Aristotle’s thoughts about politics. He wrote that “man is by nature a political animal.” Some of the more important human relationships involving politics in many aspects of our lives are listed in a chart, which starts with babies and their relationships with their mothers.

Psychoanalytic Theory

4.

French thinker Michel de Certeau’s ideas about how the weak find ways to deal with the strong and “lend a political dimension to everyday practices.” He was a thinker who wrote a great deal about power differentials found in people’s everyday lives.

5.

The theories of the French philosopher Michel Foucault about the codes that shape culture and about his ideas about power being ubiquitous and being part of all human interactions. Foucault is one of the most important and influential thinkers of recent years and the author of many books, such as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*.

6.

The battle in our minds between the id, ego, and superego elements of our psyches. I quote Freud on the id to offer an example of the strength of these three elements of the psyche. If the ego cannot control both the id and superego, people end up disturbed or with serious mental problems.

7.

The work of an important psychoanalytic theorist, Joan Riviere, who has interesting things to say about the trauma babies have when breastfeeding and about greed and our desire for things as proof that we are worthy of love. Her essay is part of a book, *Love, Hate and Reparation* that has a second essay by Melanie Klein.

8.

Melanie Klein is a controversial psychoanalytic theorist who discusses the experiences babies have when breastfeeding and other topics and argues that people often continually go through the cycle of loving, hating, and making reparations.

9.

The theories of an English anthropologist, Geoffrey Gorer, who wrote from a psychoanalytic perspective and analyzed the way Russians raised their babies in his book *The People of Great Russia: A Psychological Study*. Gorer argued that the use by Greater Russians of swaddling for babies led to them being extreme in terms of their attitudes towards gratifications. As an example, I offer material on the remarkable way Russians relate to vodka from a book by Hedrick Smith, *The Russians*.

10.

The theories of another psychoanalyst, Clotaire Rapaille, on what he calls *The Culture Code*, which explains how children from the age of one to seven become “imprinted” by the codes of their culture and this imprinting stays with them throughout their lives. Rapaille shows how people from various

countries differ from one another in terms of the codes that shape their cultures.

11.

A study by an important psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, which considers the difficulties adolescents face as they grow up. He discusses this topic in his book, *Childhood and Society*. Erikson argues that people all have to confront eight developmental crises, such as initiative and guilt in childhood, and positively resolve them all if they are to avoid psychological problems.

12.

The analysis by Ernest Jones, an English psychoanalyst, who deals in his book, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, with the problems Hamlet had in revenging the murder of his father. What is interesting about the book is that he discusses many psychoanalytic interpretations of Hamlet's character, all of which differ in explaining Hamlet's behavior.

13.

Otto Rank's *The Double*, which considers an enigmatic aspect of culture: our fascination with doubles in literature and the arts. Rank suggested that the root of "doubles" was narcissism and the story of Narcissus, whose erotic fascination with his image reflected in a stream (in effect a double) led to his death.

14.

The ideas of Valerie Young whose theories about impostors are psychological, and which focus on feelings some people have that they are "frauds." She argues people must switch from feeling they are impostors to having "impostor moments" and moving beyond that identity. She discusses how some people's misconceptions about themselves affect their behavior.

15.

The theories of Sigmund Freud and his hypothesis about the three levels of the psyche: consciousness, the subconscious, and the unconscious. Freud believed we cannot know the contents of the unconscious, but must recognize that it affects much of our thinking and behavior. Freud was one of the most important psychologists and influenced many generations of psychologists and psychoanalysts.

16.

Erich Fromm writes about narcissism in his book, *The Greatness and Limitations of Freud's Thought* and suggests that narcissism, if not excessive, has a survival value. Fromm has a theory about what he calls "social character" which is found in groups and different nations. This social character shapes much of our behavior and makes people "act as they have to act." This suggests that social character is, in subtle ways, coercive.

17.

Judith Butler, the author of a celebrated work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender is best understood to be a performance, and the binary distinction, male or female, is too limited. Gender, she argues, is not biologically "fixed" but is socially constructed. This idea is now widely accepted by gender scholars.

18.

The comedic discussion of ErosGOPanalia is based on Freud's essay on "Character and Anal Eroticism," which argues that anal erotics are orderly, parsimonious, and obstinate. The essay applies this notion, satirically, to the GOP (Grand Old Party) also known as the Republican Party.

