

Handbook of
Politics
State and Society in Global Perspective

Edited by

Kevin T. Leicht

*The University of Iowa
Department of Sociology, Iowa City, IA, USA*

J. Craig Jenkins

*The Ohio State University
Department of Sociology, Columbus, OH, USA*

 **Springer**

CHAPTER 6

Power, Politics, and the Civil Sphere

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

The state is the source of coercion in modern societies, but politics and power are about much more than states. The state provides an umbrella for modern politics, but so does the civil sphere. Politics originates in the civil sphere; it aims to push state power in a certain direction, making it work on behalf of this end rather than another. These ends are set by communicative conflicts in the civil sphere. To articulate these ends with state power – that is the aim and reward of modern politics.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

Before an overflow audience of Munich students in 1918, in the highly unstable and polarized atmosphere of the just defeated German nation, Max Weber spoke about the meaning of modern politics. In the years since, this lecture, “Politics as a Vocation,” has become famous. Weber stressed the dignity of politics and its distinctive nature. He also wanted to remind his radically inclined students – who represented both rightist and leftist extremes – that politics can be effectively conducted within the framework of the state.

What do we understand by politics? The concept is extremely broad and comprises any kind of *independent* leadership in action. One speaks of the currency policy of the banks [or] of the strike policy of a trade union; one may speak of the educational policy of a municipality or a township, of the policy of the president of a voluntary association, and, finally, even of the policy of a prudent wife who seeks to guide her husband. Tonight, our reflections are, of course, not based upon such a broad concept. We wish to understand by politics only the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a *political* association, hence today, of a *state*. (Weber 1958a: 77, original italics)

In the context of a state, politics is about gaining or losing power, which Weber defined in a realistic, not an idealistic manner. It is “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber 1978: 53).

“Politics” for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state ... He who is active in politics strives for power either as a means in serving other aims, ideal or egoistic, or as “power for power’s sake,” that is, in order to enjoy the prestige-feeling that power gives. (Weber 1958a: 78)

Politics pulls us away from the impersonality of bureaucracy, from the modern emphasis on rationality and efficiency. It seems to bring us back to private interests and resources. It certainly moves political analysis from the impersonal to the personal, from state to party, from commands to persuasion, from rules to votes, from organizations to individuals. It also allows us to think about the cultural images and about symbolic manipulation.

AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMATION

While power may be defined as the ability to carry out one's will regardless of any resistance, it is easier and more effective to exercise power if one takes the will of the other into account. Insofar as another person obeys you, not from fear but from respect, one exercises not only power but authority. Authoritative power possesses legitimation. According to Weber's classic definition, now accepted by virtually all political thinkers, there are actually three different types of legitimate authority, what Weber called "inner justifications" for the exercise of power. The first is tradition, which Weber describes as "the authority of the 'eternal yesterday,' i.e., of the mores sanctified through the unimaginably ancient recognition and habitual orientation to conform" (Weber 1958a: 78–79). Quite the opposite of this traditional form of authority, which defined patrimonial power in premodern times, is the rational-legal mode of legitimation that defines the modern state.

There is domination by virtue of "legality," by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional "competence" based on rationally created *rules*. In this case, obedience is expected in discharging statutory obligations. This is domination as exercised by the modern "servant of the state" and by all those bearers of power who in this respect resemble him. (Weber 1958a: 79)

Finally, power can be legitimated in much more personal terms, by reference to a leader's charisma.

There is the authority of the extraordinary and personal *gift of grace* (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism or other qualities of individual leadership. This is "charismatic" domination, as exercised by the prophet or – in the field of politics – by the elected war lord, the plebiscitarian [i.e., popularly-elected] ruler, the great demagogue, or the political party leader. (Weber 1958a: 79, original italics)

POSTMODERN AUTHORITY: CHARISMA AND CULTURE

Weber thought charisma would wither away in the face of modern rationalization. Its inspiring, volatile, innovative, and sometimes dangerous subjectivity would be no match for the rational-legal power of the bureaucratic machine. It has not turned out that way. For at least two centuries, democratic and nondemocratic nations have sustained the public spheres whose structuring has depended upon mass media. Both democratic and nondemocratic politicians, then, depend upon mass media to construct their charismatic power; and in postmodern societies, political strategists have become increasingly self-conscious about the mass mediated production of their image. Though always symbolic and cultural, in postmodern societies public political action has become increasingly reconceptualized as political "performance" (Alexander et al. 2006). Those who struggle for power, whether conservative, liberal, or radical, strive to project powerful symbolic images on the public stage, and to control their interpretation. And political journalism has become increasingly concerned with evaluating this performative task.

Intellectual critics and critical sociologists often decry the emphasis on "symbolic politics" as manipulative and propagandistic, as a turning away from reality to pretence, simulation, and spectacle. Political practitioners speak simply about getting out truthful information about their message or their candidate.

In contemporary society, the politics of image-making – public relations and advertising – has become fundamental to public life, whether the intent is to inform or to deceive, to liberate or to repress. In the 1960s, the new rules of the political game were already emerging, but the media were not yet covering campaigns from the performative point of view. Back in 1968, after Richard Nixon triumphed over Hubert Humphrey in a critical presidential election, a former Republican strategist named Joe McGinniss published *The Selling of the President*, and the "scandalous" tell-all book became a controversial, runaway best seller. At one point in his account, McGinniss revealed the contents of a secret strategy memo that had been prepared for Nixon before Robert Kennedy's assassination, when the telegenic "Bobby" looked to be Nixon's future democratic opponent. The aim of the Republican staff memo was to convince Nixon to recast his public image. Its self-serving but still revealing subtext was that mass mediated charisma that had triumphed over reasoned political debate.

