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The concept of power acquires different meanings according to the dimension, the historical cut and the circumstances that are being analyzed. Power has been characterized as the base of state domination over civil society and individuals. However, the concept of power cannot be reduced to a univocal sense, because it also occurs in interpersonal relationships and social micro-structures. This article reviews the literature on the subject from the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Arendt, Foucault, Bobbio and Bauman, highlighting the various configurations and manifestations of power, mitigating its centralization at the state instance and extending to other dimensions of society.

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Abstract

The concept of power acquires different meanings according to the dimension, the historical cut and the circumstances that are being analyzed. Power has been characterized as the base of state domination over civil society and individuals. However, the concept of power cannot be reduced to a univocal sense, because it also occurs in interpersonal relationships and social micro-structures. This article reviews the literature on the subject from the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Arendt, Foucault, Bobbio and Bauman, highlighting the various configurations and manifestations of power, mitigating its centralization at the state instance and extending to other dimensions of society.

Keywords: Civil society. Modernity. Politics. Power. State.

1. Introduction

This article discusses the configurations that the concept of power acquires in various circumstances, be they economic, social or political. Throughout the history of humanity, power has been predominantly characterized as the mainstay of state domination over civil society. The power structurally instituted by the state determined social and political organization, the limitation or not of the exercise of citizenship, and the domination of the state or the ruling classes over subaltern social groups to the detriment of the construction of the common welfare.

In other words, this work addresses the polysemy character that the concept of power assumes in different contexts. Considering that until the end of the eighteenth century power was normally understood as a condition of the institutionalization of the state in its domain over civil society, in modernity, in turn, the social, political and economic conjuncture, and consequently the concept of power have acquired new configurations, according to which the exercise of the forms of power mitigated its centralization in the state scope extending to other dimensions of the society. The individual, especially from modernity, becomes increasingly important in defining the guidelines that shape civil society and the State.

2. Methodology

The methodology used in this work is the bibliographic review. In this way, a comparison is made between selected authors in order to verify the variations of the concept of power in their works. According to Lakatos and Marconi (2003), the bibliographic research or secondary sources covers the bibliography made public in relation to the studied subject. The purpose of this method is to put the researcher in direct contact with what was written on a certain subject.

3. Results and discussions

Machiavelli (1469-1527), considered in the Western philosophical tradition the forerunner of modern politics, considers that politics is an autonomous science, because in the bosom of its actions it lacks

external elements that guide the criterion of choice. Politics would not necessarily correspond to the exercise of the common good, but to the exercise of power. This realism, in the light of the work "The Prince", implies that, often when doing politics, the ethical character of actions is dispensed (MAQUIAVEL, 2010).

Political virtue, in this way, must, first of all, serve objectively for the maintenance of power. The virtuous prince is the one who acts according to the circumstances, independently of established a priori ethical values. The convenience of being evil, if necessary, to maintain state sovereignty and the preservation of social order and peace is a useful criterion for the stability of government. According to Machiavelli (2010: 36): "Thus it is necessary for a Prince to maintain himself, to learn to be evil and to value himself or to make use of it according to necessity." The philosopher warns that only the political virtue of circumstantial action is what allows a ruler his preservation and perpetuation in power. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), on the other hand, in speculating on man in the "state of nature," conceives him as individualistic, selfish, and violent. His famous statement "man is man's own wolf" reflects the characterization of an amoral human in the circumstances of his interpersonal relations. Hobbes (1999), addressing human nature in his "Leviathan", discusses the form of political and social organization that seeks to defend man from his own beast, preventing him from self-destruction.

The social pact, for the philosopher, presupposes that each one of us renounces the natural condition of freedom and transfers the power to govern to a "single man" or an "assembly of men." This political body formed from a contract is the "sovereign power", to which the subjects (population) transfer all their rights, thus guaranteeing a safe coexistence. In this sense, the power of the State can be exercised by force, in the interests of the subjects, for the maintenance of order and peace:

He who is the bearer of this person calls himself sovereign, and is said to have sovereign power. All the rest are subjects. This sovereign power can be acquired in two ways. One is the natural force ... The other is when men agree among themselves to submit themselves to a man, or to a congregation of men, voluntarily, hoping to be protected by him against all others. This latter power can be called a Political State, or a State by institution ... Moreover, if he who tries to depose his sovereign is killed or is punished for that attempt, he will be the author of his own punishment, given that by institution he is the author of everything his sovereign does ... since the end of the institution is peace and the defense of all (HOBBS, 1999: 147-148).