Anthropological Theory/American Culture

19.

Many of our ideas about the nature and behavior of crowds are found in the work of the French thinker, Gustave Le Bon, whose book, *The Crowd*, is considered a classic work in social psychology. Le Bon points out that people in crowds act differently from the way they behave as individuals. I used his theory to help explain the riot at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

20.

John Rickman is another psychoanalytic theorist who collaborated with anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer on their book, *The People of Great Russia*, on Russian national character. Rickman argues that culture shapes personalities and personality disorders, focusing on how Russians alternate between being very submissive but also, at other times, subject to violent outbursts.

21.

Alexis de Tocqueville was interested in national character and argues in his book, *Democracy in America*, that the central value in America, equality,

shapes other traits in America and American public opinion. It is behind American individualism, a term he coined. Ultimately, individualism, he cautioned, leads to separation and alienation and a radical disconnect from society with very negative consequences for everyone.

22.

Frederick Jackson Turner, one of the most important American historians, argued that it was the frontier that shaped a distinctive American character and weaned Americans from their attachments to European culture. He believed that democracy, individualism, and nationalism were shaped by our frontier experience, which ended in 1780.

23.

The role of the Puritans in shaping American character and culture was examined by Vernon Louis Parrington, who dealt with them in his book, *Main Currents in American Thought*. Parrington was particularly interested in Cotton Mather, an important Puritan who seems to have been extremely neurotic but whose ideas have been very influential.

24.

We consider the role of John Calvin (1509-1564) in shaping Puritan thinking and American culture. Calvin wrested with the theory of predestination and how it related to free will and argued that while man could act as he pleased, he could not please as he pleased and that it was God who determined what pleased people.

25.

Max Weber was one of the most important sociological theorists of recent years and wrote a book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which suggested there was a link between the core beliefs of Protestantism and the development of capitalism. He also discussed American society, where he suggests that pursuing wealth had reached its highest level of development.

26

The thinking of W. Lloyd Warner, a sociologist, who explained that there were six social classes in America: the upper-upper, lower-upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-lower and lower-lower. His breakdown still is fairly accurate. The “common” person in America comes from the upper-lower and lower-middle classes. One of the most important problems

American society faces involves social classes and the gross distortion of wealth in America and the problems that inequality brings.

27.

The role of McDonald's hamburgers and fast-food restaurants is a subject of considerable interest to social scientists. The discussion in this book involves suggestions of what McDonald's reflects about American culture and society and includes part of an essay, written by the author in 1964, that argues that McDonald's is in many respects like an evangelical religion.

28.

The discussion of the Super Bowl deals with the concept "super" and with the role of spectacles in capitalist countries and offers sociological and psychoanalytic discussions of the role of sports and football in American society and its role as an agent of pop cultural imperialism.

29.

The power of myth in shaping much of our behavior, even though we are not aware of myth's role. I offer a "myth model," which shows how given myths can be found in historical experience, psychoanalytic theory, elite culture, popular culture, and everyday life. As an example, the myth model is applied to the story (myth) of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

30.

Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian media theorist, wrote an important book, *Understanding Media*, in which he discussed the differences between electronic and print media and what he called "hot" and "cool" media. These differences, which are to be considered apart from the contents of media, play an important role in shaping people's perceptions and consciousness.

Marxist/ Social Scientific

31.

A British Marxist communications scholar, Raymond Williams, discussed the role of ideology in the media and also popularized and explained Antonio Gramsci's theories about hegemony and domination. Because hegemony is all-pervasive, people do not realize they have been indoctrinated with belief systems advantageous to the ruling classes in capitalist societies.

32.

The discussion of socio-economic classes in Britain, based on a survey by the British Broadcasting System, reveals not six classes, as found in W. Lloyd Warner's typology, but seven, described as Elites (6%), Established Middle Class (25%), Technical Middle Class (6%), New Affluent Workers (15%), Emergent Service Workers (19%), Traditional Working Class (14%), and Precariat or most deprived (15%).

33.

Guy Debord wrote a book, *Society of the Spectacle*, which argues that in capitalist or bourgeois societies, people prefer images to reality and that lived reality has been replaced by spectacles. He defines spectacles as social relations among people dominated by mediated images.

34.