The Bobby phenomenon; his screaming appeal to the TV generation. This certainly has nothing to do with logical persuasion; it's a total *experience*, a tactile sense Thousands of little girls [*sic*] who want him to be president so they can have him on the TV screen and run their fingers through the image of his hair ...

Reason pushes the viewer back, it assaults him, it demands that he agree or disagree; [by contrast,] impression can envelop him, invite him in, without making an intellectual demand, or a demand on his intellectual energies ...

When we argue with him we demand that he make the effort of replying. We seek to engage his intellect, and for most people this is the most difficult work of all. The emotions are more easily roused, closer to the surface, more malleable. Get the voters to like the guy, and the battle's two thirds won. (quoted in McGinniss 1968: 187–189)

SOCIAL POWER AND POLITICS

As this insider's account suggests, the struggle for charismatic power is fuelled, sometimes invisibly, by other forms of social power. (Mann 1986, 1993). The very idea of "selling" a President suggests that the struggle for charismatic power is enabled and also constrained by economic and intellectual power. It is both expensive (economic power) and strategically demanding (intellectual power) to mount a convincing political campaign, whether Presidential or parliamentary. Effective politicians are, of course, usually talented strategic thinkers themselves. But professional strategists must also be hired, and the salaries of speech writers must be paid. The politician who strives for charismatic power must purchase television time, and she will hire, if she can, professional spin doctors and other experts at public relations. Those who possess economic power can, in this way, exercise great influence over who gets power, and how much.

This layered complexity of power, its visible and its invisible parts, was explored in an influential manner by the three-dimensional model developed by Steven Lukes. The one-dimensional view of power, Lukes writes (1974: 15, original italics), "involves a focus on *behavior* in the making of *decisions* on issues over which there is an observable *conflict* of *interests*." While he criticizes this approach, Lukes acknowledges that it does capture one level of modern politics, the level that is directly observable and that involves policy preferences and political participation. The two-dimensional view goes deeper into the less visible

aspects of social power, into "the question of the control over the agenda of politics and of the ways in which the potential issues are kept out of the political process" (Lukes 1974: 21). The three-dimensional approach carries this search deeper still, exploring how power can be exercised without any overt participation in political institutions and without engendering any open political conflict. In this third dimension, hidden social powers ensure that a particular political agenda will be pursued, even while the forms of political legitimacy remain intact and the autonomy of the state seems to be maintained.

It is with the second and the third dimensions of power that Lukes points to the influence of social as compared to merely political elites. Social elites operate outside the political domain framed by the state and the political institutions of party and government. These elites try to "wire" politics, using their social power to control political power, largely in private ways.

THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE: THE POWER ELITE?

Suspicious about social elites controlling political life are nothing new. They are the cynical response to disappointment about the possibilities for equality and democracy in the capitalist society. Karl Marx articulated a particularly strident and powerful vision of hidden social control in his class theory, which held that the state is really nothing more than the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, the wealthiest economic class. Writing a century after Marx, C. Wright Mills developed this class model in the more subtle form that has become a model for critical, neo-Marxian analysis ever since. Mills published *The Power Elite* (1959) in the waning days of the conservative political administration of President Dwight Eisenhower and in the shadow of the most virulent phase of the Cold War. He gave voice to the frustrations of those who had been excluded from political decisionmaking and to those who were becoming increasingly pessimistic about the ability for average people to effect any substantial political change:

The powers of ordinary men are circumscribed by the everyday worlds in which they live, yet even in these rounds of job, family, and neighborhood they often seem driven by forces they can neither understand nor govern. "Great changes" are beyond their control, but affect their conduct and outlook none the less. The very framework of modern society confines them to projects not their own ... The men and women of the mass society ... accordingly feel they are without purpose in an epoch in which they are without power. But not all men are in this sense ordinary. As the means of information and of power are centralized, some men come to occupy positions in American society from which they can look down upon, so to speak, and by their decisions mightily affect, the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women. They are not made by their jobs; they set up and break down jobs for thousands of others; they are not confined by simple family responsibilities; they can escape. They may live in many hotels and houses, but they are bound by no one community. They need not merely "meet the demands of the day and hour;" in some part, they create these demands, and cause others to meet them. Whether or not they profess their power, their technical and political experience of it far transcends that of the underlying population. (Mills 1959: 3)

In opposition to the traditional Marxian view, Mills developed a seemingly more pluralistic and Weberian model. He discussed elite power, not only in the economic sphere but also in the political and the military spheres, insisting that it is the control of institutions, not wealth per se, that defines the elite position. Rather than pure economic control, elite domination is defined by three different forms of social power:

We do not accept as adequate the simple view that high economic men unilaterally make all decisions of national consequence. We hold that such a simple view of "economic determinism" must be elaborated by "political determinism" and "military determinism" [and] that the higher agents of each of these three domains now often have a noticeable degree of autonomy ... Those are the major reasons why we prefer "power elite" to "ruling class." (Mills 1959: 277)

Despite these theoretical reservations, however, Mills claimed that in his empirical analysis he had discovered that, in practice, the three different elites closely coordinate their actions, that "at the top of this structure, the power elite has been shaped by the coincidence of interest between those who control the major means of production and those who control the newly enlarged means of violence," "the corporate chieftains and the professional warlords" (Mills 1959: 276). While the power elite thesis thus seems to resemble the Marxian theory that was rejected by Mills, it differs in exploring how cultural processes shape an elite's sense of itself. One must investigate the power elite's life style, its "psychological affinities," to "grasp the personal and social basis of the power elite's unity" (Mills 1959: 278).