Hobbes's (1999) political thought can justify, if applied with this intention, the establishment of an absolute State, since sovereign power is centralized and exercised by the State, and it is illegitimate in that sense to attempt against it. The State may use all means necessary for the maintenance of order and peace. The power in this state may be total.

The foregoing considerations demonstrate the variations of the concept of power throughout the Renaissance and modernity in the works of Machiavelli and Hobbes. It is worthwhile to present the ideas on power presented during the twentieth century by Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and Norberto Bobbio (1904-2004), and in the new millennium by Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017).

The word "power" is defined by Arendt (1906-1975) as the human ability not to act alone but to act with other individuals. Thus understood, power will never be owned by anyone, since one of the presuppositions of its existence is precisely that it belongs to a group that is united. For the author, when one asserts that someone is "in power", what is being referred to is the fact that someone has been empowered by a certain number of people to act on their behalf. There is no power, therefore, without people or a group.

Arendt (2012), when analyzing the legitimacy of the discourse of power in the face of the oppression that subjugates certain social groups, considers that the acceptance of power is only possible if inserted in the political scope. The utility of power in this sense is only legitimate when socially recognized by peers in society. The oppression resulting from this logic entails a kind of social order that can be accepted on a daily basis. However, in spite of eventually not oppressing, the wealth and power that corresponds to it, when not politically recognized, are fatally considered to be usurpers and lacking in legitimacy. According to the philosopher:

What makes men obey or tolerate power and, on the other hand, hate those who dispose of wealth without power is the idea that power has a certain function and a general utility. Even exploitation and oppression can lead society to work and to establish some kind of order. Only the wealth without the power or aloof detachment from the group that, while powerful, does not engage in political activity is considered parasitic and revolting (Arendt, 2012: 26-27).

In describing the structuring movement that power exerts on totalitarian regimes, Arendt (2012) notes that the results, from a practical point of view for affected societies, are the use of all instruments of force and state violence; the creation of a fictitious world under rigid observance of norms; the promotion of propaganda used by the regime; and the use of terror as a model of success for his ideology. Thus, according to the philosopher, totalitarianism creates a world of fiction, including the enemies that must be fought:

The struggle for total domination of all the production of the earth, the elimination of all non-totalitarian rival reality, is the tonic of totalitarian regimes; if they do not fight for the global domain as their ultimate goal, they run the serious risk of losing all the power they may have gained. [...] Totalitarianism in power uses the state administration for its long-term goal of world conquest and to direct the movement's subsidiaries; installs the secret police in the position of performer and guardian of the domestic experience of constantly transforming fiction into reality [...] (Arendt, 2012: 531).

Arendt (2012, 2015) thought that the totalitarian system has as its first mission the establishment of a global domain, and therefore, there is no other reality than the fictitious one that is intended to perpetuate, besides the extinction of everything that threatens its power.

Foucault (2000) ends up against the opposite, so to speak, of the idea of power hitherto more widespread, thereby dismantling consecrated conceptual paradigms. Power is usually understood in its relation between force and imposition, which at first emanates chiefly from the figure of the state, which subjects everyone inflexibly. However, this view is not the only way to understand and apply or operate power.

Power, according to Foucault (2000), is diffuse, as a hidden force of relation. Power forms its path from the periphery to the center, from the outermost layers of society to its core. The philosopher understands power not as something that has place and form to happen, but rather as a force that emanates and penetrates

into the narrowest cracks, thus becoming a form of social control. Machado (2000), when introducing the work "Microphysics of power", seeks to synthesize Foucault's thinking in this respect:

What is interesting about the analysis is precisely that the powers are not located at any specific point in the social structure. They function as a network of devices or mechanisms to which nothing or no one escapes, to which there is no possible exterior, boundaries or frontiers [...] Strictly speaking, power does not exist; there are actually practices or relations of power. What it means to say that power is something that is exercised, that is effected, that works. And it functions as a machinery, as a social machine, which is not situated in a privileged or exclusive place, but spreads throughout a social structure (Machado, 2000: XIV).