Postmodernism is the subject of considerable debate among culture theorists: how do we define it, what impact has it had on America and other countries, and does it still exist, or have we moved beyond it to post-postmodernism? Jean-François Lyotard wrote a book, *The Postmodern Condition*, which defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards meta-narratives." What this means and how postmodernism has affected society and social relations continues to be an enigmatic matter.

35

One of the more important theorists of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, has argued that "reality itself is hyperrealist" or that reality has been replaced by hyperreality. Thus, for example, Disneyland is real and America, Baudrillard argues, is hyperreal. As he explained, "America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality."

36.

Harold Garfinkel was a sociologist interested in what people do in everyday life and the rules that govern our activities. He developed a form of sociology called ethnomethodology that investigated familiar scenes in everyday life and how they are related to social organization. He is famous for thinking up remarkable experiments to shed light on the meaning of events in everyday life for people.

37.

The British social anthropologist, Mary Douglas, developed what she called Grid-Group theory, which focused on the strength or weakness of

boundaries around groups and the number of rules to which they are subjected. She argued that Grid-Group theory led to our recognizing four “lifestyles” that played an enormous role in people’s lives—even though members of a lifestyle might not recognize that they belonged to one. Her theory suggests that many of our preferences are shaped by the lifestyles to which we belong.

Semiotic Theory

38.

Yuri Lotman, a Russian semiotician, wrote many books on the semiotics of culture and on the arts, including one on cinema. He explained that everything in a work of art is important and that works of art are extremely concentrated. They contain an enormous amount of information in a small text, which transmits different information to readers based on their ability to comprehend the text. He founded a school of semiotics that focused on using semiotics to understand culture.

39.

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian semiotician who argued that works of art always have connections to previous works of art, what semioticians call intertextuality. Sometimes the connection is overt, as in the “1984” Macintosh commercial and George Orwell’s *1984*, and sometimes it is not recognized by the artists who create texts. Bakhtin was also interested in humor and the role of laughter in societies and politics. He saw laughter as a “liberating” force.

40.

The French Marxist semiotician Roland Barthes was interested in ideologies hidden in mass culture and everyday experiences and wrote an influential book, *Mythologies*, about masked ideologies in everyday life in French culture. He wrote many books on different aspects of semiotics, including a semiotic study of Japanese culture titled *Empire of Signs*. In that book, he wrote about Japanese chopsticks, Japanese food, bowing, and other aspects of Japanese culture and everyday life.

41.

Umberto Eco was an Italian semiotician who also wrote some very popular novels, one of which, *The Name of the Rose*, was made into a film. He wrote books on semiotic theory and the application of semiotics to literature and popular culture. His book, *A Theory of Semiotics*, is considered a classic.

He explained that signs can be used to lie and explained that if signs cannot be used to lie, they cannot be used at all.

42.

A British semiotician, Daniel Chandler, wrote one of the most important explanations of semiotic theory, *Semiotics: the Basics*, which also functions as a leading textbook on the subject. It has the virtue, also, of being both comprehensive and being highly readable. Chandler writes about the importance of codes and explains that we need to know codes in order to make sense of signs.

43.

Ernest Dichter was an important marketing consultant. While not, technically speaking, a semiotician, his interest in the significance of the objects we purchase, in what social scientists call material culture, is semiotic in nature. Our objects, he explains, reflect our image of ourselves and hidden aspects of our personalities. He deals with these topics and many others in his book, *The Strategy of Desire*.

INTRODUCTION



Figure 0.1.
Machado de Assis.

This book deals with how power manifests itself in every aspect of our lives, from birth to death. The format is unusual, with all the numbered discussions of any size, from a few paragraphs to a couple of pages. The format was inspired by a novel by Machado de Assis, author of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, a classic of Brazilian literature. This design was also used in a book, *The Society of The Spectacle* by Guy Debord. Like Debord's book, I will use many illustrations and images of one kind or another. I will also reprint quoted material from the various writers and theorists I use in **boldface type** to make it easier for readers to distinguish between my writings and quotations.

The focus is upon the ideas of seminal thinkers and theorists on power as it manifests itself in countless areas of society and culture, from aspects of everyday life to political parties. In recent years, everything has become politicized—wearing face masks, getting vaccines, verdicts in trials, deciding on styles of clothes, and so on. We live in an age of hyper-politicization in which every aspect of our lives, now more than ever before,

so it seems, is tied to our political preferences and to overt or covert power relationships in which we are involved.

