

A Comparative Study of Max Weber and Foucault's Perspectives on Power: Taking the Film Snowpiercer as a Case

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Abstract: In the academic field, the concept of power has been a subject of extensive research. Scholars have explored its various dimensions, including its sources, manifestations, and effects on social structures and individual lives. Power is often seen as a key factor in shaping social hierarchies and inequalities. Some movies that reflect the realities and social class status quo include *Parasite*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Snowpiercer*. These films offer insights into the struggles and conflicts arising from power imbalances. The purpose of this study is to explore the differences in the authoritative theoretical views of Max Weber and Foucault, and to analyze them using the film "The Snowy Train" as an example. By reviewing relevant literature and interpreting movies, reveal the differences between the two theories in terms of power concepts, social order, and other aspects. The study adopted literature research and case analysis methods to provide new perspectives for a deeper understanding of authoritative theories.

Keywords: *Snowpiercer*, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Power.

1. Introduction

In contemporary social science research, the concept of power holds immense significance in comprehending social structure, interpersonal relationships, and individual behavior. Max Weber and Foucault were two eminent scholars who offered profound insights into the nature and functioning of power. Their theories provide important perspectives for understanding power's dynamics and operations. As society evolves and undergoes changes, the forms and manifestations of power are also continuously transform. In the context of globalization and informatization, the complexity and diversity of power have become more prominent than ever before. Therefore, conducting comparative research on Weber's and Foucault's views on power enables us to gain a better understanding of its role and impact in society.

The objective of this study is to compare these two scholar's perspectives on power using *Snowpiercer* as an illustrative example. The research method involves analyzing relevant works as well as examining the film itself. Specifically, a literature review approach will be employed to systematically sort out and analyze Weber's and Foucault's pertinent works, while employing film analysis techniques to conduct a detailed interpretation of *Snowpiercer*. This analysis aims to explore the intricate web of power relationships within it along with their operational mechanisms.

The research questions encompass identifying similarities and differences between Weber's and Foucault's viewpoints on power, examining how their conceptions are reflected in *Snowpiercer*, as well as elucidating what insights these views offer for our comprehension of social structures depicted in movies along with character destinies. By comparing Weber and Foucault's views on power through the analysis of *Snowpiercer*, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into the complexities of power and its impact on social structures and individual lives.

2. Literature Review

Regarding the concept and theory of power, predecessors and scholars have conducted extensive research. Some of the main viewpoints include: power is the ability to influence the behavior and decisions of others; power can be divided into different types, such as political power, economic power, social power, etc. and the sources of power can be various factors, such as resource control, knowledge, legitimacy, etc.

The previous mainstream research directions for the review of the movie 'Snowpiercer' include: social class and power structure, human nature and morality, symbolic meaning and metaphor and dystopian theme.

The gaps this research can fill, or better answer include: deep comparison of Weber and Foucault's power views in films, offering a new perspective on power relations, analyzing the operational mechanism of power in movies and its impact on individual and group behavior and exploring the connection between the power concept in movies and real society, and its inspiration for social issues.

3. The Different Power Views Reflected in Snowpiercer

3.1. Introduction to the Movie Snowpiercer

Snowpiercer is a post-apocalyptic film set in a world where a failed climate-change experiment has plunged the planet into an ice age. The only survivors are on a train, the Snowpiercer, that circles the globe non-stop. The train is divided into classes, with the wealthy at the front and the poor at the back, enduring harsh conditions. Led by Curtis, the tail-section passengers decide to revolt and move forward through the train, facing various obstacles and confrontations. Along the way, they discover shocking secrets about the train and its creator, Wilford. The film explores themes of class struggle, survival, and the nature of power, as the rebels strive to reach the engine and potentially bring about change.

3.2. Weber's Views in the Movie

3.2.1. Hierarchy and Rules

In *Snowpiercer*, there is a strict hierarchical system on the train; from the rulers at the front of the train to the lower-class people at the back, each person is assigned to a specific carriage and position. This hierarchical system is maintained by the rules formulated by the creator of the train, Wilford, who ensures the operation and order of the train through these rules. "The trains developed by Wilford Industries have achieved a small cycle closed natural ecosystem technology, allowing humans to survive in such cold weather and creating a strict train hierarchy order" [1].

The existence of these rules aims to ensure the operation and order of trains. By formulating and implementing these rules, Wilford ensured the stable maintenance of the social structure on the train. People obey these rules because they believe they are legal, reasonable, and aimed at achieving the overall goal of the train.

