

—THE—
**POWER
ELITE**
—AND THE—
STATE

**How Policy is
Made in America**

G. William Domhoff



Social Institutions and Social Change

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THE POWER ELITE AND THE STATE

How Policy is Made in America

G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF



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PREFACE

I have benefited greatly from the suggestions of several social scientists and historians in writing this book. In particular, I would like to thank Michael Goldfield, Clarence Stone, and James Wright for their useful and detailed comments on the book. They have saved me from many specific mistakes and my worst rhetorical excesses. I am also grateful to Joe Feagin, Harvey Feigenbaum, Mark Mizruchi, Harvey Molotch, Joe Peschek, and Laurence Shoup for their helpful suggestions on one or more of the chapters.

The interest in this project expressed by Trev Leger of Aldine de Gruyter and the series editors, Michael Useem and James Wright, when it was only a prospectus gave me the energy and enthusiasm that made it possible to complete the writing. I am deeply appreciative of their support.

I have been aided by the research assistance given to me on parts of this project by Michael Webber while he was a graduate student in sociology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His dissertation research on campaign finance and the Democratic party has been especially helpful to me (Webber, 1990). I am also grateful to my son Joel Domhoff and a close family friend Steve Glass for their research assistance. In addition, I want to thank Robert Bulman, a recent graduate in sociology from the University of California, Santa Cruz, for his research and editorial help in the final stages of the project. Finally, I am grateful to the Research Committee of the Academic Senate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for the financial support that made it possible to hire Michael Webber.

Chapter 3 is a greatly expanded and updated version of a paper published in *Politics and Society* (Domhoff, 1986–87). Parts of the argument in Chapter 4 were published in a very different version in *Political Power and Social Theory* (Domhoff, 1987a). Chapter 7 is an expanded version of a paper published in the *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* (Domhoff, 1986b). A small portion of the empirical information in Chapter 9 was published in a brief review essay in *Theory and Society* (Domhoff, 1988).

I cannot pretend to be fully expert in each of the many specialist areas I have drawn on to construct my general framework in this book: organizational theory, welfare policy, labor relations, foreign policy, monetary policy, congressional

voting patterns, and party politics. I am extremely appreciative of the fact that my work has been made possible by the many detailed studies in each of these areas. However, I have not been able to read everything, and I apologize to those I may have overlooked, and to those who feel that I did not study their work closely enough.

INTRODUCTION

The general question that animates this book is the nature and distribution of power in the United States. It is in one sense a highly abstract and theoretical question, made all the more difficult by disagreements over what is meant by the concept of power, but the issues immediately become very clear when we think of power as manifesting itself in terms of who benefits, who shapes the political agenda, who holds key positions, and who has a say-so on the big decisions. Nor is the question abstract when it comes to hopes for greater freedom and equality, for such hopes soon bump up against the power of social classes, economic institutions, political groups, and state agencies.

For all its seeming relevance, however, few social scientists want to talk about how power operates in the United States, let alone try to study it. Maybe the concept becomes too vague when we try to define it, as many mainstream (pluralist) social scientists claim when they reduce power to mere "influence" or narrow it to "decision-making," and then limit their studies to specific issues or organizations at best.

Whatever the reasons for avoiding the study of the power structure in America, it has no disciplinary home in the social sciences. Research on power therefore crops up at the edges of disciplines, or in the interstices between disciplines, especially between political science and sociology. The pariah status of power in the social sciences can be seen most glaringly in economics. There, in the most celebrated of the social sciences, widely admired because of its seemingly hard-nosed assumptions about rationality, efficiency, and competition, not to mention its heavily quantitative orientation, there is virtually no concern with power. In a perusal of over 2000 entries in a comprehensive and highly regarded four-volume encyclopedia of economics that covered every topic imaginable, Robert Heilbroner (1988:23) could not find a single one focused on power. He concludes that by ignoring power the field of economics misses the heart of its subject matter, and what he says about economics applies almost equally as well to the other social sciences. Instead, the emphasis is on social "exchanges" that take place in a political vacuum. The social structure is a given. People merely try to "maximize utilities" rationally, which Heilbroner (1988:3) translates into plain

English as “bettering our condition” or “making money.” The capitalist system is seen as “a regime without rulers and ruled” (1988:25).

