

Power in American Society

Jim Jacobs



STUDY GUIDE ON POWER IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

by Jim Jacobs

INTRODUCTION:

Radicals interested in learning about political decision-making in American society face voluminous amounts of literature, much of questionable relevance. Hopefully, this study guide will aid in separating the wisdom gained through research into the complex political relationships existing in the United States from the rhetorical, impressionistic or irrelevant material usually confronting SDS members in the classroom and, unfortunately, in the literature of the movement. Yet hard facts are not enough. A theory or means of assembling the evidence seems almost equally important. Disagreements on the nature of political power in American society often hinge not on facts, but with the implications drawn from the evidence. A theoretical approach aids in guiding both the research and evaluation of the conclusions, making for a more unified and coherent explanation. Thus, it is intended that the study guide offer not only a critique of conventional 'pluralist' theories of how power operates in America, but suggest some grounds for a more fruitful approach.

The plan of the study guide is very simple. The first section is concerned with the view most widely held by social scientists about American political power, namely pluralism. Readings discuss the implications of this perspective and its theoretical limitations. The second section presents more factual material focusing upon what are normally considered the potential centers of political power in the United States. Much of this evidence 'counters' the expectations of pluralist theory and strongly urges a different approach. Some of the readings indicate potential 'agents of change' in American society. Finally, the last section, and unfortunately the briefest, suggests what might become a new approach to the study of power in American society.

By no means is this study guide a full treatment of political power in American society. There are no readings concerned with decision-making in American foreign policy, political power at state and local level, or the political role of the bureaucracy and the legal system. All these topics, and no doubt others deserve serious attention by any interested individuals. The readings offered here present a preliminary view of power in the United States and are concerned with outlining a large picture, very briefly, rather than focusing upon single parts.

The study guide is divided into a ten week course that needn't be followed closely. Readings have been arranged with the intention of presenting easily accessible, introductory material, with additional readings recommended for those wishing to pursue topics further. One note of caution, however. The study guide assumes a basic knowledge of American governmental institutions, their functions and history. Individuals who feel they do not possess some elementary knowledge are urged to consult some introductory American government text to assimilate the factual skeleton.

SECTION I -- PLURALIST THEORY

Among contemporary American social scientists in the late 1950's a debate raged between the pluralist and elitist descriptions of American political power. Today the debate is less intense as the heat of the original controversy motivated many scholars to find more 'researchable' projects. Yet it is here that a study of political power in America must begin. The crucial differences in the theoretical approach and research methodology between the pluralists and elitists will recur in most of the following readings.

WEEK I -- The Pluralist Argument

*Robert Presthus, *Men at the Top*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964. Ch. 1-2. Reviews the recent literature on American political power and summarizes the elitist and pluralist interpretations. The second chapter explores the methodological distinctions between both views.

David Truman, *The Governmental Process*. New York: Knopf, 1951. Ch. 1-3, 16. Truman perceives American politics as a battle between competing interest groups, none strong enough to completely dominate the struggle. The output of the struggle is the public interest. This belief is one of the cornerstones of pluralist theory.

* = paperback editions available

Talcott Parsons, "The Distribution of Power in American Society," World Politics X (1957), 123-143. A review of C. W. Mills, The Power Elite by a leading theoretician of pluralism. Needless to add, the review is highly critical.

Additional readings:

*Nelson Polsby, Community Power and Political Theory. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963. Ch. 4-5. Polsby presents the pluralist approach to the study of power in America, and attempts to deal with criticism of the pluralists. The first few chapters of the book discuss the elitist and stratification studies of political power.

*Robert Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. A rigorous, theoretical approach to democracy justifying the pluralist system as the most functional for a democratic polity.

*Robert Dahl, Who Governs. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961. Probably the most thorough pluralist case study of community power structure. It is well written and intended to deal with theoretical and empirical problems of researching political power.

John Kenneth Galbraith, American Capitalism. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952. Ch. 9-10. This book attempts to document the famous 'countervailing power' thesis of American politics.

WEEK II -- The Pluralist Payoff and Realistic Democratic Theory

The pluralist argument tends to perceive democracy as a functional system of elites battling for political power. Elites are necessary because most individuals lack the interest, intelligence, and resources to influence decisions. Thus, pluralists call for a review of democratic ideals in order to fit reality.

