IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY
V55 0690 MAP: Societies and Social Sciences

Spting 2004
Lectures: T TH 12:30 - 1:45 PM
Silver Building, Room 208
Office Hours: Tuesday, 2:00-4:00

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Precepts:
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The Theme of the Course: In our modern industrial society, there are goods that almost all of us hold as being of great value. These extend beyond material things, and extend into such goods as community, liberty, and democracy. But these are not distributed equally: some sections of society typically find themselves with more, and other with less. This is recognized with respect to material goods, but it is also true of many other things we value, like freedom and power. Is it possible to understand the mechanisms which govern the allocation of material and normative goods?

This course is structured around the investigation of two governing principles of American society: the fact that it is a market society, and the fact that it is a democracy. We will examine how the fact of its being a capitalist democracy affects the distribution of goods, rights, and powers. Among our concerns will be not only the question of whether capitalist markets are efficient, but also the question of whether market outcomes serve the ends of democracy and justice. We will explore the ways in which efficiency can sometimes come into conflict with justice, and how just institutions can in turn have a beneficial impact on efficiency.
The first part of the course introduces the “common wisdom” about markets – that they promote both efficiency and justice – and then subjects this to a critique. In the second part of the course, we then examine how markets actually work, and sometimes fail, by looking at their impact on health care, the environment, and the media. In the third and longest part of the course, we then look at how markets relate to democratic institutions, by focusing on how they affect the distribution of power in society, and how American democratic institutions have been affected by capitalism over time.

Lectures and Readings: Each week will deal with a discrete topic in the course. The lectures will be in broad conformity with the assignments, but will not simply repeat them. They should be viewed more as complements to the readings, and not simply their restatement. Lectures will often introduce new concepts not covered in the assigned material, provide new information, and a broad context in which the readings can be placed. Attendance will therefore be important.

Reading Material: The readings are mostly from a reading packet, which will be available at the University Copy Shop, on 11 Waverly Place. There are two books, Robert McChesney’s Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy, (Seven Stories Press: 1997), and Jerome Skolnick and Elliot Currie, Crisis in American Institutions, (Allyn and Bacon: 2004), which will be available at the university book store.

Requirements: Given the relation between lectures and reading assignments, it will be very important for students to keep up with the weekly texts. Students will be expected
to have completed the readings for each week by the Monday of that week. As an exercise to aid in discussion and debate, they should bring to each recitation some comments on the readings, which should be at least half a page long. Precepts will be asked to keep account of students' performance on this matter, and submission of the weekly comments will account for 20% of the final grade. The grades will be tabulated on the basis of performance in recitations and on two writing assignments of 8-9 pages each.

**Grades: The weight of each component is as follows:**

- **First Paper (8-9 Pages), March 11th:** 40%
- **Second Paper (8-9 Pages), April 29th:** 40%
- **Recitations:** 20%
LECTURES AND READINGS

Jan. 20-22: Introduction

Jan. 27-29: How the Market is Supposed to Work: The Classical Liberal Argument for Free Enterprise


Feb. 3-5: What is Wrong in the Classical View of the Market – How Actual Markets Behave


Feb. 10-12: Example of Market Failure: The Environment

6. The Prisoner’s Dilemma, (Lecture Supplement).
Feb. 17-19: **Market Failure: Health Care**


12. Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, “Cater to the Children”, in *Crisis in American Institutions*, Reading #32.

Feb. 24-26: **Market Failure: The Media**


March 2-4: **Inequality**


March 9-11:  

(FIRST PAPER DUE, MARCH 11)

Welfare and Power


March 23-25:  

Race in Market Society


23. Daniel Golden, “At Many Colleges, the Rich Kids Get Affirmative Action”, in Crisis in American Institutions, Reading #15

Recommended: Orlando Patterson, “The Paradox of Integration”, in The Ordeal of Integration”, (Civitas/Counterpoint, 1997), pp. 15-82.

March 30-April 1:  

American Democracy: How it Really Works


April 6-8:  

The Historical Trajectory of American Democracy: Elections

Supplementary: 117-139.


**April 13-15:** The Rise and Fall of the Affirmative State, Part One: Capitalist Blowout


**April 20-22:** The Rise and Fall of the Affirmative State, Part Two: Capitalist Heyday


**April 27-29**

(SECOND PAPER DUE, APRIL 29)

Conclusion: Real Democracy