To the degree that there is any discussion of power among conventional social science practitioners, it is mostly theoretical in nature, and it usually concerns the power of one hypothetical individual or group over another, or focuses on a single issue or policy. When all is said and done, the mainstream literature on power never has gone beyond the excellent old book on the topic by the great philosopher Bertrand Russell, who defined power as “the production of intended effects” (1938:35). This is demonstrated by the fact that Dennis Wrong ends up with a slightly modified version of Russell’s definition after surveying the entire social science literature until 1979: he tells us that power “is the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others” (1979:2).

Russell’s definition of power also has been my starting point because it does not reduce power to underlying economic arrangements, as in Marxian theory, or to organized violence, as in Weberian theory. As Russell emphasizes:

The fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics. Like energy, power has many forms, such as wealth, armaments, civil authority, influence on opinion. No one of these can be regarded as subordinate to any other, and there is no form from which the others are derivable (1938:10–11).

The only exceptions within the academic community to the avoidance of any sustained focus on the actual operations of power in the United States have been the studies inspired by the seminal work of Floyd Hunter (1953) on Atlanta and of C. Wright Mills (1956) on the national level. Both held to theories that rooted power in organizations and institutions, putting them at odds, on the one hand, with the classical liberal emphasis on individuals and groups and, on the other, with the Marxian emphasis on classes. For Hunter, there was a “power structure,” defined as the associational, clique, or institutional patterns that maintain the general social structure and generate new policy initiatives (1953:1–6); in Atlanta this meant the major developers, retailers, and associated bankers in the downtown business community. For Mills, there was a “power elite”, who share a common experience, interest, and outlook as the top leaders of the three major institutional hierarchies of the society—giant corporations, the executive branch of the federal government, and the Pentagon. Both concepts have become part of the everyday language of social scientists and political commentators. They are seen as two sides of the same coin if we note that a “power elite” is the set of people who are the individual actors within the associational and institutional roles that comprise the “power structure.”

Hunter’s work inspired dozens of studies because he had developed a new approach called the “reputational method,” which involves systematically interviewing people about the who and how and why of power in a given city, issue area, or country. Most of the findings from these further studies at the local level

were similar to Hunter's, and a later study by Hunter (1959) at the national level identified the same individuals and institutions that Mills did through his historical and archival investigations. Later work on Atlanta by Clarence Stone (1976, 1989) has supported Hunter's claims while adding many original insights and theoretical understandings.

But mainstream social scientists, and especially political scientists, did not like Hunter's method or conclusions. One of the leading political theorists of the past 35 years, Robert Dahl (1961), even decided to undertake the only major empirical study of his academic career, an analysis of "notables" and decision-making in his hometown, New Haven, where he found that different groups had influence on different political issues. More importantly, he found that government officials were the most important power figures. Dahl's book became one of the most widely cited books in all the social sciences. Not only was it seen as a refutation of Hunter at the local level, but of Mills at the national level as well. Raymond Bauer, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Lewis Dexter, for example, wrote that Dahl "answered" Mills "most effectively" (1972:vii). America was merely New Haven writ large.

Dahl's study was in fact seriously flawed, as I subsequently showed with memos, minutes, letters, and interview material from New Haven unavailable to Dahl at the time of his inquiry, and even with material in his own protocols that contradicted his thesis (Domhoff, 1978; 1983a: Chapter 6). It was clear that the downtown business community and Yale University were the moving forces behind the all-important urban renewal program, not the new Democratic mayor, as Dahl believed from interviews with the mayor and his aides. But none of these new findings has stopped theorists as varied as Eric Nordlinger (1981:100-101) and Theda Skocpol (1985:4) from quoting his conclusions as support for their view that government is free of undue private influence. There is not the slightest hint to readers that these conclusions have been challenged empirically.

The theory and findings presented by Mills for the national level met with an even greater hue and cry, although there were no attempts at mere empirical refutation. Whereas Mills had studied the social backgrounds, educational training, and occupational careers of thousands of American leaders down through the ages before concluding that since World War II the United States has been dominated by an institutionally based power elite, his critics simply asserted he was wrong or else attacked his methodology. Dahl, speaking for a great many others on this score, said it was "a remarkable and indeed astonishing fact" that Mills could make his claims without studying "an array of specific cases to test his major hypothesis" (1958:466).