Sociologists influenced by Mills have confirmed that there is, indeed, an economic elite in the U.S. Wealth is vastly concentrated in the top one per cent of the American population, and a large part of this wealth is inherited at birth. Many large stock holding families, in fact, remain actively involved in controlling the direction of major corporations through family offices, investment partnerships, and holding companies. Researchers such as William Domhoff (1967) have also confirmed Mills' claim that elite domination involves, not only shared economic interest, but shared collective identity. The product of private cultural institutions, shared elite socialization generates a sense of trust. The super-rich go to school, socialize, and recreate in institutions to which ordinary people hardly have access. So, they are linked not only economically, through business transactions and corporate interests, but also socially, through shared culture and marriage. Middle class people who rise to become members of the power elite gain not only great wealth but access to the life styles of America's relatively invisible privileged class. There is, in other words, cultural assimilation into the American upper class.

DOES THE ECONOMIC ELITE CONTROL POLITICS?

Mills and his followers have demonstrated that social power is distributed unevenly, and that the economic elite is particularly powerful. But they have never succeeded in making a good case for their most ambitious claim – that the economic elite actually controls the state. To the contrary, it has been relatively easy to demonstrate that the state retains a very real autonomy from social power. In the often fiercely fought political struggles to influence state power, social elites fail time after time to exercise compelling control over the discourse or ultimate success.

One way to see this is to set side by side the biographies of those who wield great political power. The career of Vice President Richard Cheney would seem to prove the power elite thesis. Mr. Cheney moved from being a Wyoming congressman to Defense Secretary in the first Bush administration, then to become chief executive of the multibillion dollar Halliburton (oil) company and finally to being Vice President under the administration of President George W. Bush. Yet, right alongside Vice President Cheney sat Secretary of State Colin Powell, one of the most powerful cabinet members in the same administration who, albeit unsuccessfully, opposed the Vice President in central areas of social policy. Born into the African American working class, Powell achieved military power as a four star general and later as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. For every scion of inherited wealth and Ivy League provenance who becomes President, like those named Bush or Roosevelt or Kennedy, there is a brilliant political strategist from humble origins, named Lincoln, Johnson, or Clinton, who achieves the Presidency through charisma and hard work. For every giant corporation, like Enron, exercising backroom influence on government policies, there is the counter-influence of the charismatic outsider, like Martin Luther King, who brought an exploited minority to

significant political power, or Ralph Nader, who forced safety and environmental concerns onto the national political agenda.

Power elite theorists try to explain away such obvious examples of state autonomy and political pluralism. Mills (1959: 231), for example, makes the following claims:

- "The simple, old-fashioned sense of being elected up the political hierarchy" simply no longer exists;
- Politics has become "more of an appointed than an elected career;"
- An "inner circle of political outsiders" representing the corporate rich "have taken over the key executive posts of administrative command," excluding figures from electoral politics and political parties.

If such assertions were true, then the public and open contestations for power that appear to characterize contemporary societies would be entirely without effect. Public opinion would be powerless, and social movements initiated by those outside the power elite would be doomed to fail.

Mills was aware that power elite theory had to respond to these challenges. The central empirical question for understanding modern politics, he agreed, is "the degree to which the public has genuine autonomy from instituted authority" (Mills 1959: 303). If there does exist "the free ebb and flow of discussion," then there exist "possibilities of answering back, or organizing autonomous organs of public opinion, [and] of realizing opinion in action" (Mills 1959: 298). Whether or not there is a concentration of institutional power, in other words, ends up not being critically important. If "the power elite ... is *truly* responsible to, or *even exists in connection with*, a community of publics, it carries a very different meaning than if such a public is being transformed into a society of masses" (Mills 1959: 302, italics added).

Mills asserts that the public has, in fact, been transformed in just this way. The same social forces that have created the new power elite, he claims, have turned the once critical and independent public into a manipulated, dependent mass. Elites, he suggests, are "centers of *manipulation* as well as of authority." The public is "rather passively exposed to the mass media and rather helplessly opened up to the suggestions and manipulations that flow from these media" (Mills 1959: 305, italics added). The mass media have committed "psychical rape," and public opinion has been eliminated as a challenge to the power of the elite (Mills 1959: 309).

Such assertions about the transformation of the modern public into a pliant mass are central to arguments for the domination of political by social power. They define the vital research questions for social scientists interested in whether or not democracy continues to be a viable possibility in contemporary societies. Is the public in democratic societies really manipulated in this way? Are the media fundamentally controlled by corporate wealth, or do they also provide a space for oppositional groups to broadcast alternative ideas? Can charismatic power serve anti-elite movements? Is the culture of political life merely the replication of class culture? Does democratic political culture contain ethical aspirations that draw from noneconomic and nonelite sources?

CITIZENSHIP, PUBLICS, AND THE CIVIL SPHERE

Less than a decade after Mills articulated his sociological pessimism about democratic publics, President Lyndon B. Johnson, a politician who had risen from the provincial poverty of south-central Texas, signed into law the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*. He did so in response to a social

movement of working class African Americans whose grandparents had been slaves in the American south. Their charismatic leader, Martin Luther King, had created vast waves of sympathy among the privileged Northern whites in the course of challenging the power of the white racist Southern state. He did so by organizing a series of powerfully affecting performances on the stage of American public life (Alexander 2006: 293–391). These black social dramas projected radical, anti-racist challenges to established power. They were transmitted by a sympathetic mass media dominated by white journalists and controlled by vast corporate wealth. This supportive public opinion was transformed into political power through the votes of American citizens, both black and white.

