

GIA/UAP/PAPA 5004
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POWER AND POLICY IN THE US

It does not take a sociologist to observe that inequalities permeate our society and the world. There are inequalities, glaring inequalities, in the access of different groups of people to practically every type of resource: to good health care, to financial security, to money and the things that money can buy, to public safety, to just treatment under the law, to a stimulating education, to the opportunity for creative work, to the avoidance of certain diseases, and to the length of life itself. By some measures, it can be shown that these inequalities are growing more intense, that the quality of life for different classes is becoming ever more polarized. The burden of social science is not just to describe these inequalities, such as they are, but to understand WHY they persist.

To answer this question, we turn to an examination of the concepts of *class*, *power* and *institutions*. Specifically, this course will focus on the connection between the structure of power in our society and policy outcomes at the national level. To better understand class and its relationship to power in society, we will turn to the foundational work of Karl Marx; to better understand how power becomes institutionalized and enduring, we will examine the work of Max Weber. Taken together, the ideas of Marx and the ideas of Weber, as they have been developed over the ensuing century of social science, provide the keys to understanding why the bounty of society is distributed so unevenly.

Put another way, the essence of this course is to help the student to understand the concept of *power* and the process by which power can be institutionalized, *thereby shaping public policy*. How did the central institutions of society come historically to be configured as they have been, i.e., what *classes* of actors contributed to shaping these organizations and institutions such as they are, whose *interests* are they meant to serve, what *uneven outcomes* do they have, and in what *alternative ways* might these major social policies be shaped? These are the questions that will inform this course.

This course begins with an examination of theoretical conceptions of power in society and then moves to empirical examination of important policy shifts in this country, asking in each case, how they came about, who the real architects were

of these shifts in policy and who did they advantage or disadvantage. Ultimately, the question of power and its connection to policy has very real consequences for very real people.

Building on the work of C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter, the work of G. William Domhoff has greatly extended our understanding of the nature and distribution of power in our society. Is the American political arena characterized by competing interest groups, each vying for influence over their issues of relevance, with the state acting as the impartial arbiter and referee? In other words, is the state in a position to independently resolve disputes, is it relatively autonomous? Or, does a ruling class, grounded in great wealth, actually shape the public agenda and dominate government institutions and policy outcomes? Domhoff's books will help us to get a handle on these important questions.

Once we have developed a theoretical grasp of these issues, the class will choose landmark policy shifts that have taken place in this country, from New Deal policies like the Social Security or the National Labor Relations Acts of 1935 to present day policies like Sarbanes-Oxley, on which we will focus our further investigation and attention. We will begin with these two key books on power in American society:

- *Who Rules America? Power, Politics and Social Change.* G. William Domhoff. McGraw Hill, fifth edition, 2006.
- *State Autonomy or Class Dominance? Case Studies on Policy Making in America.* G. William Domhoff. Aldine de Gruyter, 1996.

Then, as we turn our attention to case studies of how various important policy shifts occurred in this country, we will read selected chapters from other books that have been ordered for this course, along with a number of articles from other sources. All are available in paperback edition:

- *One Nation, Uninsured: Why the US Has No National Health Insurance.* By Jill Quadagno. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- *The New Media Monopoly.* By Ben Bagdikian. Beacon Press, 2004.
- *Rethinking Social Policy.* By Christopher Jencks. Harper Collins.
- *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race and the conservative counter-revolution.* By Dan Carter. Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1996.
- *The Great Unraveling.* By Paul Krugman. W.W. Norton, 2004.
- *Corporate Warriors: The rise of the privatized military industry.* By P.W. Singer. Cornell University Press, 2003.

Grading: Your grade for this course will be based upon weekly reading and active participation in classroom discussions (20%), the quality of your presentation to the class and the quality of your final paper (which is due on the last day of class). You will get to choose how much you want your presentation to be weighed, from 30% on the low side to 50% on the high end. This means that your paper also can count between 30 to 50% of your overall course grade, with the three components of your grade adding to 100%. (For example, you might choose for your presentation and your paper to each be weighed as 40%, or you might choose for your presentation to count as 30% and your paper to count as 50%, or whatever combination you choose that adds to 100%).