An article by Valeri Modebadze, a professor from Georgian University in Tbilisi, Georgia, "*The Term Politics Reconsidered in the Light of Recent Theoretical Developments*," offers some insights into a broader perspective on politics:

But politics is not only confined to a particular sphere, but also takes place in every corner of human existence. According to the sociologists, Dowse & Hughes (1972) politics is about power. They say: politics occurs when there are differentials in power. This suggests that: Any social relationship which involves power differentials is political. Political relationships would extend from parents assigning domestic chores to their children to teachers enforcing discipline in the classroom, from a manager organizing a workforce to a general ordering troop into battle. Power is the ability to make other people do whatever you want, either by threat, sanctions, or through manipulation. Politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. Leftwich argues that politics exists at every level and in every sphere of human societies. Politics is the defining characteristic of all human groups. Politics takes place not only within the institutions of the state, but also occurs in the private sphere of life. Thus, all people are somehow involved in politics. It influences the lives of all of us, whether or not we participate in politics. Politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal.

<https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/54647>

I share this broad understanding of politics, not as something confined to governmental policies, but as an important part of our everyday lives. I begin with Aristotle's famous statement that man is a "political animal." I interpret this to mean that all human relationships are, in the final analysis, when you scratch beneath the surface, political in nature.

But the political involves more than human relationships. We can also consider such matters as:

Ideas people have about raising children,

"Imprinting" children with culture-specific beliefs,

The importance of place,

Belief systems (Postmodernism),

Codes of behavior,

Cultural imperatives,

Certain historical figures (John Calvin),

Historical periods (the Puritans, the Frontier),

Unusual events (January 6, 2020, Supreme Court overturns Roe),

National character,

Important thinkers (Freud, Marx),

Important theories (Psychoanalysis, Semiotics, Marxism).

These, and many other things that exert power over our thinking and behavior, are, I believe, what Aristotle would consider as “political,” and are discussed in this book.

ARISTOTLE



Figure 0.2.
Aristotle.

Aristotle writes in his book on politics:

It is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal, and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless, is either low in the scale of humanity or above it like the “clanless, lawless, hearthless” man reviled by Homer, for one by nature unsocial is also (‘a lover of war’) inasmuch as he is solitary, like an isolated piece at draughts. And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another, but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state.

Thus also the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually. For the whole must necessarily be prior to the part; since when the whole body is destroyed, foot or hand will not exist except in an equivocal sense, like the sense in which one speaks of a hand sculptured in stone as a hand; because a hand in those circumstances will be a hand spoiled, and all things are defined by their function and capacity, so that when they are no longer such as to perform their function they must not be said to be the same things, but to bear their names in an equivocal sense.

This statement by Aristotle, that “man is by nature a political animal,” is one of his most quoted ones and has been used by political scientists in many ways. One of the most well-known uses is found in political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset’s book, *Political Man: the Social Basis of Politics*, published in 1960 and translated into many languages. Lipset taught at Harvard University for many years.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

POLITICS AND POWER

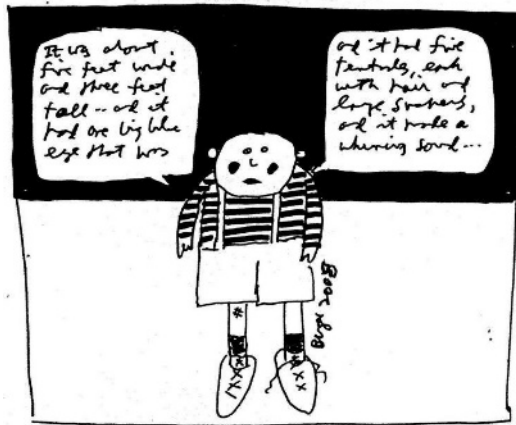


Figure 3.1.
Talking Boy.

If politics involves using power either to achieve one's ends or preventing others from achieving their wishes and desires, we can study this phenomenon in everything from the relationship that exists between babies and their mothers to political parties. In essence, I suggest that just about every aspect of our lives involves political—that is, power—relationships.

Wherever you have two or more people, politics plays a major role, though it may not be clear, in their relationships. Power manifests itself in different ways. Sometimes it is overt, as when a sergeant tells a private to do something, and sometimes it is covert, when, for example, someone persuades someone to do something. The nagging power of children (known as “pester power”) who want their parents to purchase a toy or something else is an example of power being exercised by the weak, financially speaking, over the strong.