CIVIL SOLIDARITY AND PUBLIC LIFE

Political struggles in contemporary societies are not determined by the power of social elites and state bureaucracies. They are deeply affected by moral ideas about citizenship and human rights. Between social power, on the one side, and state power, on the other, there sits a cultural and institutional space that can be called the “civil sphere” (Alexander 2006: 53–192). The civil sphere is defined by legal norms that guarantee rights to individuals. It is also defined by feelings and values that stress solidarity with every other member of society, no matter what their status or power. Being a citizen does not only mean being part of a state. It also means being a member of the civil sphere, part of the imagined solidarity of the civil community that defines a democracy.

You are born a full citizen only in the narrowly legal sense. Your citizenship can actually become full only if those who are already citizens believe, feel, and acknowledge that you have the capacity for civil behavior. This considered evaluation is reflected in a negative way by the fact that children and convicted felons are not allowed to vote. Differential access to full citizenship is reflected in the struggles of subjugated and excluded groups for political power. For such political struggles are not only about power, but about recognition of civil qualities. Social movements demand power, but they also work to present themselves in a civil way, as potentially good citizens. To be seen as a potentially good citizen, one must present oneself inside the “discourse of civil society,” as rational and honest, trusting but critical, open not secretive, cooperative but also independent. Those who strive to achieve political power must strive to represent themselves in terms of these civil qualities. To do so, they need the mass media. Their audience is the public of citizens. Their goal is to influence the public’s opinion.

The civil sphere is highly idealized. It reflects the aspirations and hopes crystallized by charismatic democrats like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King. It rests upon philosophical foundations that stretch from Socrates, who died for political and intellectual freedom in ancient Greece, to thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who resisted the divine rights of British and French kings, to the American founding fathers who created the Constitution and Bill of Rights. These ideals can sometimes have real teeth. Civil society is composed not only of beliefs, but of institutions. These institutions create real rewards for civil behavior and punishments for uncivil action.

Full members of the civil society possess a wide range of highly material rights. Contract law punishes dishonesty, the failure to disclose pertinent information. Criminal law provides severe sanctions for violence, indeed for coercion of any kind, which is the prototype of anticivil behavior between two people. The material powers that accrue to fully realized membership in civil society extend to voting, the process of selecting and discarding those

who control the state power. If you are a member of the civil sphere, you also have the right to meet with other people in public, to keep your private life invisible to state authorities, to form organizations, and to mount political campaigns and demonstrations. Fully recognized citizens have the right, in other words, to trigger and to alter the great tides of public opinion. One of the most important political theorists of democracy, Hannah Arendt, wrote that "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity" (Arendt 1958: 50). Members of the civil sphere have the right to publish newspapers and books, to produce and distribute movies and songs. They can start their own radio and television stations. They can raise money to fund pet projects. They can start social movements to raise issues, to redirect political and social power, to be critical of any and all the powers that be.

To the degree that there is democracy, the civil sphere has some autonomy from social powers and state bureaucracy alike. When citizens mobilize themselves, when they become concerned and demanding citizens, then the state governs *for* them, and bureaucratic power is distributed in *their* interests. When opinion is fervent, elites offer compromises to co-opt aroused publics and reforms to calm them down. In such times, those who control the political power offer to share it with charismatic civil leaders, and those who control social power offer to spend it on their behalf. Arendt emphasizes this potential conflict between private social power and public political power. She writes, "the term 'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (Arendt 1958: 52).

The civil sphere defines an open space of public contention. Jurgen Habermas, brought this element to light in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991). Habermas describes how this new institution of democratic life first emerged in the eighteenth century. He believes that it emerged when the bourgeoisie struggled for political power against the aristocracy that exercised traditional authority:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing [social] relations The medium for this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (Habermas 1991: 27)

Within the public space of the civil sphere, Habermas claims, the simple force of the better argument sometimes wins. This is a non-bureaucratic, more democratic version of "rational-legal" authority as the sine qua non of legitimacy in the modern epoch.

After the cultural turn, however, we must understand "better argument" in a much more symbolic way. Those who aspire to exercise public power in democratic societies rely less on reason and intellectual argument than upon symbolic representation. Civil qualities are constructed through images, codes and narratives broadcast to the public audience of citizens. And it is not only outsiders who must navigate the shoals of public opinion and mass media. The same applies to the powers of social elites and even to the highest powers of the state. Corporations do not exercise some kind of automatic control over public life. No matter how much they would like to, at important moments they cannot control the political agenda. Particularly at moments of crisis, the publics of democratic societies – composed of lower, middle, and upper classes – can turn against corporate power and force it to become regulated in a more responsive way. This civil indignation can be heard, for example, in the anger that U.S. Senators broadcast during the Enron crisis. They fired off withering salvos at the corporation's former top executive who appeared before a Congressional panel.

Senator FITZGERALD: Mr. Lay, I've concluded that you're perhaps the most accomplished confidence man since Charles Ponzi. I'd say you were a carnival barker, except that wouldn't be fair to carnival barkers. A carnie will at least tell you up front that he's running a shell game. You, Mr. Lay, were running what purported to be the seventh largest corporation in America.

Senator KERRY: ...As we fight a war on terrorism, and as we talk about holding other systems accountable, so we can follow the flow of money, we have – all of us – in this Congress allowed to stand for too long a system that undermines our capacity to do that, and that's offshore subsidiaries and tax havens.