Even a political scientist who later concluded that much of the American government had been captured by specific business interests, Grant McConnell joined the hunt by writing a pluralist pamphlet for the Advertising Council, an organization created by large corporations to sell themselves to America (Hirsch, 1975). The pamphlet was meant for the use of media employees and discussion

groups as background material for dealing with the kind of claims being made by Mills and Hunter. On the first page it said:

Frequently, individuals have drawn the conclusion that policy-making lies in the hands of a small and powerful class. This conclusion is a gross misunderstanding of the political processes by which political and economic power is diffused and which extend the wide sharing of economic benefits in a people's capitalism (1958:1).

The 54-page pamphlet went on to say that "interest groups" are a "vital and indispensable form of political representation," and that they "stand as barriers against the conquest of power by any pathological mass movement" (1958:1). It included a summary of the arguments for the usefulness of interest groups by representatives of the American Farm Bureau Federation and the AFL-CIO, government officials, business leaders, and University of Chicago professors. The pamphlet received a friendly send-off in the *New York Times* (July 12, 1958:48) under the headline "Pressure Groups Called Integral: Chicago Study Says Most Perform Governmental Functions in the Open." The participants in the discussion leading to the pamphlet were listed, including executives from *Time*, Marsh and McLennan Insurance Company, Union Tank Car Company, and the Farm Foundation.

As negative as mainstream social scientists were toward the theories proposed by Hunter and Mills, I believe the issue of methodology upset critics almost as much. There was always the whisper in the halls that research on power structures is just so much "muckraking," little better than what a good investigative journalist might do. But the real problem was that this research did not fit into the conventional categories that are taught in courses on methodology—experimental, survey, interview, case study, field observation, historical, and comparative. Since it is their unique methods that mark social scientists off as specialists deserving of some respect, power structure researchers must be something else because they did not have a sanctioned methodology. Only slowly did social scientists realize that the tracing of individuals, money flows, and ideas through institutions and social classes is a form of sociometry (Kadushin, 1968), an approach described by Granovetter as "curiously peripheral—invisible, really" (1973:1360) within the main traditions of sociology. Finally, in the 1970s, advances in graph theory and computer science combined with respectable new work in social anthropology to rechristen the field as "network analysis." The work of Phillip Bonacich (1972, 1982, 1987) and Richard Alba (1973) then provided the essential quantitative techniques for studying large corporate and social data bases (e.g., Sonquist and Koenig, 1975; Domhoff, 1975; Mariolis, 1975; Bonacich and Domhoff, 1981; Mizruchi, 1982; Salzman and Domhoff, 1983; Mintz and Schwartz, 1981a,b, 1983, 1985). Thus, many social scientists came to understand that power structure research was a form of "membership network analysis" (Breiger, 1974).

However, the real breakthrough to respectability began when the new network analysts emphasized that social networks can include institutions as well as individuals. It became clear that the network of people and institutions that is the foundation of all power structure research, whether it is done by pluralists, Marxists, or anyone else, is not reductionistic to the individual level, but instead incorporates individuals into organizations, institutions, or classes. Both an individual clique network and an institutional interlock network are imbedded in the matrix of people and institutions that is the mathematical representation of a social network (Breiger, 1974; Domhoff, 1978: Chapter 4; 1983a:23–26, 187–89). As Breiger (1974:70–71) succinctly put it, such matrices incorporate the two social relations of concern to all social theorists, personal relationships and memberships in collectivities.

Despite the general rejection of the theory, methods, and findings provided by Mills and Hunter, there were a few social scientists and activists of the 1960s generation who produced empirically based studies of social power. Many of them turned to American Marxists like Paul Sweezy, Paul Baran, and Harry Magdoff as well as to Mills and Hunter for their inspiration, infusing a class dimension into power structure research. By and large, people like Sweezy, Baran, and Magdoff were what Mills approvingly called “plain Marxists” (1962:98–99), meaning Marxists who worked within the spirit and method of Marxism, but were not dogmatic about every one of its historical and political claims. He even decided to include himself in the category, to the horror of many Marxists. This easy mingling of Mills, Hunter, and the plain Marxists found expression in my work (Domhoff, 1967, 1970c; Domhoff and Ballard, 1968) and in many of the analyses done by members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the North American Committee on Latin America (NACLA). Much of this work proved to be useful in civil rights, campus, and antiwar organizing. Several of the most enduring of these studies were on major universities and how they fit into the larger power structure: “Who Rules Columbia?”, “How Harvard Rules,” and “Go To School, Learn to Rule”, a study of Yale University and its role in New Haven.

