

## **Using Nicky Hager's 'The Hollow Men' as a case study in teaching theories of social power**

*Elaine Webster*

### **Abstract**

In this paper I discuss teaching theories of social power at 300 level using Hager's book as current case study material, an approach that successfully engaged students with both theory and the social and political context, and where the usefulness of particular theories could be tested.

Social theory is necessary for sociological analysis, and theories of power particularly so, since power shapes knowledge and is implicated in every social structure and relationship (Mackinnon, 1989; Giddens, 1986). There are a number of implications for teaching this material including acknowledgment of power relationships in class and developing a constructive approach to students' own experiences and knowledge of power. Ideally, this involves fostering the students' potential for action and voice, which suggests to me participation in existing power structures and critical engagement with real events. Another challenge of teaching social theory to undergraduates is to demonstrate the usefulness, relevance, and limits of theory, which can also be done when students make connections between theories and real social events.

For some years this paper (SOCI 302 - Theories of Social Power) has been taught at Otago using various case studies from New Zealand social history, which has worked well. Teaching this 300 level paper for the first time in 2007, I too wanted to use material that would engage students' critical intellect and imagination. However I wanted something current, in the hope of strengthening participation and voice. Following the recommendation of a colleague, Dr Martin Tolich, I read Nicky Hager's recently published book 'The Hollow Men'. While reading the book I kept in mind the possibility of using it as a class reader, and by the time I got to the middle of Chapter Five I had decided to use it.

The book details the rise to power of Dr Don Brash in the New Zealand National Party over a two year campaign to become government. Hager used leaked emails, internal reports and meeting minutes given to

him by disaffected sources within the National party. Published just prior to the 2006 national elections, the book achieved instant notoriety through Brash's attempt in the courts to prevent its release. The book chronicles a range of cynical and dishonest practices that seem to characterise modern politics, and although much of the book content was hardly surprising for that reason, what was chilling was the sheer scope of these deceptions. In chapter after chapter details are given of the inner workings of the Party, providing real insight into what the struggle for power can entail. Brash and his inner circle earned the title 'hollow men' through their pursuit of power by not resorting to, but relying on manipulation, dishonesty, and deception. Former National Government Cabinet Minister Ruth Richardson's advice to Brash (page 68) sums up the theme of power running through the book: 'Stick to your guns, being in government is worth everything'.

This book was our primary case study for the semester, used to analyse social power in various forms and as a source of examples. It was clearly useful in terms of analysing state power mainstream and second stream theories of power, Lukes' three faces of power and Gramsci's hegemony, Marxist theories of class struggle and ideology, and Foucault's later work on power. Feminist theories of power were also highlighted in Chapter Nine 'Trouble with women'.

In preparation for each week's seminar session, students were given two or three chapters from the book to read, in addition to readings directly addressing theories of social power. Individual students were given a chapter to summarise for the seminar session, followed by general discussion. The book proved an excellent stimulant and discussions were lively. Prepared questions were unnecessary because students generated their own questions, engaging with the book in their own ways. I consider this an ideal situation, and I only intervened to refocus or to amplify an interesting point.

Their quite remarkable interest was enlivened even further by regular appearances in the media by some of the main players including Don Brash, his advisors and backers, the Exclusive Brethren, and Nicky Hager himself. Students' knowledge motivated them to pay closer attention to politics in the news and to question it, clearly a new experience for some. This also stimulated further questions in class, for

example one student wanted to know more about the Exclusive Brethren. I invited her to find out and report back, and at the next seminar she presented her findings to the class. Often students would comment about other news items relating to social power, which had become more recognisable and real to them as a result of our work with Hager's book.

During lectures I made connections between theory and the book contents at every opportunity. The book provided multiple examples of every kind of power and also people's approaches to power, vividly demonstrating theory in action. Half way through the course, I asked students to comment on the book and to write down five things they had learned from it. Students were enthusiastic about it as a learning resource. In terms of what they learnt, students reported increased awareness of the New Zealand political system and election process; the power of pressure groups, lobbyists, and financial backers and their influence on policy; the use and effects of spin and the media to manipulate voters, and increased understanding of the part played by the public as voters from the various positions of duped, deceived, or insulted. Some examples of their comments follow:

"What the whole saga behind the exclusive brethren was. I didn't really get that when it hit the press. I missed something."

"Dog whistling: how easily the public are deceived.... I was never aware."

"Politicians think the general public are a tad stupid... and that we can be manipulated into thinking what they want us to, and lets be honest, we do at times...Dumbing things down."