*Robert Dahl, Who Governs. Ch. 19. Dahl's view of Homo Politicus summarizes the realistic view of democracy.

Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, Voting. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954. Ch. 14. Using survey research evidence, the authors document the claim that most individuals are not equipped to participate fully in the decision-making process and they call for a revision of classical democratic theory.

Jack Walker, "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," American Political Science Review, LX (1966), 285-305. Walker spells out the implications of the realistic approach to democratic theory and specifically links the realistic view with pluralism. Dahl's reply to Walker (in the same issue) should also be read for insight into the realistic position.

Lane Davis, "The Costs of Realism: Contemporary Restatements of Democracy," Western Political Quarterly, XVII (1964), 37-46. Davis perceives the classical notion of democracy as an ideal to strive for, not a descriptive statement of the present American political system. From this perspective, realistic theory seems an implicit defense of the status quo.

Additional readings:

*Joseph Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy. New York: Harper Row, 1962. Ch. 21-22. One of the earliest realistic views, emphasizing the competitiveness of democracy rather than its representativeness.

*S. M. Lipset, Political Man. New York: Anchor Books, 1963. Ch. 3. In his discussion of stability in democratic political systems, Lipset presents the realistic approach as the best solution to preserve order.

WEEK III -- Critiques of Pluralism

The opponents of pluralism have stressed that studying decisions is not enough. By assuming that different groups actually possess dissimilar interests and that these groups represent most segments of opinion, the pluralists have not touched upon the heart of political power. Many studies point out the amazing homogeneity of the elite value systems and the interconnections of their interests. Even if the interest groups were indeed representative of various concerns, the countervailing power thesis is a myth. Clearly, some interests have the resources to make their views win out over others.

C. W. Mills, "The Power Elite," in A. Kornhauser, ed. Problems of Power in American Society. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1957. Mills presents a brief statement of his approach to American national politics, stressing the shared values of the elites.

Todd Gitlin, "Local Pluralism as Theory and Ideology," Studies on the Left, V (1965), 21-45. A summary of the arguments against the pluralist approach.

Bernard Nossiter, The Mythmakers. Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964. Ch. 5. Nossiter documents the case against the countervailing thesis.

Additional readings:

Robert Wolff, "Beyond Tolerance," in A Critique of Pure Tolerance. Boston: Beacon Press, 1965. A theoretical and philosophical argument against pluralism and one of its manifestations, tolerance.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," American Political Science Review, LVI (1962), 947-952. The authors are critical of the pluralist approach for not being concerned with the "non-decisions," i.e., those questions that do not come up when interest groups are competing for political power. Dealing with non-decisions, the authors argue, allows us to perceive if the elites are representative of community opinion.

SECTION II -- THE EVIDENCE

The ultimate usefulness of any theory is how it helps to organize reality into a coherent, understandable image. These materials are presented to indicate how pluralist theory, however logical and lucid, does not fit the empirical reality of American political power. In examining the institutional and non-institutional centers of power in America, the interconnections of this material may not become clear. To fit the readings into context, it is suggested that readers become familiar with some general works of the American social and economic order. Some useful beginnings are:

*Gabriel Kolko, Wealth and Power in America. New York: Praeger, 1962.

Richard Centers, The Psychology of Social Classes. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947.

*David Bazelon, The Paper Economy. New York: Random House, 1963.

*E. E. Schattschneider, The Semi-Sovereign People. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960.

WEEK IV -- The Adequacy of Political Institutions

Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy. New York: Knopf, 1966. Ch. 5, 10. McConnell argues that elites have taken over parts of the national government, especially the regulatory agencies, and are making decisions without regard for the public interest.

*Vidich and Bensmen, Small Town and Mass Society. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958. Ch. 5, 6. For those who believe that grass roots democracy still exists at the local level, a look at the elite structure of Springdale might be sobering.

Donald Stokes and Warren Miller, "Party Government and the Saliency of Congress," Public Opinion Quarterly, XXVI (1962), 531-546. Survey research evidence suggests the linkage between the congressman and his constituency is at best extremely weak. Most congressmen vote as their personal will dictates without knowledge of or concern for the electorate's opinions.