3.2.2. Correspondence between Position and Power

In Weber's theory of legal authority, the correspondence between position and power is an important feature. This theory holds that the legitimacy of power comes from established rules and legal systems, and positions are the concrete manifestation of the power granted by these rules and laws.

In *Snowpiercer*, "the few first-class carriages symbolize the few rulers of human society," Wilford serves as the leader of the train, and his position gives him absolute power [1]. This power is considered legitimate because others recognize the authority represented by his position. The staff on the train, such as security, management personnel, handlers, teachers, and chefs, also derive their power from their positions. They carried out Wilford's orders and maintained order on the train because they believed it was their duty and believed that such behavior was in accordance with the rules and laws of train operation.

3.2.3. Rational Management and Control

In Weber's theory, rational management and control are important components. Legal authority emphasizes the management of organizations or society through reasonable rules, systems, and procedures to ensure their efficient operation and stable development.

In the movie, Wilford maintains the operation of the train by formulating strict plans and arrangements, which reflects the importance of rational planning by legal authority. His careful arrangements for food distribution, energy use, and other aspects aim to maximize the use of resources and ensure the survival and operation of trains.

3.2.4. Wilford and the "Sacred Engine"

Traditional authority is usually established based on traditions, customs, and long-standing practices. In the movie, Wilford, the creator of the train, is regarded by some people as a figure with traditional authority to a certain extent. He is depicted as the founder of the train, and his rules and decisions have been followed for a long time on the train.

In this closed space where material determines consciousness, for the upper-class people who enjoy a superior material life, the implementation of "brainwashing and education" is unimpeded. Even adults with sufficient rational thinking seem to maintain absolute loyalty to the "Sacred Engine" [2].

3.2.5. Curtis' Leadership Charm

The main character Curtis demonstrates strong leadership charm while leading the people at the rear of the car to resist. His courage, determination, and wisdom attracted the following of others, who believed he could lead them to change the status quo. This trust and following towards Curtis can be seen as a manifestation of charismatic authority.

3.3. Foucault's View in the Movie

3.3.1. Discipline

Train space isolation and allocation: In the movie, people live in different sections of the train; the train is divided into different carriages, each representing a different social class. The people in the last carriage live in crowded and dirty environments, while those in the front carriage enjoy superior, high-standard living conditions. This spatial isolation embodies a form of "discipline," as Foucault called it, which is the management and dominance of people through the division and control of space.

‘Everyone on the train has their own fixed position. The most effective way to establish a class table and rearrange the carriages is simply to control each passenger’ [3].

Norms of behavior: People on the train must follow various rules and regulations; otherwise, they will be punished. For example, people in the last carriage cannot freely move to the front carriage; otherwise, it will be considered a rebellion. The regulation of such behavior is also a form of discipline, which achieves the management and governance of people through the restriction and constraint of their behavior.

Surveillance and control: Wilford ensures compliance with rules through surveillance systems, personnel and force, and punishes those who violate the rules. In the movie, the person in the last carriage was punished for violating regulations and had their arm severed. This monitoring and control are also a means of discipline, which keeps people constantly under surveillance and prevents them from easily violating rules.

Just like Foucault wrote in his book, ‘The Panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see or being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen’ [4].

“When reason and power form an alliance, they will punish those who are irrational. This is another dimension of rational logic. In the movie, this punishment is manifested as a domination of space. Foucault believed that only rational individuals who exile or monitor the insane deserve space.” [5]

3.3.2. Punishment

The scenes of violent punishment in the movie *Snowpiercer* are shocking. The people in the last carriage live in fear and oppression for a long time, and they often suffer from cruel treatment from the people in the front carriage. For instance, a character was punished for trying to take back his child, Mason. The minister punished him by putting his arm out of the train, which made the arm frozen to necrosis and knocked it off. This violent punishment is undoubtedly an extreme form of discipline.

‘Mason, the second character on the train, also emphasized the importance of order in class society in her speech.’ She said, “You can’t put your shoes on your head with a hat on your head and shoes on your feet” [1].

“A never-ending train surrounds the frozen surface of the earth, and the train and all its passengers are the entire human society. The ability of a train to maintain perpetual motion is not only due to the hardware’s perpetual motion, but also to the balance between the internal circulation system and the number of passengers, which is maintained by the rules and order on board.” [6].

