16. Power and Domination

A. "Power" (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.

B. "Domination" (Herrschaft) is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons. "Discipline" is the probability that by virtue of habituation a command will receive prompt and automatic obedience in stereotyped forms, on the part of a given group of persons. 77

1. The concept of power is sociologically amorphous. All conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances may put him in a position to impose his will in a given situation. The sociological concept of domination must hence be more precise and can only mean the probability that a command will be obeyed.

2. The concept of discipline includes the habituation characteristic of uncritical and unresisting mass obedience.

C. The existence of domination turns only on the actual presence of one person successfully issuing orders to others; it does not necessarily imply either the existence of an administrative staff or, for that matter, of an organization. It is, however, uncommon to find it unrelated to at least one of these. A "ruling organization" (Herrschaftsverband) exists insofar as its members are subject to domination by virtue of the established order.
17. Political and Hierocratic Organizations

A "ruling organization" will be called "political" insofar as its existence and order is continuously safeguarded within a given territorial area by the threat and application of physical force on the part of the administrative staff. A compulsory political organization with continuous operations (politischer Anstaltsbetrieb) will be called a "state" insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order. Social action, especially organized action, will be spoken of as "politically oriented" if it aims at exerting influence on the government of a political organization; especially at the appropriation, expropriation, redistribution or allocation of the powers of government.

A "hierocratic organization" is an organization which enforces order through psychic coercion by distributing or denying religious benefits (hierocratic coercion). A compulsory hierocratic organization will be called a "church" insofar as its administrative staff claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of hierocratic coercion.

1. It goes without saying that the use of physical force (Gewaltanwendung) is neither the sole, nor even the most usual, method of administration of political organizations. On the contrary, their heads have employed all conceivable means to bring about their ends. But, at the same time, the threat of force, and in the case of need its actual use, is the method which is specific to political organizations and is always the last resort when others have failed. Conversely, physical force is by no means limited to political groups even as a legitimate method of enforcement. It has been freely used by kinship groups, household groups, consociations and, in the Middle Ages, under certain circumstances by all those entitled to bear arms. In addition to the fact that it uses, among other
means, physical force to enforce its system of order, the political organization is further characterized by the fact that the authority of its administrative staff is claimed as binding within a territorial area and this claim is upheld by force. Whenever organizations which make use of force are also characterized by the claim to territorial jurisdiction, such as village communities or even some household groups, federations of guilds or of workers' associations ("soviets"), they are by definition to that extent political organizations.

2. It is not possible to define a political organization, including the state, in terms of the end to which its action is devoted. All the way from provision for subsistence to the patronage of art, there is no conceivable end which some political association has not at some time pursued. And from the protection of personal security to the administration of justice, there is none which all have recognized. Thus it is possible to define the "political" character of an organization only in terms of the means peculiar to it, the use of force. This means is, however, in the above sense specific, and is indispensable to its character. It is even, under certain circumstances, elevated into an end in itself.

This usage does not exactly conform to everyday speech. But the latter is too inconsistent to be used for technical purposes. We speak of the foreign currency policy of a central bank, the financial policy of an association, or the educational policy of a local authority, and mean the systematic treatment and conduct of particular affairs. It comes considerably closer to the present meaning when we distinguish the "political" aspect or implication of a question. Thus there is the "political" official, the "political" newspaper, the "political" revolution, the "political" club, the "political" party, and the "political" consequences of an action, as distinguished from others such as the economic, cultural, or religious aspect of the persons, affairs or processes in question. In this usage we generally mean by "political," things that have to do with relations of authority within what is, in the present terminology, a political organization, the state. The reference is to things which are likely, to uphold, to change or overthrow, to hinder or promote, these authority relations as distinguished from persons, things, and processes which have nothing to do with it. This usage thus seeks to bring out the common features of domination, the way it is exercised by the state, irrespective of the ends involved. Hence it is legitimate to claim that the definition put forward here is only a more precise formulation of what is meant in everyday usage in that it gives sharp emphasis to what is most characteristic of this means: the actual or threatened use of force. It is, of course, true that everyday usage applies the term "political," not only to groups which are the direct agents of the legitimate use of force itself, but also to other, often wholly peaceful groups, which attempt to influence the activities of the political organization. It seems best for present purposes to distinguish this type of social action, "politically oriented" action, from political action as such, the actual organized action of political groups.
3. Since the concept of the state has only in modern times reached its full development, it is best to define it in terms appropriate to the modern type of state, but at the same time, in terms which abstract from the values of the present day, since these are particularly subject to change. The primary formal characteristics of the modern state are as follows: it possesses an administrative and legal order subject to change by legislation, to which the organized activities of the administrative staff, which are also controlled by regulations, are oriented. This system of order claims binding authority, not only over the members of the state, the citizens, most of whom have obtained membership by birth, but also to a very large extent over all action taking place in the area of its jurisdiction. It is thus a compulsory organization with a territorial basis. Furthermore, today, the use of force is regarded as legitimate only so far as it is either permitted by the state or prescribed by it. Thus the right of a father to discipline his children is recognized—a survival of the former independent authority of the head of a household, which in the right to use force has sometimes extended to a power of life and death over children and slaves. The claim of the modern state to monopolize the use of force is as essential to it as its character of compulsory jurisdiction and of continuous operation.

In formulating the concept of a hierocratic organization, it is not possible to use the character of the religious beliefs it offers, whether worldly or other-worldly, material or spiritual, as the decisive criterion. What is important is rather the fact that its control over these values can form the basis of a system of spiritual domination over human beings. What is most characteristic of the church, even in the common usage of the term, is the fact that it is a national compulsory association with continuous operation and that it claims a monopolistic authority. It is normal for a church to try to establish itself on a territorial basis and to attempt to set up the corresponding territorial or sacerdotal organization. So far as this takes place, the means by which this claim to monopoly is upheld will vary from case to case. But historically, its control over territorial areas has not been strictly necessary to the church as to political associations, and this is particularly true today. It is its character as a compulsory association, particularly the fact that one becomes a member of the church by birth, which distinguishes the church from a "sect." It is characteristic of the latter that it is a voluntary association and admits only persons with specific religious qualifications. (This subject will be further discussed in the Sociology of Religion.)

NOTES

Unless otherwise noted, all notes in this chapter are by Talcott Parsons. For Parsons' exposition and critique of Weber's methodology, see his introduction to The Theory of Social and Economic Organization and his Structure of Social Action.