Just as this work seemed to be taking off, it was slowed down and put on the defensive by the decline of the New Left and attacks on it by those Mills would have called the sophisticated Marxists (1962:96–97), who manage to find a way to rescue every Marxian formulation from refutation through exegesis, reinterpretation, or contrived reformulation. The substance of these critiques by the new “structural Marxists” will be presented in detail in the following chapters, but for now the point is that their criticisms had an impact in some quarters.

The structural Marxists were soon joined in the attack on power structure studies by those who called themselves “state-centric” or state autonomy theorists. While the state autonomy theorists certainly had their major differences with all varieties of Marxists, they did share with the structural Marxists the

belief that plain Marxists had a crude view of the state as the simple tool or “instrument” of capitalists. This “instrumentalist” view of the state was said to rest on personal linkages between capitalists and government officials, and to require the direct participation of capitalists in the state. Instrumentalism was then contrasted with “structuralism,” which was said to be more sophisticated because it saw the state as an organizational entity within an overall system with underlying rules and imperatives. For the structural Marxists, the state has “relative autonomy” from any specific capitalists or the capitalist class, but is in the general service of capitalism. For state autonomy theorists such as Theda Skocpol (1979), states are administrative, policing, and military organizations with a logic and interests of their own. These interests are not necessarily equivalent to or related to the interests of a dominant class or the members of society as a whole. The state is concerned with maintaining order and competing with other states. In the process of carrying out these tasks, the state may compete with the dominant class in the society for resources or subordinate that class to its own interests.

Structural Marxists and state autonomy theorists also shared a common lack of interest in the work of Mills and Hunter. Mills was sometimes footnoted by them for his work on union leaders (1948) or his ringing critique of conventional sociology (1959), but rarely for his work on power. As for Hunter, he never made it into a single footnote in any of the major works in either of the new approaches, despite the fact that a thoughtful theorist sympathetic to the efforts of all structural thinkers, John Walton (1976), argued that Hunter’s work was far more sophisticated than most social scientists were willing to grant, and potentially useful to new work in political economy as well.

Structural Marxists and state autonomy theorists shared one final point beside their common disdains. They abandoned the study of social power in general for more narrow concerns such as “class structure” or “state power.” Just as the pluralists tend to reduce power to mere influence or decision-making, so these theorists cut it down to a topic in political economy (structural Marxists) or politics (state autonomy theorists). When this narrowing is combined with their emphasis on very traditional historical and comparative methods acceptable to everyone, it comes as no surprise that they have been welcomed into the mainstream academic community. The work of state autonomy theorists will be criticized along with that of structural Marxists in subsequent chapters.

I might have concluded it was futile to argue with these new critics if the study of social power in all its manifestations had not been revived in 1986 with the publication of Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power: From the Beginnings of Civilization to 1760 A.D.* The new theory in this book, which roots power in four interacting social networks, makes it possible to deal with both structural Marxists and state autonomy theorists in a way that is completely compatible with the aims, findings, and middle-range theorizing that characterizes the Mills–Hunter tradition. I must admit that it is invigorating to have

such a congenial theoretical home after all those years spent wandering in the empirical wilderness, surrounded on every side by pluralists, structural Marxists, and utility maximizers.

The purpose of this book now can be stated more specifically. I intend to show that Mann's theory provides the general framework and rationale for the more limited interpretation of the American power structure that I have developed over the past 25 years. I aim to demonstrate this through bringing new data and arguments to bear on several major policy initiatives at the national level that were analyzed previously by structural Marxists, state autonomy theorists, or other prominent theorists with whom I disagree. That is, each of the case studies directly challenges a previous analysis by one or more of my opponents with empirical information that I think to be contradictory to their most important claims.