"Insane amount of ties that conservative parties have to fundamentalist/crazy religious groups. Even if these ties are simply used for funds, its still very disturbing that these groups can play such a large role in politics. That money talks - money truly makes a world of difference in political campaigns."

"Elections are never won on just the issues."

"A professional cadre of spin doctors and political strategists has recently emerged in New Zealand... Trivialising of political issues take public attention away from what's really

going on... We are not as independent and sovereign as we think we are, or as our politicians want us to think we are.”

Students analysed the kinds of power operating at different times and identified models of power used by the main players, including the author of the book. Force and manipulation were used to depose former leader Bill English while Brash was legitimated as leader through formal procedures/ritual performance, while in fact his financial backers were what counted at Party level. This gave an example of the view that money is power, shown over time to be flawed. We traced Brash’s alienation from the existing power base in the party i.e. experienced MPs, party members, and genuine policies, which prompted National Party insiders to leak emails and documents to Hager, and perhaps even more damaging, to leak details to the press concerning Brash’s connections with the Exclusive Brethren. Getting caught in these apparent lies seriously tarnished his image, and tells us a lot about ‘spin’ and image-making. The actions taken by party insiders provide examples of resistance and rebellion as significant sources of power, power clearly underestimated by Brash to his cost.

Brash and his advisors also seriously underestimated both the value and the character of women voters, alienating them by his enduring commitment to ‘Old Boys Club’ politics. Why did he imagine he could afford to ignore women voters? Or was appealing to women voters simply too hard for him? His advisers described women as swing voters easily manipulated by campaign tactics, conflicting with focus group research suggesting ‘women’ were pretty much natural enemies of National Party policy. Although advised to go for “feminine appeal” (p136), to woo the female vote, and to soften National’s image, Brash sacked Katherine Rich from the welfare portfolio when she refused to publicly endorse his second Orewa speech as she could not support his beneficiary bashing. This failure with women was one of the most extraordinary aspects of National’s campaign: a failure to understand, a failure to take seriously, even failure to manipulate. National’s subsequent election failure partly resulted from this fundamental sexism. Any politician chasing polls runs the risk of appearing insincere but Brash added insult to injury by discounting the views of a numerically and therefore politically powerful group. This result is suggestive in the

light of Mackinnon's discussion of state power as male power (Mackinnon, 1989).

Brash's image was created by an 'army of specialists' using both discourses and appearances in an effort to manipulate public perceptions, yet as Kaiser explains, appearances imply more than surface meanings (Kaiser, 2001) and the relationship between discourses and power are complex (Foucault, 1980). Brash appealed to prejudiced opinion (such as the infamous 'dog whistling' in the Orewa Speech) while shamelessly concealing his real agenda: a hollow man indeed. Last minute tax cuts were an obvious inducement, but could also be interpreted as the action of a desperate man. Students questioned whether their own votes could be bought.

Throughout the book we can see Brash's assumptions about how power works to persuade, obscure, and induce. His view would seem consistent with mainstream theories of power, while second stream theories were more able to account for actual outcomes. Explaining how and why National lost the election, students identified limits of particular theories, and also problems with politicians own theories of power. On the other hand, the election success of the Labour Party was interpreted by some students as an outcome based on Labour's appreciation of power networks, enabling 'a match' between Labour party and voters. Such a mutual understanding was made possible by Labour's access and use of historical and social knowledge and the reproduction of these 'truths'. Foucault's work on power is particularly useful here (see Foucault 1980, 1991, 1994).

Lastly, some students speculated about Hager's motives and intentions in writing this book. By asking that essential question "who benefits?" the traces of power can be seen to operate at every level. This question enlarges the view of power and politics offered by this book, by looking back at the book itself. What was Hager trying to achieve? This question also sharpens the critical thinking we try to foster in Sociology.

'The Hollow Men' was very useful in teaching this paper. Students made strong connections between theory and real events, enhancing their appreciation of particular theories and the application and limits of theory more generally. They also saw themselves as participants in power relationships on multiple levels, more clearly appreciating how

knowledge shapes power and vice versa, and that power is implicated in every social structure and relationship.

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**Elaine Webster** completed her doctorate in 2005 at the University of Otago and taught social theory for 2 years in the Sociology Programme, also at Otago. In her doctorate, Elaine explored issues of identity, dress, and appearance through the history and practice of school uniforms in New Zealand, following themes in her Masters study of dress, identity and the twin. Her ongoing research in the sociology of dress includes identity and appearances, currently focusing on symbolic meanings and power.