

Elites in Democratic America
Sociology 3XXX
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Professor Shamus Khan
617 Knox Hall

Office Hours: Monday 2-4, or by appointment
sk2905@columbia.edu

When social scientists study inequality, they tend to look at poverty. In this class we will take a very different approach: we seek to better understand elites and the conditions of advantage, identifying how elites participate in the reproduction of social inequality. There are empirical, theoretical, and normative justifications for this approach. Empirically, over the past forty years increases in inequality are not explained by the declining wages of the poor and middle classes; instead, it is the massive increase in the income share of the highest earners that has driven inequality. Wealth, not poverty, is the engine of inequality. Theoretically, almost all explanations of inequality are relational. Poverty cannot be understood as a thing in-and-of itself. Instead, it must be understood in relation to both wealth and overall social organization. Yet scholars have dedicated almost all their time to the disadvantage side of inequality and spent little time on understanding the “other side” of the relations of inequality: advantages. This class is dedicated to that other side. Normatively, it is important to engage with the conditions of advantage because in situating advantages in a context related to disadvantage, those who acquire and enjoy advantages might better understand the social contract which ties them to those less fortunate than themselves.

Elite research is not as developed as other areas of social science inquiry. And so I have chosen to take a broad view in terms of what we read and cover. The course is divided into four modular units: (1) The Decline of Aristocracy, (2) Creating an American Elite, (3) Elites and Power, and (4) A New Elite. For each of these units we will spend one week reading a theoretical approach to understanding the theme, one week on an empirical case to put this theory in context, and one week reading a novel that works with the themes of the theory and research we have read.

The aim of this course is to provide you with the tools to think about elites within democratic societies. What is the place of an elite within a democracy? What roles have they traditionally played? How have they supported or undermined democratic institutions? And how have elites work for an against the reproduction of social inequality?

Requirements

There are four requirements for this class. First, you must attend class. This policy is neither negotiable nor flexible. Second, you must do the reading. Third, you must write a short paper for each module of class (750-1000 words). You must write on one theoretical work, one empirical work, and one novel. The fourth short paper can be your choice. Finally, you must turn in a final paper. I will provide an assignment for guidance, but the theme of this paper may be on any topic of interest. This final paper should draw upon New York as a laboratory for understanding elites, democracy, and inequality. A proposal for your project is due by the third week of class.

Short papers must be turned in by the final class of each modular section. The final paper is due on the final day of finals period. Late papers will not be accepted and will result in a zero for that paper. I am very serious about this policy. If you miss more than two classes you will receive a zero for the class attendance portion of your grade.

The distribution of requirements is:
Class Attendance/Preparation: 20%
Short Papers (4 Papers total): 40%
Final Paper: 40%

We will take two field trips at the end of the semester. One will be to the Armory on Park Avenue, <http://www.armoryonpark.org/>; the other will be to a trading floor on Wall Street. And we will have a class visit by various New York elites: a hedge fund manager, a member of the Rockefeller family, and a director at a major cultural institution. I will schedule a film showing outside of class during the first three weeks. Attendance is required -- but if your schedule does not permit you to attend an evening showing, you may watch the film on your own.

I hope that the range of topics in this course, the breadth of works that we will read, and the various encounters “outside the classroom” will provide for an intellectually engaging and rewarding course. Some fair warnings: there is a lot of reading in this class. On average you will read a book a week. Some of these books are quite challenging. But I have tried to pick texts that are interesting and often surprising. Though they are hard, I have tried to make sure that the readings are enjoyable.

Academic Honesty

You must be responsible for the full citations of others' ideas in all of your papers; you must be scrupulously honest in all of your work; you must always submit your own work and not that of another student, scholar, or internet agent. Any breach of this intellectual responsibility, no matter how small, will not be tolerated. Students failing to meet these responsibilities will fail this course and should anticipate being asked to leave Columbia.

Required Texts (Estimated Cost: \$150)

Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896*, Cambridge University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0521524100

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner. ISBN-13: 978-0743273565

Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy*, Harvard University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0674017474

Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Education of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, Princeton University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-14528-0

Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, ISBN-13: 978-0375714795

C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 978-0195133547

Edith Wharton, *Age of Innocence*, Norton. ISBN-13: 978-0393967944

Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Picador. ISBN-13: 978-0312427573

Gordon S. Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, ISBN-13: 978-0679736882

The Fall of Aristocracy and the Rise of Democratic America

Week 1: Tocqueville (Selections)

1/18: Introduction to Class

1/20: Selections from *Democracy in America* and *Ancien Regime*

Week 2: Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*

1/25: pp. 1-168

1/27: pp. 169-379

Week 3: di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

2/1: 3-186

2/3: 187-280. Proposal for final paper due

Film viewing: *Il Gattopardo*, dir. Luchino Visconti

Creating an American Elite: The Wealth and Mobility in America

Week 4: Marx & Veblen

2/8: Selections from Marx, class formation

2/10: Selections from Veblen

Week 5: Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*

2/15: pp. 1-170

2/17: pp. 172-334

Week 6: Wharton, *Age of Innocence*

2/22: 1-37

2/24: 138-255

Elites and Power: Elite Rule in Democracy

Week 7: Mills, *The Power Elite*

3/1: pp. 1-170

3/3: pp. 170-362

Week 8: Fraser & Gerstle, *Ruling America*

3/8: pp. 1-148

3/10: pp. 149-294

Week 9: Fitzgerald, *Great Gatsby*

3/22: pp. 1-73

3/24 pp. 74-144

Class visits by member of the Rockefeller family, a hedge fund manager, and the director of a major cultural institution.

A New Elite: The Opening of American Life and the Increase in Inequality

Week 10: Bourdieu, *Distinction & The State Nobility*

3/29: *Distinction*, pp. 1-97

3/31: *The State Nobility*, pp. 1-53; 71-123.

Week 11: Khan, *Privilege*

4/5: pp. 1-136

4/7: pp. 136-257

Week 12: Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*

4/12: pp. 1-370

4/19: pp. 371-681

Exploring Elites in New York

Work on final papers.

Week 13:

4/26: Field trip to Park Avenue Armory

4/28: Field trip to Wall Street Trading Floor