Foucault (2000) denies the idea, hitherto quite widespread, that it is through negative repression of the state and institutions that power can effectively fulfill the role for which it is intended. His understanding is that power constitutes a network of relations that assume procedural forms for its exercise. The philosopher points out that the institutions use procedural techniques that allow to diffuse the circulation of the effects and the forms to produce the power in the society:

If power were only repressive, if it did nothing other than say no, do you believe it would be obeyed? What makes the power stand and be accepted is simply that it weighs not only as a force that says no, but in fact it permeates, produces things, induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces speech. It must be considered as a productive network that crosses the whole social body much more than a negative instance whose function is to repress. Classical monarchies not only developed great state apparatuses - army, police, local administration - but they instituted what could be called a new "power economy", that is, procedures that allow to circulate the effects of power of form to the same time continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and "individualized" throughout the social body. These new techniques are both much more effective and far less costly [...] (Foucault, 2000: 7-8).

In this way, it is understood that in Foucault (2000) the power does not mean a palpable thing, but a relation constituted by heterogeneous forms of diffusion, being the decentralization of its characteristic. Power, in this sense, is a social practice built historically. Power relations that extend beyond the state are verified in society, although such relations are considered indispensable for efficient state action. Thus, according to the philosopher's thinking, power is microphysical.

Bobbio (2007), on the other hand, points out that power comes in various forms in the economic, political and ideological spheres. Economic power is based on domination through wealth. The politician is based on the use of force to guarantee its legitimacy and the ideological power has in the information and the knowledge the form of dominion and superiority. The economic, ideological and political powers institute and keep the society of dissimilar divided between strong and weak, rich and poor, wise and ignorant. These powers distinguish society between superior and inferior individuals according to their performance. Bauman (2001), finally, in approaching the concept of power in postmodernity, considered that the new times presented other forms of production and relations of power. They shift from state power production to new manifestation mechanisms. The sociologist highlights in this regard:

As for power, it navigates away from market street, assemblies and parliaments, local and national governments, beyond the reach of citizen control, to the extraterritoriality of electronic networks. The favorite strategic principles of the existing powers today are escape, avoidance, and disengagement, and their ideal condition is invisibility (Bauman, 2001: 55).

In the wake of Bauman's (2001) thought, in contrast to what happened in the past, when it was constituted by tradition, from the "solid", embodied in the state, the church and the scientific production, fluid modernity power is ensured by a more powerful and yet imperceptible functionality. For the sociologist, "[...] in the information age, invisibility is equivalent to death" (2008: 21). The technological development of society in late modernity allowed the expansion of communication capacity and the visibility of individuals and their relationships, which was unthinkable not so long ago, but on the other hand, when approaching the distant may have distanced the nearest and making people indifferent to the real problems observed in social life.

4. Final considerations

To conclude, it should be pointed out that for Machiavelli, in the light of "The Prince", political power, by assuming its autonomy of science, is linked to the maintenance of power, which is usually the motive of government. In his speech probably written with the intention of sensitizing and thereby receiving the grace of the Medici family who had taken over the Florence government, the political virtue consists in the good performance of the ruler in exercising and maintaining power regardless of values established a priori.

Hobbes, for his part, understands that the political body, instituted by the social pact, presupposes the transfer of natural rights to the sovereign power of the state, which is responsible for guaranteeing to the subjects the security and the maintenance of order and peace. To the people it is necessary to execute the will of the instituted power, being illegitimate to attempt against him.

Arendt points out, as far as totalitarian power is concerned, that there are no limits to the achievement of its objectives under that system, since State administration is used to create norms and an environment of terror aimed at maintaining the rule global, seeking the elimination of enemies.

In analyzing the phenomenon of power from a microphysical perspective, Foucault understands it not as a thing or an object, but as a social relation, which occurs in all spheres of society, from periphery to center, from micro to macro. Powers that ultimately produce results that impact the social being in its macrostructure.

Bobbio, in analyzing modern society, considers that power is based on three different perspectives: economic power linked to domination through wealth, the political one based on the use of force to guarantee its legitimacy and the ideological power of information and knowledge their form of domination and superiority.

Finally, Bauman argues that postmodern society has produced new forms of power different from traditional ones, and that with the latest technologies, in fluid modernity, power is ensured by a more potent and imperceptible functionality.

In the light of the above, this approach to the concept of power allowed us to understand its polysemy, that is, the variations in its forms of configuration and manifestation. It is inferred, therefore, that power is not

produced and exercised only by the state or institutions, but that it also occurs in interpersonal relationships and social micro-structures.

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