Understanding Politics — Chapter 5 Student Practice Pack

Power, Class and Domination: Reading Marx and Engels

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About this pack and chapter at a glance

This pack helps you work through Chapter 5 of *Understanding Politics* with *The Communist Manifesto* open. Answers and marking guidance are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com.

How to use it. Read Chapter 5 and the whole *Manifesto*, parts I–IV. Read Arendt, *On Violence*, section II, and Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 'On violence' and 'The trials and tribulations of national consciousness'. Complete the worksheet, take the self-test without the book, then plan and write one essay.

Text note. *Manifesto* passages use Samuel Moore's 1888 translation, which is out of copyright and is the translation in the Penguin edition the book cites. Arendt and Fanon are in copyright, so this pack gives references rather than extracts.

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Approach	Where power is found	Evidence it needs
Marx and Engels	Class relations of production	Ownership, dependence, how the state sustains accumulation
Pluralism (Dahl)	Who prevails in observable decisions	Votes, decisions, winners and losers
Elite theory (Mills)	Concentrated leadership across institutions	Networks and overlapping positions
Second face (Bachrach and Baratz)	Keeping issues off the agenda	What was proposed, who blocked it, how
Third dimension (Lukes)	Shaping what people want	How preferences form and alternatives
Arendt	Acting in concert, distinct from violence	Cooperation and its withdrawal
Fanon	The colonial organisation of domination	Racialised hierarchy, force, post-independence elites

Close-reading worksheet

Underline the claim, circle the qualifications, and answer in full sentences.

Passage A: class struggle and the bourgeoisie

> *The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another. (part I)*

> *Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. … All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (part I)*

1. Engels added a note to the 1888 edition restricting ‘all hitherto existing society’. To what, and why does it matter?
2. The pairs listed are not all owners and wage workers. What do they have in common?
3. Is the second passage a criticism or a celebration of capitalism? Find words for each reading.
4. What does ‘sober senses’ suggest about earlier societies?

Passage B: the state and its limits

> *The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie. (part I)*

> *This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. (part I)*

1. Why do the words ‘common’ and ‘whole’ matter in the first sentence?
2. Could a state managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie act against individual capitalists? Give an example.
3. What does the second passage concede about class unity?
4. How do the chapter’s accounts of relative autonomy and structural dependence develop these sentences?

Passage C: ideas and property

> *The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class. (part II)*

> *You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population. (part II)*

1. How does the first sentence connect to Lukes's third dimension of power?
2. What evidence would show that an idea serves a ruling class rather than being widely and freely held?
3. In the second passage, what kind of property do the authors mean? How do they turn the charge against their critics?
4. Does the argument depend on the labour theory of value?

Self-test

Allow 20 minutes and answer without the book.

1. The *Manifesto* opens by claiming that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of:
    - A. Ideas
    - B. Nations
    - C. Religion
    - D. Class struggles
2. Engels's 1888 note restricts that claim to:
    - A. Europe
    - B. Written history
    - C. Capitalist societies
    - D. The industrial age
3. The *Manifesto* calls the executive of the modern state:
    - A. A committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie
    - B. A neutral referee between classes
    - C. The servant of the working class
    - D. An expression of the general will
4. What the bourgeoisie produces above all, according to the *Manifesto*, is:
    - A. Wealth for all
    - B. New nations
    - C. Its own grave-diggers
    - D. Religious revival
5. 'All that is solid melts into air' describes:
    - A. The decline of religion alone

- B. The constant revolutionising of production and social relations
- C. The collapse of the feudal state
- D. Communist revolution