Senator HOLLINGS: Well, much has been said about the development of a culture of corporate corruption, but there's also the culture of political corruption. And maybe we can get some good out of this whole situation, in that there's no better example than "Kenny Boy" of cash-and-carry government. I mean, I hope that this shames us into acting over on the House side and then on the Senate side, and sends a campaign reform bill to the president. We've got to clean up our own act, and maybe that's the good we'll get out of this situation. (Oppel and Kahn 2002)

Senator DURBIN: After all of the sound and fury of these investigations, the bottom-line questions are: Is Congress willing to amend the law to rein in the greed of the next Enron? Are we willing to concede that the genius of capitalism can result in ruthless behavior without our oversight and the protection of law? Can we save pensioners and investors – who were outsiders believing in the fairness of the market – from the corporate insiders who walk away from these colossal business train wrecks with their pockets full and without a scratch? Over 100 million Americans who own stock and 42 million who own 401(k)'s will be watching to see if these hearings and many others on Capitol Hill are about more than face time on the nightly news. To me, this national debate is about more than a failed corporate giant. It is about the values of our nation. Enron is a big story not just because of its bankruptcy. Sadly, bankruptcies occur everyday. Enron is a big story because it reminds us of our vulnerability. It reminds us that without the enforcement of fair and just laws, the average American doesn't have a fighting chance. (Steven-son and Gerth 2002)

Civil indignation is the silver lining in the scandals that so regularly rock public spheres. It is this public and democratic face of government that *Newsweek* highlights in its blazing and outraged coverage of the conviction of Enron's chief executive officers.

Instead of making the world safe for capitalism, the Enron Era set off a corporate scandal wave that leapt the species barrier, morphing from a business-pages-only story into a national psychodrama. We saw crying Enron employees whose jobs and life savings both vaporized when Enron melted down [and] Enron's close ties to George W. Bush, our first M.B.A. president, which lent a decidedly political aspect to the scandal. Enron became grist for the 24-hour news cycle, and was seared into then national consciousness like no other business story since the Great Depression ... The Enron epic, already the subject of a TV movie, got a made-for TV ending last week when former chief executive Ken Lay was convicted on all 10 conspiracy and fraud charges the government brought against him, and Jeff Skilling, a second former Enron CEO, was convicted on 19 of 28 counts ... The FBI's Enron task force examined the astounding total of more than four terabytes of data – equal to about 20 percent of all the information stored in the Library of Congress ... Enron seems like a fever dream, an illusion from the past that business unfettered could solve all problems, that all we needed to do was get out of the way of corporate titans ... and let them work their magic on behalf of all of us. The convictions of Lay and Skilling write *finis* to that delusional era. (Sloan, 2006)

Those who possess great wealth and social power must win the battle of public opinion if they are to exert power in the civil sphere. In order to do so, they create vast public relations machinery. They justify their environmental records in the civil sphere, apologize for chemical spills, and portray themselves as deeply respectful of nature. When a well-known commercial product, like the Ford Explorer, is exposed as dangerously unstable, companies like Ford rush publicly to pledge themselves to expensive structural reforms. Corporations buy advertising space in newspapers and television to burnish rough spots in their corporate image. They do not, however, always succeed.

PRESIDENTS AND PUBLICS

Nor do the highest and the most powerful politicians who, in purely bureaucratic terms, control the state. In his classic study, *Presidential Power* (1960), the political scientist Richard Neustadt described just how difficult it is for Presidents to get their way. Neustadt had himself been a personal advisor to Presidents Truman and Kennedy. He knew from direct experience, and not only from scholarly research, that even a President's direct orders – to military officers, to Cabinet secretaries, to their own staffs – are often not followed, or are creatively misinterpreted in ways that amounts to disobedience. It is not command but persuasion that allows an American President to exercise power. Whether he has his way is determined neither by his formal powers of office, nor by his ability to generate social or military control. It is a matter of his political prestige. Prestige defines a President's ability to persuade. It is determined by a President's standing in the civil sphere.

What and who are the President's publics? According to Neustadt, they are "as diverse and overlapping as the claims Americans and allied peoples press on Washington" (Neustadt 1960: 86–87). They start with members of the Washington D.C. community, the "Washingtonians" who are lobbyists and citizens, governmental bureaucrats and Congressmen, journalists and Congressional staff, think tank members, social hostesses, and gossip columnists. But the opinion of this "inside-the-beltway" public is deeply affected by their estimates of the opinions of publics outside itself:

The Washingtonians who watch a President ... have to think about his standing with the public outside Washington. They have to gauge his popular prestige. Because *they* think about it, public standing is a source of influence for *him*, another factor bearing on their willingness to give him what he wants They anticipate reactions from the public. Most members of the Washington community depend upon outsiders to support them or their interests. The dependence may be as direct as votes, or it may be as indirect as passive toleration. Dependent men must take account of popular reaction to their actions. What their publics may think of them becomes a factor, therefore, in deciding how to deal with the desires of a President. (Neustadt 1960: 86, italics added)

In assessing the wider public's opinions, Washingtonians are looking beyond the desires of elites. They need to know the opinions of the proverbial "man in the street," the "average everyday citizen." To the degree that power is democratic, the ability of a President to sustain and deploy his prestige ultimately depends upon making his case in the civil sphere:

How do members of the Washington community assess a President's prestige with the American public? They talk to one another and to taxi drivers. They read the columnists and polls and news reports. They sample the opinions of their visitors and friends. They travel in the country and they listen as they go [and] they watch Congress. (Neustadt 1960: 89)

THE STRUGGLE FOR FULL CITIZENSHIP

When the modern state first emerged, despite its commitments to bureaucratic formality and its aspirations to rationality and legality, most people were actually excluded from the political power. Men without significant property could neither vote nor form associations, such as trade unions, to improve their economic position. Women were allowed neither to vote, hold property, nor exercise any public office. Because Jews were not considered citizens, they could not own land, or vote, or use any public services like hospitals or schools. Nonwhite persons were also sharply segregated from public life. Subject to high levels of poverty, they could neither vote nor exercise civil liberties.