Possible Topics for Student Projects:

1. War policy and the war industry. How does the latter explain the former with reference to Iraq?
2. The Organization of Medical Care in the U.S./ Why No Universal Coverage in the US?
3. The Organization of the Mass Media in the U.S./ The FCC's allowance of media consolidation. Implications for public frameworks and opinions.
4. The Organization of the World Bank or the IMF/ "Free Trade" Policies and their Effects
5. The Organization of the Workplace/Labor Relations Policies (the history of the NLRA and Taft-Hartley and subsequent battles over labor organizing and minimum wage laws)
6. Pension Support in the US/ The Social Security Act of 1935 and Recent Debates over "privatization" of pensions
7. Environmental Sustainability/Policy (pick one like the Clean Air Act or the Clean Water Act)
8. The Rise of Institutes and 'think tanks'. How does the public agenda get set? How is public opinion shaped?
9. The Rise and implications of 'Supply-Side' Economics and Tax Policies that Favor the wealthy.
10. The Rightward Turn in American Politics/ Why do citizens support parties and candidates who do NOT advance their material standard of living?

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POWER AND POLICY IN THE US

Topics Syllabus

Part I Concepts: Power, Class and Institutions

- Aug. 22 Introduction to the concepts of power, class and institutions. How an institutional approach will help us to understand power relations and policy shifts.
- Aug. 29 Competing Theories of Power in Society
-What are their methods, findings and conclusions?
-Who does rule America today and how do they influence public policy?
- Read Domhoff, 2005, chapters 1-4
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- Sept. 5 What is Class? What are class interests? What is Class Conflict and why does it arise in modern capitalism?
-The Foundational Work of Karl Marx:
-Power comes from the ownership of productive assets
- Sept. 12 What is Bureaucracy? Why does it arise in modern society?

-The Foundational Work of Max Weber:
-Domination comes from institutional incumbency

Part II Institutional Case Studies of Power & Policy in the US

- Sept. 19 Iraq War Policy:
How did we get to where we are in Iraq? The developing ideas of the Neo-cons. The Role of certain think tanks. The Role of the Media. How ideas shaped war policy. (Alex)
Read: Selection from Singer book or articles provided
- TBA The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and subsequent labor relations policies and court rulings: How did these policies come about and what do they mean for the balance of human rights vs. property rights in this country? (Joyce)
Read: Selection from Krugman book and/or Clawson book

- Sept. 26 **One Nation, Uninsured: Why the US Has No National Health Insurance to this Day (Dianna and Rebecca C.)**
Read: Selection from Quadagno book
- Oct. 3 **The Rightward Turn in American Politics. How did this come about? Why do citizens support parties and candidates who do not advance their material standard of living? (Robin & Daryn)**
Read: Selection from Carter book
- Oct. 10 **The Mass Media in the US: The FCC's allowance of media consolidation and the implications for public opinion. Does the mass media shape public frameworks and opinion? (Matthew & Andrea)**
Read: Selection from Bagdikian book
- Oct. 17 To be arranged
- Oct. 24 **The World Bank, its 'structural adjustment' policies and 'free trade' advocacy: How did it get erected, who wanted these policies, who benefits and who loses from them, and how are they sold to the public in this country and in less developed regions of the world? (Daniel & Jen)**
Read:
- Oct. 31 **The rise and implications of 'supply-side' economics in the US: How did this happen? Who benefits/ who loses by these policies? How do they get sold to the public? (Betsey)**
Read: Selection from Krugman book
- Nov. 7 **Who Rules and how do they come to sway votes and public opinion? The Role of Campaign Finance and Political Parties (Joyce)**
Read: Domhoff, chapters 5-7
- Nov. 14 **The Question of Social Movements: Under what circumstances can they succeed in offsetting the power of an elite? (Rebekah)**
- Nov. 21 Thanksgiving Vacation
- Dec. 5 Papers Due

Notes:

*Readings will be distributed and assigned by the various student presenters one week in advance of each topic's presentation.

**Presentations/discussions on each topic will follow, wherever possible, the five core questions listed on separate page.