It is not just about punishing a specific mistake but aims to establish the authority of the ruling class and achieve control and management over the entire group through direct harm to people’s bodies. Through such cruel means, the ruling class attempts to make the people in the last carriage fearful and afraid to resist the established order to maintain their ruling position.

Wilford used a carefully planned propaganda and education system to control and brainwash the people in the last carriage. He instilled in them a distorted notion that their difficult life at the end of the train was a necessary arrangement, even a state of “happiness.” This kind of propaganda aims to weaken their awareness of their own difficulties and their resistance to unfair treatment. What’s more, the education system on the train demands “teachers” to brainwash the children about the order, hierarchy, and belief in the “Sacred Engine.” These mental controls enabled Wilford to maintain his rule more firmly without relying solely on direct and obvious means such as violent punishment.

4. Difference between Weber and Foucault's Views on Power

4.1. Weber's Three Pure Types of Authority

4.1.1. Traditional Authority

“Traditional authority is based on custom, habit, and the sanctity of long-established beliefs” [7]. Weber's traditional authority is built on the sacred and inviolable foundation of people's habits and ancient traditions. In this form of governance, the reason why the ruled obey the rule is because this relationship already exists in the sacred tradition. Rulers exercise legitimate rule through the power of tradition while also being constrained by tradition. Its most typical forms include patrilineal, hereditary, and feudal systems.

4.1.2. Legal-rational Authority

Weber's legal authority is a form of authority based on clear laws, rules, and institutions. “That any given legal norm may be established by agreement or by imposition, on grounds of expediency, value-rationality, or both” [7]. Its characteristics include based on legitimacy, authority comes from specific positions rather than personal traits. Organizations operate according to rational rules and procedures, free from the influence of personal emotions and biases. Related to professional knowledge and skills, it requires corresponding professional competence. People obey such authority because they recognize the legitimacy of laws and institutions. Legal authority is common in modern society, with stability and predictability, but it may also bring problems such as bureaucratic rigidity and suppression of human nature. “Classes are defined by their economic position in the market, while status groups are determined by their social prestige and lifestyle” [7].

4.1.3. Charismatic Authority

“Charismatic authority is based on the exceptional qualities and personal appeal of a leader” [7]. Weber's charismatic authority refers to leaders who attract followers and gain their trust and obedience through their extraordinary personal traits, such as exceptional abilities, heroism, and charisma. The source of authority is not traditional rules or legal procedures.

4.2. Foucault's Discipline and Punish

Foucault believed that in modern society, the methods of punishment have gradually shifted from public torture to covert disciplinary measures. Discipline comprehensively controls and shapes an individual's behavior, thoughts, and body through a series of techniques and strategies such as monitoring, standardization, and inspection. “Discipline is a mechanism of power that regulates and normalizes individuals and populations through surveillance, control, and correction. And discipline creates docile bodies that are obedient to the demands of power” [4].

This kind of discipline not only exists in obvious institutions such as prisons but also permeates various levels of society, including schools. “Power is exercised not only through coercion but also through the production of knowledge and the shaping of discourse” [4]. The purpose of discipline is to make individuals obey the norms and order of society and become "normal people" who meet specific standards.

5. Conclusion

This paper conducts an analysis of the movie *Snowpiercer*, exploring the embodiment of Max Weber and Foucault's views on power within it. The hierarchical system of trains, rulemaking,

correspondence between positions and power, and the charisma of leaders demonstrate Weber's traditional authority, legal authority, and charismatic authority. Furthermore, Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment is reflected through the spatial isolation of trains, behavioral norms enforcement, surveillance and control mechanisms, as well as instances of violence and psychological punishment. Overall, *Snowpiercer* provides a vivid example illustrating how Weber and Foucault's views on power operate within social structures and interpersonal relationships. This enhances our comprehension regarding the nature, sources, and impacts of power, while also illustrating its influence on individual behavior and social order formation. Simultaneously, it serves as a reminder to remain vigilant against abuses in power dynamics and unequal power structures, to pursue a more equitable society.

Future research can further explore the applicability and limitations of Weber and Foucault's theories of power in different social contexts and situations. Additionally, the application of these theories to analyze and address real-world problems can be better examined. Furthermore, the manifestations of power in other films or literary works can be studied to enrich our understanding and recognition of this concept. The author hopes this study will provide valuable references for academic discussions in related fields while promoting deepened research and contemplation on theories of power.

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