The story of democratic political life over the last 200 years is less about the continued exercise of elite power than about how the space of the civil sphere has allowed such domination gradually to be overcome. It is a political story about how these subordinated groups have struggled to make good on the promises of citizenship. To understand this story, we must see that these groups view themselves, not just as unequal and subordinated, but as excluded from the civil sphere. As Judith Shklar emphasizes in *American Citizenship* (1991: 14), they see themselves as “members of a professedly democratic society that was actively and purposefully false to its own vaunted principles.” As a result, the excluded have demanded not only power but “civil repair” (Alexander 2006: 193–209). Along the way, they have suffered humiliation and repression, but they have often succeeded in gaining control over state power. This process – the gradual expansion of civic membership – illustrates how the civil sphere opens up a space between state control and social power.

Voting is typically the most taken-for-granted dimension of citizenship. Yet it expresses membership in civil society in a particularly vivid and important way, for voting transforms civil recognition into state power. As Shklar (1991: 2) puts it, “the ballot has always been a certificate of full membership in society, and its value depends primarily on its capacity to confer a minimum of social dignity”:

People who are not granted these marks of civic dignity feel dishonored, not just powerless and poor. They are also scorned by their fellow-citizens. The struggle for citizenship in America has, therefore, been overwhelmingly a demand for inclusion [and] an effort to break down excluding barriers to recognition. (Shklar 1991: 3)

The working class struggle for voting rights during the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century Britain demonstrates how closely the recognition of civil capacity and the granting of political citizenship are intertwined. “The civic position of the common people,” Bendix (1977) found in his extensive study, “became a subject of national debate.”

Faced with the inequity of their legal position and a public debate over their civic reliability, [Social reformers] comment[ed] on the feeling of injustice among the workers, on their loss of self-respect, on the personal abuse which the rulers of society heap[ed] upon them ... and on the workers’ feeling of being an “outcast order” in their own country. (Bendix 1977: 65–66)

Against such denial of their civic capabilities, working class organizations loudly and publicly proclaimed their civic virtue. In 1818, in Manchester, England, a leaflet protested that labor was “the Cornerstone upon which civilized society is built,” objecting that labor is “offered less ... than will support the family of a sober and orderly man in decency and comfort” (quoted in Bendix 1977: 66). Protests such as these eventually won workers not only the right to organize but the right to vote.

Once the right to vote was granted to the laboring classes, a process that extended from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, political parties formed to represent them. Since the 1920s, politicians representing trade unions have, in fact, exercised extensive state power in Europe and North America. It is through this political struggle that the social dimension of citizenship has become an increasing reality. The elite view of politics – that it is a simple reflex of economic power – fails to capture this critical feature of democratic societies. In his discussion of the debate over capitalism and citizenship, Bryan Turner has highlighted this failure:

Why does modern capitalism depart from the economic model of capitalism which we find in Marx’s economic sociology? Part of the answer is to be found in the extension of social citizenship over the last hundred years as a consequence of working-class struggles, trade-union organizations and the effects of social democracy. In other words the full force of the market place is not felt by the working-classes because the institutions of social welfare to some extent regulate the market and compensate for income inequality, poverty and unemployment. (Turner 1986: 5)

Despite the long struggle to achieve them, political rights are not consistently exercised, and social citizenship remains partial as well. In his fundamental work, *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development* (1964), T. H. Marshall outlined the stages of this struggle for inclusion. He defined citizenship as consisting of three related, but separable dimensions. Civil rights refer to the "liberty of person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice." Political rights refer to the ability to cast your vote, which allows your citizenship to directly enter into control of the state. Social citizenship refers to the economic and cultural benefits that the exercise of such political rights might bring, ranging from "the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall 1964:78). While each of these forms of citizenship amplifies membership in the civil society, today we would also consider cultural citizenship – the recognition of ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual difference – as essential for civil incorporation.

POLITICAL PARTIES

As part of these struggles for political and social citizenship, the political party emerged as a new organizational form. Seymour Martin Lipset once described elections as "the democratic class struggle" (Lipset 1960: 230). He called the class struggle democratic because the framework of citizenship allows economic cleavages to be debated in the public sphere. This debate informs voting. But citizens do not vote directly on particular economic policies. They cast their votes for members of political parties who have promised to represent their divergent interests.

Parties are ideological organizations. They specialize in transforming public debate into votes, and votes into state power. They develop slogans and candidates, organize and fund political campaigns, and provide the strategic expertise to make them successful. Weber wrote that "parties live in a house of power" (Weber 1958b: 194). It is typically parties, not individuals per se, that vie for political power, that control legislative majorities, and that place their political-ideological representative into the top position in the state. Parties form because the civil sphere of democratic societies gives interest groups the opportunity to get together and to make a public, political stand. When parties representing outgroups are successful, they extend social solidarity. Yet, parties themselves are partisan and one-sided organizations. They specialize in developing a particular ideology, one that effectively represents the interests of their own groups. "The rationale of the party system," wrote Robert MacIver in *The Web of Government* (1947: 215) "depends on the alignment of opinion from right to left." During modern industrial society, this ideological split was primarily understood as a division that was determined by economic class.

The right is always the party sector associated with the interests of the upper or dominant classes, the left the sector expressive of the lower economic or social classes, and the center that of the middle classes ... The conservative right has defended entrenched prerogatives, privileges and powers; the left has attacked them ... Defense and attack have met, under democratic conditions, not in the name of class but in the name of principle; but the opposing principles have broadly corresponded to the interests of the classes. (MacIver 1947: 215)

Subsequent studies of party ideology and voting have demonstrated that the left/right cleavage is more complicated. It is more than a matter of higher and lower class. Groups do not define their interests in only economic terms.

