

Introduction to "Power in American Society"

The course website can be found by going to allenbolar.wordpress.com, and then finding our course from the teaching dropdown menu. There you will find the syllabus, course readings, and some handouts with advice on writing a paper, reading Supreme Court cases, and managing your anxiety. Your professor's email address is rbolar@ucsd.edu, his office is located in SSB #329, and his office hours will be Tuesdays from 3:30-5:30 PM. Your TA is Kyle Haines, and his email address is kyhaines@ucsd.edu, his office is SSB #349, and his office hours are on Thursday from 12:30-1:30 PM.

There is a lot of reading in this class, so get to work. The readings are truly the gem of the class. Attendance will count for 10% of your course grade, but you will be given 2 free absences without penalty. There will be a take-home midterm, a 7-page paper, and a final exam, which will make up the balance of your course grade.

The purpose of this course is to examine the ways in which political power and participation – *what it means to be a citizen* -- have been contested over the course of American history. We want to understand power in an American context. According to the Declaration of Independence, "all men are created equal...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights", and according to the preamble to the Constitution, the government of the United States was ordained and established by "the people." It seems from these documents that equal citizens hold power in our democracy. But as acrimonious debates and violent struggles have demonstrated, these canonical formulations do not capture the full scope of the distribution of power in America.

We seek to understand: Who has power? What can they do with it? What limits are present to protect individuals from the state and from each other? To answer these questions, and others, we shall look at a range of primary texts as well as elements of the larger cultural and historical landscape that have shaped our society. The *Declaration of Independence* is important, but so are Charlie Chaplin, Woody Guthrie, and Bob Dylan.

We begin the course by looking at the relationship between power and the law. Later, we will look at the role of citizenship and standing, identity, class, social expectations, and ability. The power distribution depends upon elements both internal and external to any given individual. Some communities and institutions have power, and defining the membership in such communities and institutions is itself an act of power.

Power comes in multiple forms; some beneficent, some potentially harmful. Supreme Court Justices have the anti-majoritarian power to overrule democratic legislatures. The casino-billionaire, Sheldon Adelson, has the power to provide substantial funds to Newt Gingrich's presidential campaign because of his immense wealth and because the Supreme Court overturned legislative limits on political contributions (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 2010). The diagnostician Dr. Gregory House has the power to diagnose and cure diseases that no one else can, which is a power that he usually wields for good. Lt. John Pike of the UC Davis Police had power to enforce the law and the power to hurt student protesters. What criteria shall we use to judge Lt. Pike's use of power? In addition, we can see the power of social roles and expectations reflected in advertisements, which in turn attempt to shape our expectations. Parents have the power to influence their children, but so do vapid celebrities.

Power comes in many shapes and sizes, so we need a definition. Possible definitions: "p=w/t", "power is strength", "power is influence". Let us use this: "power is

the ability to work one's will in the world". Power can operate through violence and physical coercion, economic influence, legal power, culture, and ideas. Ideas matter a great deal, and so we will spend a good deal of our time talking about ideas in this class.

Our ideas about the proper use of power shape our reactions to its use. Assume that you are driving 15 miles over the speed limit, and a police officer catches you and writes you a ticket. Though the money's loss will sting, it is unlikely that you will harbor ill-will towards the police officer, and you will probably pay the ticket. But why? Surely, it is not merely the threat of force, because as a law-abiding citizen you probably think that you should pay the fine.

However, if your professor caught you speeding and lowered your grade as punishment, you will not only lament your lowered grade, but you will also feel that you have been treated unfairly, and probably rebel or seek redress. You will consider it illegitimate for the professor to punish your traffic violation, but why? After all, you did speed, and you know it.

The reason is simple. The police officer has the authority to issue traffic citations, while college professors do not. Let us define authority, thusly: "authority is the legitimate use of power". Authority can come from multiple sources. Three common sources are tradition, the law, and charisma.

Traditional authority is when we believe that someone may use power legitimately because they or their group have always done so. Rational/legal authority gives someone their authority based upon their prescribe role, e.g. a police officer, a President. Note that Barack Obama as a lot of authority, because he is "The President". There is also charisma, which is when someone has authority because a particularly exceptional quality about them. Perhaps they smile a lot and have skill on the football field; that sort of thing.

Our class will take an historical and a theoretical approach to an understanding of power. We begin at the beginning of the American state, and we will discuss the limits of state power, as well as mechanisms that early Americans established to institutionalize proper authority in the law. The founders looked upon the ruling powers in England that established their laws and did not recognize it as a legitimate power. They saw this power as a tyranny, and they sought to rid themselves of it. Early Americans worried about tyranny, and the founders established institutions that could wield authority and legitimize power in a way that they were comfortable with. We must understand how they did this.