Additional readings:

Oliver Garceau and Corinne Silverman, "A Pressure Group and the Pressured," American Political Science Review, XLVIII (1954), 672-691. An attempt to measure how much influence a pressure group has upon the legislature.

*Donald Matthews, Social Background of Decision-Makers. New York: Random House, 1964. Ch. 3. Offers empirical evidence on the backgrounds of elites. Although somewhat dated, Matthews' generalizations are applicable to the present.

WEEK V -- The Corporation and the Corporate System

Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Monopoly Capital. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966. Ch. 2. The authors attempt to define the characteristics of the large corporation and demonstrate how differently this beast behaves from its 19th century predecessor.

*Edwin Sutherland, White Collar Crime. New York: Holt, 1961. The author presents a great deal of data that questions the assumption that the corporations act responsibly in American society.

Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy, Ch. 8. McConnell views the corporation as a political body that has gained private access and control in many of the federal regulatory agencies originally designed to control corporate abuses of public interest.

Additional readings:

N. R. Collins and L. E. Preston, "The Size Structure of the Largest Firms, 1900-1958," American Economic Review, LI (1961), 986-1003. The authors present evidence to suggest the largest firms are still in very real control of the American economy, just as in the early 20th century.

Robert Engler, The Politics of Oil. New York: Macmillan, 1961. Ch. 1, 6-8, 10-12, 14. A study of the oil industry's use of the federal government to gain incredible profits and access to overseas markets. Engler argues that the behavior of the federal government has always been in favor of a small group of oil companies and against the interests of the majority of Americans.

Francis X. Sutton, et al. The American Business Creed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956. A study of the ideology of businessmen and how they perceive their role as leaders of American society.

WEEK VI -- The Military Complex

*Fred Cook, The Warfare State. New York: Collier Books, 1964. Ch. 4-6. A somewhat disconnected study of the increasing power of the military in American society. The most relevant parts describe the military's use of public relations to publicize the need of the United States to defend its national security against Communist aggressors.

Marc Pilisuk and Tom Hayden, "Is There a Military Industrial Complex That Prevents Peace?" Journal of Social Issues, XXI (1965), 67-117. A detailed article bringing the connections of the armaments industry and the military interests into clearer focus.

*Daniel Bell, "The Dispossessed," in Bell, ed. The Radical Right rev. ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1964. Bell presents evidence that describes the military's involvement in radical right activities as they search for a constituency in which to base their interests.

Additional readings:

*Irving Louis Horowitz, The War Game. New York: Ballantine Books, 1963. A study of the ideology and practice of the new "technocratic" militarists.

*Samuel Huntington, The Soldier and the State. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957. Ch. 1, 3, 13. These chapters focus upon the growing professionalization of the military and conflicts that have arisen in civilian-military relations. The author's assumptions of a need for national security are pretty conventional, but the facts presented are relevant.

WEEK VII -- Labor

*Sidney Lens, The Crisis of American Labor. New York: Barnes, 1961. Ch. 1, 4, 10. An introduction to the demands and style of the American trade union movement.

Grant McConnell, Private Power and American Democracy. Ch. 9. Traces labor's attempts at becoming more politically oriented, and finding an access point in the federal government.

Harvey Swados, "The UAW -- Over the Top or Over the Hill," Dissent, X (Autumn 1963), 321-343. An article describing the dilemma faced by the leadership of one of America's more militant unions as they grow out of touch with their membership.

Additional readings:

Stanley Aronowitz, "Fate of the Unions," Studies on the Left, IV (1964), 58-73. This review of Lens, Jacobs and Widick's book raises important problems for those interested in the direction organized labor is taking. The discussion of Aronowitz's views in the following issue of Studies is fruitful.

*Lipset, Trow and Coleman, Union Democracy. New York: Anchor Books, 1962. Ch. 12, 13, 18. A study of the internal politics of the International Typographical Union, which has two political parties competing for union leadership.

WEEK VIII -- The Mass Society: End of the Old Establishment?

Pluralists and others have agreed that the older WASP establishment is falling from political prominence in America. Power is supposedly being transferred from the old elites to the managerial class. Yet, will the possibility of achieving democracy become greater? What does this development mean for class distinctions? Will a new equality result?