The poorer strata everywhere are more liberal or leftist on economic issues; they favor more welfare state measures, higher wages, graduated income taxes, support of trade-unions, and so forth. But when liberalism is defined in non-economic terms – as support of civil liberties, internationalism, etc. – the correlation is reversed. The more well-to-do are more liberal, the poorer are more intolerant (Lipset 1960: 92)

This contrast between the social and economic dimensions of political ideology explains a great deal of contemporary voting and party politics. As economies have moved from industrial to postindustrial forms, the professional and managerial segments of the middle class have become more powerful voting publics than the old working classes. Not only have the sheer numbers of these publics grown in size, but their members vote at much higher rates. Whether this new middle class is conservative and committed to the status quo, or whether it is liberal and oriented to expanding rights and supporting change, is an increasingly critical question, both practically and intellectually. Brooks and Manza (1997) have discovered that this new middle class is hardly homogenous. Managers have remained solidly Republican, but professionals have increasingly moved into the ranks of the Democratic Party. This division is not the result of income differences between the two groups, but a matter of their orientation to social issues. For most of the twentieth century, the Democratic Party was voted into power by the overwhelming nature of its working class support. As the old working class has withered in size, the Democrats have increasingly relied, not on the economic liberalism of the workers, but on the social liberalism of highly educated professionals.

Our analyses demonstrate that socially liberal attitudes have critical explanatory value in understanding important trends in middle-class political behavior. Not only does social issue liberalism explain the recent trends and differences in the voting behavior of professionals and managers, it has increased among professionals in both magnitude and to a more limited extent in political salience. We can think of no firmer demonstration of the specifically *political* importance of socially liberal attitudes than a strong association with vote choice in presidential elections. Moreover, liberal views on social issues such as abortion, women's roles, and civil rights are the principal reasons behind professionals' realignment with Democratic candidates and their widening differences vis-à-vis managers. Without this specific ideological base of support, our analyses show that Democratic presidential candidates would have lost considerable ground ... The long-term shift in voting behavior among professionals [is] a shift which is particularly remarkable when viewed from the perspective of their solidly Republican voting patterns in the 1950s ... Increased liberalism on social issues has been sufficient to drive a wedge through the middle-class and move professionals out of their earlier Republican alignment. (Brooks and Manza 1997: 204–206, original italics).

THE DISCOURSE OF DECLINE

Compared with “realist” arguments for state autonomy and cynical arguments about power elites, the focus on public sphere and civil society sets a high moral standard for democratic societies to meet. Civil society is, by definition, an unfinished project. Its very existence reflects an idealism about the possibilities of democratic life.

For many of those who participate in civil life, whether as political activists or secular or religious intellectuals, the quality of contemporary democracy never seems to be high enough. There is never enough “true” publicness, never enough “real” civility in the civil sphere, never enough solidarity in the democratic community's political and cultural life. These pessimistic evaluations do not seem persuasive. Despite the vast difficulties and setbacks that have marked the modern political life, the civil sphere has deepened and expanded. At every step along the way, however, it has been subject to the persistent criticism that civil society and public life are in decline.

In 1750, Rousseau already lamented that "we no longer have citizens" (Rousseau 1987: 17). In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, in 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that American democracy produced, not liberty and political equality, but merely the tyranny of the majority and mass conformity. In 1925, in *The Phantom Public*, Walter Lippmann lamented the victory of political propaganda and public relations over reason and public spiritedness. In the post-war period, such critical intellectuals as Mills, Arendt, and Habermas all have warned that mass society, fuelled by the rise of advertising and the media of mass communication, had eroded the democratic capacities of the public sphere. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed in a famous speech that American society suffered from a "malaise" that heralded political and moral decline. In the mid-1980s, Robert Bellah and his colleagues articulated this pessimism in their best selling *Habits of the Heart* (1985), which argued that American culture had drifted from civil solidarity into individualistic self-absorption.

The decline argument has recently been refurbished by Robert Putnam's influential claim that Americans are, for the first time, "bowling alone." Putnam (1995, 2000) claims that the famous American propensity to start up and join voluntary organizations is withering away. He points to the decline of such hands-on groups as the Boy Scouts and the P.T.A. and the rise of giant "check book" organizations like Green Peace or the American Civil Liberties Union. Americans have even stopped bowling in teams, and now were much more likely to go bowling alone. Putnam suggests that developments such as these, along with the increasing time Americans spend watching television, explains the lower voting rates that characterizes later-twentieth century American society and, more generally, its moral and political decline.

The discourse of decline is hardly an accurate description of American political and cultural life. Yet, paradoxically, it remains a vital moral component of American democracy. In persistently proclaiming the high ground of moral principle, it adds energy to the force of the moral obligations idealized by civil society. In their lament about democratic decline, critical public intellectuals are helping to make sure that it will not come about.

THE DEEPENING OF THE CIVIL SPHERE

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, there has been, if anything, a marked deepening of the democratic current in American life. This has been so despite the periods of conservatism and backlash that have followed hard upon the periods of social opening and political reform. Underneath these inevitable periods of "shifting involvements" (Hirschman 1982), civic culture and its institutions have strengthened. The quietism and conservatism of the post-war era were shattered by the immensely powerful black movement for civil rights. In *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, Michael Schudson places the civil rights movement at the center of what he calls the "profound revolution in rights" (Schudson 1998: 242) that marked that last decades of the twentieth century.