6. The ruling ideas of each age are, according to the *Manifesto*:
   - A. Divinely given
   - B. Scientifically discovered
   - C. Chosen democratically
   - D. The ideas of its ruling class
7. ‘Relative autonomy’ means that the state:
   - A. Can act against particular capitalists while sustaining capitalism
   - B. Is fully independent of economic power
   - C. Is controlled directly by capitalists
   - D. Has no coercive power
8. Dahl’s pluralist approach asks:
   - A. Who owns the means of production
   - B. How preferences are formed
   - C. Who prevails in actual decisions
   - D. Who holds hereditary office
9. Bachrach and Baratz’s ‘second face’ of power concerns:
   - A. Military force
   - B. Keeping issues from reaching decision
   - C. Winning votes
   - D. Economic growth
10. Lukes’s third dimension of power concerns:
    - A. Formal authority
    - B. Electoral competition
    - C. Judicial review
    - D. Shaping people’s wants and preferences
11. Structural power operates through:
    - A. Officials’ anticipation of investors’ reactions
    - B. Explicit bribery
    - C. Military coups
    - D. Constitutional amendment
12. For Arendt, power is:
    - A. The capacity to command obedience by force
    - B. Wealth
    - C. The human ability to act in concert
    - D. Legal authority alone
13. Arendt argues that violence:
    - A. Is the essence of power
    - B. Always creates new institutions
    - C. Is necessary for legitimacy
    - D. Can destroy power but cannot create it

14. Fanon describes the colonial world as:
    - A. Compartmentalised
    - B. Unified by law
    - C. Peaceful
    - D. Democratic
15. Fanon's critique of the national bourgeoisie is that it:
    - A. Is too revolutionary
    - B. Acts as an intermediary rather than transforming the economy
    - C. Rejects nationalism
    - D. Supports peasant power

Short-answer and essay questions

Short answers (100–150 words each)

1. What is class, for Marx and Engels, and how does it differ from an income category?
2. Why does the *Manifesto* both admire and condemn the bourgeoisie?
3. Explain the instrumental and structural accounts of the capitalist state.
4. What is the difference between pluralism and elite theory?
5. Explain nondecision-making with an example.
6. Why is Lukes's third dimension both powerful and risky?
7. How can a voluntary employment contract be exploitative in Marx's sense?
8. Distinguish power from violence in Arendt's account.
9. Why does Fanon think colonial rule cannot be analysed as an ordinary state?
10. What is the danger of elite substitution after independence?

Essay questions

Plan two and write one: 1,500 words, or 45 minutes under exam conditions.

1. Does economic power necessarily produce political power?
2. Can power exist without observable conflict?
3. Is the state in capitalist societies 'a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'?
4. How can an analyst identify manipulated preferences without dismissing people's agency?
5. Can coercion produce obedience without producing power?
6. Why need national independence not complete liberation?

What a first-class answer does

- Reads the *Manifesto*'s state claim precisely ('common', 'whole') and connects it to relative autonomy and structural dependence.
- Specifies the evidence each theory of power requires, rather than declaring one approach correct.

- Handles Lukes's real-interests problem directly, with a test for manipulation that respects agency.
- Keeps Arendt's and Fanon's disagreement about violence in view, separating explanation from justification.

Glossary and further reading

Term	Definition
Class	A position in social relations of production: who owns, who works, who appropriates
Bourgeoisie	The class controlling capital and employing wage labour
Proletariat	Workers who must sell their labour to live
Relative autonomy	The state's capacity to act against particular capitalists while sustaining capitalism
Structural power	Influence through dependence and anticipated reactions, without explicit pressure
Pluralism	Power dispersed among competing groups, observed in decisions
Nondecision-making	Preventing issues from reaching decision (Bachrach and Baratz)
Third dimension	Power that shapes preferences themselves (Lukes)
Power (Arendt)	The human ability to act in concert
Violence (Arendt)	Instrumental force that can destroy power but not create it
National bourgeoisie	Fanon: a post-colonial elite acting as intermediary for external capital

Further reading

- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2002) *The communist manifesto*. Translated by S. Moore. Edited by G. Stedman Jones. London: Penguin Classics.
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power: a radical view*. 2nd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dahl, R.A. (1961) *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1970) *On violence*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Fanon, F. (2021) *The wretched of the earth*. 60th anniversary edn. Translated by R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press.