*C. W. Mills, The Power Elite. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959. Ch. 5. Mills offers information upon the social backgrounds and present positions of the "Very Rich."

*E. Digby Baltzell, An American Business Aristocracy. New York: Collier, 1962. Ch. 1-4, 11-15. This book is a historical, sociological study of the Philadelphia old elites. While much of what Baltzell writes is social gossip, the book contains important insights into the sociological isolation of the aristocracy from American society.

Andrew Hacker, "Liberal Democracy and Social Control," American Political Science Review, LI (1957), 1009-1026. An essay upon the transfer of political power from the old elites to the new men of power. Hacker is highly critical of the change, suggesting that an erosion of civil liberties will result.

Additional readings:

Mills, The Power Elite, Ch. 13. His description of mass society is similar to Hacker's but his recommendations for change are completely different.

Daniel Bell, End of Ideology, Ch. 1. Bell levels important criticisms at many of the writings upon mass society.

William Kornhauser, The Politics of Mass Society. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959. Kornhauser reviews most of the literature of "the mass society" and attempts to test empirically some of the generalizations.

WEEK IX -- The Mass Society: The American Electorate

Herbert McClosky, "Consensus and Ideology in American Politics," American Political Science Review, LVII (1964), 361-382. McClosky finds little agreement among the electorate upon the basic ideals of American democracy, suggesting that the consent for the system might not be so pervasive.

Dean Burham, "The Changing Shape of the American Political Universe," American Political Science Review, LIX (1965). By calculating electoral turnout rates in nineteenth and twentieth century American politics, Burham questions whether pluralism leads to considerable political participation. He suggests that the changing of the electoral laws in the early twentieth century made it probable that potentially liberal and radical voters were eliminated from the electorate.

Lewis Lipsitz, "Work Life and Political Attitudes," American Political Science Review, LVIII (1964), 951-965. Contrary to the customary assumptions that affluence breeds politically moderate workers, Lipsitz's evidence suggests major discontents are present among the working class. These seem to emerge from the work situation itself and pose questions to those who argue that workers' militancy can be bought off.

Additional readings:

Robert Alford, Party and Society. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963. Ch. 8. Alford presents survey research evidence gathered over the past thirty years to indicate that voting along class lines has not diminished in the United States. Politically, at least, the "blurring" of class lines seems unlikely.

Nelson Polsby, "Toward an Exploration of McCarthyism," in Polsby, Dentler and Smith, ed. Politics and Social Life. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1963; Michael Rogin, "Wallace and the Middle Class: The White Backlash," Public Opinion Quarterly (1966), 98-108. Both articles provide evidence to suggest that radical right candidates (McCarthy and Wallace) drew more support from middle class, rural and suburban individuals than from the working class.

SECTION I I

WEEK IV -- Political Institutions

- *James M. Burns, The Deadlock of Democracy.
- Joseph Clark, The Senate Establishment.
- Douglas Crater, Power in Washington.
- Stanley Kelly, Professional Public Relations and Political Power.

WEEK V -- Corporation

- *Andrew Hacker, ed. The Corporation Take Over.
- Estes Kefauver, In A Few Hands.
- Morton Baratz, "Corporate Giants and the Power Structure," Western Political Quarterly, IX (1956), 406-415.

WEEK VI -- Military

- Tristram Coffin, The Armed Society.
- Walter Millis, Arms and the State.
- Morris Janowitz, The Professional Soldier.
- Harry Ransom, Can American Democracy Survive the Cold War?

WEEK VII -- Labor

- Paul Jacobs, The State of the Unions.
- Solomon Barkin, The Decline of the Labor Movement.
- Kornhauser, Dubin, and Ross, eds. Industrial Conflict. Ch. 17-19.
- Gene Levine, When Workers Vote.
- *Ely Chinoy, Automobile Workers and the American Dream.

WEEK VIII -- The Mass Society

- Robert Lane, Political Ideology.
- James W. Prothro and Charles Grigg, "The Fundamental Principles of Democracy, Basis of Agreement and Disagreement," Journal of Politics, XXII (1960), 276-294.
- Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in David Apter, ed. Ideology and Discontent.

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