The civil rights movement provided a model and inspiration for a wide array of new social movements and political organizations. This bold example, even for those who did not participate in it, galvanized a new egalitarianism in American culture at large. Its radiating influence made litigation a tool of social change, it secured direct action and nonviolent demonstrations as weapons of protest, and it fixed a rights-centered citizenship at the center of American civic aspiration. (Schudson 1998: 255-56)

One way of measuring the scope of this rights revolution is to look at the shifting nature of U.S. Supreme Court decisions. In 1935, only two of the Court's 160 opinions cited questions of civil liberties or civil rights. In 1989, by contrast, 66 out of 132 decisions were justified in

this way (Schudson 1998: 249). But this silent revolution was not some top-down movement initiated from within one part of the state. It started with the civil rights movement broadening the cultural understanding of civil rights, and this bottom-up expansion has quickened in the years since.

Lawyers not only initiated suits against hospitals that sought to reduce medical services to the poor, against landlords using evictions in ways prohibited by law, and against private companies seeking to defraud the poor, but also against government agencies, especially those responsible for providing welfare benefits. This work led to landmark cases that expanded citizens rights to welfare and to fair hearings and due process inside the welfare bureaucracy. (Schudson 1998: 257)

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of one social movement after another, each demanding a fuller recognition of civil status (Schudson 1998: 265–274). It is not only racial minorities like Hispanic and Asian Americans who have demanded civil repair. It is also students protesting for their rights against administrations and faculty; native Americans demanding respect for long-neglected treaties; employees organizing for social rights in the workplace; women demanding fundamental reform at work and at home; and handicapped persons calling for the restructuring of the legal, social, and material environments that have been constructed by “abled” people. There is no sign that these challenges to the various forms of social power are going to die down anytime soon. As Schudson (1998: 290) remarks, “scarcely a day passes without the media bringing news of another individual who crafts a social issue from a personal grievance and builds a community from a sense of a right denied.”

CONCLUSION

Governments and states obviously play distinctive and uniquely powerful roles in the contemporary society. Such political institutions do not exist in more traditional societies, or at least are much more closely tied in to religious, familial, and economic groups than they are in more modern times. Small agricultural communities were pre-political. With growing size and cultural and economic development, the need for more formal and centralized control arose. The state emerges for the first time, closely tied to the interest of a dominant aristocratic class. The first states are military and administrative dictatorships, which gradually become more impersonal and bureaucratic in order to achieve more efficient control. As large cities form, cultural life becomes more vibrant, and secular intellectuals appear, and the possibility for a new kind of “public” realm emerges. Ancient Greece possessed the first such “polis,” which became submerged by the Roman Empire and disappeared during the middle ages. The public sphere rose again during the Renaissance, with self-governing city-states like Florence and Venice, in which elite citizens openly discussed public policy, rotated the control of offices, and voted for government officials. The secular democratic revolutions that began in America and France in the late eighteenth century sought to give such publics the constitutional power to control states and other forms of social power generated by economic and religious elites.

With the rise of industrial capitalism, these historical opportunities for democracy, and the liberal and republican theories that sought to explain and legitimate them, were sharply challenged by the concentration of economic power in the great corporations, as well as by the polarization of economic classes that threatened the tenuous solidarity and “fellow feeling” upon which the public sphere relies. Whether dominant classes and power elites make democracy simply an empty promise remains a matter of intense debate today. Pessimistic predictions ring out from every corner of public life. Scandals abound, exposing the corruption not only

of business leaders but of government officials. Is it possible to understand these criticisms and scandals, no matter how lamentable, as indications of the continuing vitality of the public sphere? That is the proposition that we have entertained here.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2006. *The Civil Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernhard Giesen and Jason Mast. eds. 2006. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bendix, Reinhard. 1977. *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order*. New York: Wiley.
- Brooks, Clem and Jeff Manza. 1997. "The Social and Ideological Bases of Middle-Class Political Realignment in the United States, 1972–1992," *American Sociological Review* 62(2): 191–208.
- De Tocqueville, Alexis. [1840]1956. *Democracy in America*. New York: New American Library.
- Domhoff, William G. 1967. *Who Rules America?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Habermas, Jurgen. [1962]1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hirschman, Albert O. 1982. *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1925. *The Phantom Public*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1960. *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. New York: Macmillan.
- MacIver, Robert Morrison. 1947. *The Web of Government*. New York: Macmillan.
- Mann, Michael. 1986. *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D 1760 (vol. 1)*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1993. *The Sources of Social Power: The Rise of Classes and Nation – States, 1760–1914 (vol. 2)*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marshall, Thomas Humphrey. 1964. *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development*. New York: Doubleday.
- McGinniss, Joe. 1968. *The Selling of the President 1968*. New York: Trident.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Neustadt, Richard E. 1960. *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*. New York: Wiley.
- Oppel, Richard and Joseph Kahn. 2002. "Enron's Many Strands," *New York Times*. February 13, C: 8.
- Putnam, Robert D. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6(1): 65–78.
- . 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. [1750]1987 "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts," Pp. 1–21 in *Basic Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, edited by Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Schudson, Michael. 1998. *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*. New York: Martin Kessler.
- Shklar, Judith N. 1991. *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sloan, Allan. 2006. "Laying Enron to Rest," *Newsweek*, June 5.
- Stevenson, Richard W. and Jeff Gerth. 2002. "Enron's Collapse: The System; Web of Safeguards Failed as Enron Fell," *New York Times*, January 20 Section 1:1. P. 6.
- Turner, Bryan S. 1986. *Citizenship and Capitalism: The Debate over Reformism*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Weber, Max. 1958a. "Politics as a Vocation," Pp. 77–128 in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth, and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 12, 13, 27–29.
- . 1958b "Class, Status, Party," Pp. 180–195 in *From Max Weber*.
- . 1978 *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.