Power: Personal, Social and Institutional Dimensions
Sociology 217
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“[T]he fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics.”

Course description

Power is one of the most significant issues in our personal lives as well as in society, even though we often act as though everyone is equally free to do as one pleases. The study of power extends far beyond formal politics or the use of overt force into the operation of every life and every institution: how we are influenced in subtle ways by those around us, who makes controlling decisions in the family, how people get ahead at work, whether democratic governments reflect the “will of the people.”

In this course we will explore some of the major issues involving power, including the nature of dominant and subordinate relationships and the types of legitimate authority. We will examine situations where force is exerted and where it is not, and discuss how power operates in a variety of social settings: interactions in everyday life, the family, the community, the corporation, and the government. Consequently, we will focus attention on questions such as the following:

- How is power defined? Is it necessary to employ multiple definitions to power to understand how power operates in different situations?
- How do people (and institutions) acquire and use power?
- To what extent is power lodged within personality or a product of a given social situation (or institutional configuration)?
- How does the use of power sometimes mystify the targets so that they do not recognize that power is being exerted?
- How is power measured? Do different methodological approaches yield consistent results in the measurement of power?
- What strategies do the powerless use to resist domination?
- Can power be equalized? Is sharing power a desirable end?
Books recommended for purchase


Course requirements

The syllabus describes in outline form the topics and assignments for this course. The actual dates for discussion of any topic may vary slightly from those shown on the syllabus; the extent of class discussion and interest may extend some topics and shorten others.

- Two short (7-10 pp.) papers (You will be able to choose from among three or four paper topics): 60% of course grade (30% each)
- A take-home final examination: 40% of course grade

In addition to these graded assignments, you are expected to attend all classes and to complete all of the assigned reading in a timely manner. You should also read the class conference on a regular basis.

Unless otherwise noted, all reading assignments—other than those from books recommended for purchase—are available through electronic reserves.
Course schedule

I. An introduction to the study of power (1/31, 2/3)

Wrong, “Problems in Defining Power” in *Power*
Simmel, “On Subordination and Superordination”

II. Defining power and its limits: some classical views (2/7, 2/14, 2/17)

Machiavelli, *The Prince* and *The Discourses* (excerpts)
Pareto, “The Circulation of Elites”, in Parsons et al, *Theories of Society*
Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (excerpt)
Weber, “Class, Status and Party”

III. The faces of power

A. Influence: power (?) in everyday life (2/21, 2/24)

Asch, “Effects of Group Pressure upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgments” in Rubin, *Doing Unto Others*
Milgrom, “Behavioral Study of Obedience”
Janis, “Groupthink among Policy Makers”
Rosenthal and Jacobson, “Pygmalion in the Classroom” in Rubin, *Doing Unto Others*

B. Force: the limiting case? (2/28, 3/3)

Goffman, “On the Characteristics of Total Institutions” in *Asylums* 
http://www.zimbardo.com/zimbardo.html (slide show on the Stanford prison experiment and paper on “A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil”)

C. Leadership: inspirational and transformational power (3/7, 3/10)

Burns, *Transforming Leadership*
D. Authority: power legitimated and institutionalized  
(3/14, 3/17)

Wrong, “Authority” in *Power*  
Weber, “The Types of Authority and Imperative Co-ordination”

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IV. Institutional power and institutional arrangements


Sanday, “The Bases for Female Political and Economic Power and Authority” and “The Bases for Male Domination” in *Female Power and Male Dominance*  
Connell, “The Body and Social Practice” in *Gender and Power*  
Additional readings may be assigned

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B. Power in organizations (4/7, 4/11)

Kanter, “Secretaries” and “A View from the 1990s” in *Men and Women of the Corporation*  
Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men*

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C. Power in communities (4/14, 4/21)

Hayward, *De-Facing Power*  
Bachrach and Baratz, “Two Faces of Power”

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D. Political power (4/25, 4/28)

Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*
V. Power and resistance revisited (5/2, 5/5)

Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (excerpts)
Ewick and Silbey, “Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority”

VI. Sharing power: utopian ideals, practical considerations (5/9)

Mueller, “Ella Baker and the Origins of ‘Participatory Democracy’”