The book has two organizing principles. First, it descends from the general-theoretical-historical in Chapters 1 and 2 to the specific-empirical-contemporary in Chapters 3-10. Second, once at the specific-empirical-contemporary level, the book marches in chronological fashion from the early 1930s to the early 1980s, dealing with important New Deal legislation such as the Social Security Act and the National Labor Relations Act, significant postwar legislation such as the Employment Act and Trade Expansion Act, and more recent issues, such as the decline of the Democrats and the revival of conservatism.

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SOCIAL NETWORKS, POWER, AND THE STATE

Introduction

By the early 1980s, contrary to the pious hopes I had expressed at the turn of the decade for continuing dialogue and innovation (1980:15), the debate on power in America triggered by Hunter and Mills had become depressingly predictable. There were said to be three general theories—pluralist, institutional elitist, and Marxist—and three basic methods—decisional, positional, and reputation. There were also three main indicators of power—who decides, who sits, and who benefits. Attempts were made to show that the three theories could be in part synthesized if they were understood as different levels of analysis (e.g., Alford and Friedland, 1985), and I argued that the three methods were not as different or as tied to any one theory as sometimes claimed (Domhoff, 1978: Chapter 4), but the holy trinities were in place, and it was proving difficult to dislodge them.

From the very outset, it had been my aim to combine an institutional analysis with a class analysis. I tried to do so by seeing if Mills's institutionally based power elite could be grounded in the upper (capitalist-based) class. I redefined the power elite in such a way that it included active, working members of the upper class and high-level employees in private institutions controlled by members of the upper class, and then explored the extent to which the members of this power elite overlapped with those encompassed by Mills's concept. I found that the overlap was nearly perfect, and then showed how these people dominated policy-making in the executive branch of the federal government through a variety of direct and indirect means.

Despite this explicit attempt at transcending the usual categories, the taxonomists of the 1980s insisted that everyone had to be put in one category or another. One textbook in political sociology had me listed as a Marxist (Marger, 1981), another decided that I was an institutional elitist (Sherman and Kolker, 1987). Alford and Friedland had me down as an elitist in an early version of their

manuscript, then decided that I was a class theorist who worked at the individual level of analysis (1985:301). For me, the research tradition started by Mills and Hunter, and invigorated by the activists and plain Marxists of the 1960s, had become as sterile and polemical as the old mainstream literature on power. The orthodoxies of the structural Marxists and state autonomy theorists only added to the problem.

It was in this context that I encountered Mann's new theory of social power. As a British sociologist who had immersed himself in the study of history over the previous ten years, he was one step removed from many of the controversies that were polarizing studies of power in America. He certainly was alive to the key general issues at stake, but he was not caught up in the details and personal politics of the American debate. His work, then, offered an opportunity for a new look, a fresh start.

Mann begins by doing away with the usual notion of a "bounded society" or a "social system." Since there is no "totality," there can be no "subsystems," "levels," or "dimensions." Instead, social organization must be understood in terms of four "overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power" (1986:1) that run off in different directions and have varying extensions in physical space. This is music to the ears of those who analyze American power structures as networks of people and institutions. Network analysis is no longer a mere "methodological strategy" for studying power structures defined as "a network of people and institutions who differentially benefit from the functioning of the social system," as I claimed in the 1970s (Domhoff, 1978:133), but a theoretical stance as well.

These four interacting networks—ideological, economic, military, and political—are conceptualized as organized means of attaining human goals. Mann's concern is with the "logistics" of power (1986:9–10, 518). No one of the networks is more fundamental than the others. Each one presupposes the existence of the others, which fits nicely with Russell's (1938:10–11) point that power cannot be reduced to one basic form. Thus, there can be no "ultimate primacy" in the "mode of production" or "the normative system" or "the state." Since the emphasis is on people acting through social networks, the distinction between "social action" and "social structure," which also happens to underlie the debate over "instrumental" and "structural" theories of the state, is simply abolished. There no longer needs to be a periodic revival of the "agency vs. structure" debate. Since the four networks have different and constantly changing boundaries that vary with the invention of new technologies and the emergence of new organizational forms, the old division between "endogenous" and "exogenous" factors in the understanding of social conflict is discarded as "not helpful" (Mann, 1986:1). It is a freeing set of conceptualizations, the best thing since Mills (1962: Chapter 6) briefly stated his alternative to Marxism as a prolegomenon to the worldwide historical comparison of social