SOCIETIES AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES:
TOPICS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE—
AMERICAN PRIMACY
V55.0600 Spring 2007

Lecture (001): Mon/Wed 12:30-1:45 PM, 206 Silver
Recitation (002): Tues. 8:00-9:15 AM, 25 West 4th St., #C-5
Recitation (003): Tues. 9:30-10:45 AM, 704 Silver
Recitation (004): Tues. 3:30-4:45 PM, 25 West 4th St., #C-9
Recitation (005): Tues. 4:55-6:10 PM, Tisch LC4

Instructors

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Questions

This course addresses the question: How did the United States become the world's dominant nation? That is, what explains American primacy? By "primacy" I mean the dominance of the United States on several levels—military power, economic wealth, and "soft power"—the tendency of most other countries to defer to us out of respect, or to assume that we are in charge. On all these levels, America is preeminent to a degree that was scarcely conceivable even 30 years ago. So our first purpose is to explain how that came about.

Surprisingly, the sources of American primacy are a neglected question. The political and academic worlds today resound with talk of a "new American empire." But nearly all the discussion is about whether American power is good or bad. Everyone assumes that the United States is uniquely able to act, hence responsible for whatever is done or not done. In the course we ask instead how American predominance arose.

A second issue is: How do different disciplines account for American primacy? The course will consider geographic, economic, sociological, and political science approaches to American primacy and, within each, more than one tradition. Note that we do not have time to consider all theories. Two I have omitted—partly because I find them less plausible than the others—are those that attribute Western dominance to colonialism or to racial differences between civilizations.

Approach

My approach to explaining American primacy is more oriented to history and theory than that of most academics. Despite American dominance, most experts and commentators today tend to treat all nations as essentially alike. Differences in power or wealth are seen as a matter of degree, usually attributed to differences in policy in the present. Rich countries are those that are democratic
and capitalist. That is understood to mean that they hold elections and allow free markets to control their economies. The suggestion is that any country can become rich by doing the same. And since the end of Communism, a widespread “transition” to democracy and market economies is believed to be occurring.

I am inclined to think that American primacy is more than a matter of degree. It rests on more than elections and markets in these simple senses, and its roots are deeply seated. As our recent problems in Afghanistan or Iraq show, few nations are able to become democratic or capitalist simply by deciding to do so. Steps to democratize government or throw open markets often encounter resistance in developing countries. Leaders fear that their power would be threatened, while citizens fear the insecurity that markets can bring. “Freedom” isn’t free. It makes demands on people that many would prefer to avoid. As a result, most rich countries did not become so overnight. Rather, their societies evolved in way compatible with openness over centuries.

To explain today’s differences, then, we also must look much further back in time. Different capacities for wealth and power separate Europe from rest of the world as early as the Middle Ages. America is the heir of Europe, and much of its current primacy seems to derive from that fact.

A central role was played by Britain. Due to precocious political and economic qualities, Britain became the richest and best-governed large country in Europe. Those attributes made it for a time the dominant power in Europe. The British passed their institutions on to the Americans, and that is one explanation for our dominance today. Whoever would explain American primacy must first explain the remarkable island kingdom.

I am also skeptical of the quantitative nature of many academic studies of world power. These infer differences in outcomes from the measurable differences among countries, gauged usually in the present or the recent past. It is more insightful, I think, to look back over more history, and to express differences in terms of major theories about wealth and development. Only after the gross contrasts are understood is it meaningful to pursue more precise, quantitative estimates. So the readings in this course stress major statements of these theories, rather than the academic literature.

While I will deliver most lectures, I have enlisted guest lecturers at several points. These include my Politics colleagues Bertell Ollman on capitalism, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita on rational choice, and David Denoon on Asia. I also include my twin brother Kirt, an international business consultant who was recently a visiting fellow at the Center for European Studies. He is an expert on European history and culture, and he gave me the idea for this course.

**Challenges**

This course poses several intellectual challenges. What exactly is “American primacy,” and how do we reason about it? Tackling a subject this large is out of fashion in today’s academe, where specialization reigns. But many problems you will encounter in real life have this same ill-defined character. How to work through the definitional issues is a capacity you will need.

Any theory of American primacy must face these questions:

*Does it explain?* First, we have to show why a particular theory would in principle help us to explain the large differences we see in nations’ wealth, power, or prestige. That involves showing causal linkages on a macro level, something that inevitably involves speculation.

*Does it describe?* Next, we have to establish that a given theory characterizes the United States and, thus, helps to explain its dominance. To do this supposes that one can talk about countries as entities. How meaningful is that in a globalizing world where talented individuals from any country
may end up working or studying in the West, as they do at NYU? Yet without such generalizations, it is hard to discuss our subject.

*Does it differentiate?* A theory must not only describe America but show how it differs from other countries. There are first of all differences between the West as a whole and the non-West. Then, within the West, there are differences between the United States (and, before us, Britain) and other rich countries. How can we make such judgments?

*Is it independent?* Some will argue that some force or experience that appears to explain American primacy is really a reflection of some other force further back in time. Especially, culture or attitudes favorable to primacy may reflect structural differences, such as in wealth or geopolitical position.

*When does it explain:* The various theories situate their explanations at different points in time:

- The *premodern period*, up through 1500 AD. The classical and medieval periods are when the chief differences between Europe and other civilizations emerge.
- The *early modern era*, 1500-1900. This is when Europe came to dominate other regions while, within Europe, British primacy emerges.
- The *recent period*, 1900-present). This is when, following major wars, American primacy emerges, but also when several Asian countries begin to challenge the West.

The recent period stands closer to our present situation, so theories situated then may seem most persuasive. The earlier periods, however, may have been more formative.

As the course proceeds, I plan to pose these questions about each theory we encounter. Which approach to primacy explains it best, characterizes the United States accurately, differentiates it from other countries, and is plausibly independent of other factors? And how do the influences change over time?

**Readings**

The two general texts for the course are:


Students should purchase these books at the book store. Additional readings are specified in the course schedule below. Copies of the additional readings may be purchased from New University Copy and Graphics, 11 Waverly Place, phone 212-473-7369. If any students wish, I will also place these readings on reserve at Bobst.

**Requirements**

Students’ main responsibility will be to do the reading and come to lectures and recitations ready to discuss it. You will also write several short papers and a final examination about the issues raised by the course. Each paper will sum up a section of the course. One purpose of the course is to hone writing skills. Each paper is due at the class introducing the next section. The format for the paper is given below.
The final exam will be two-part. Half of each test will be to write six identifications of terms or concepts from the course, chosen out of 12. The other half will be to answer one broad essay question, chosen out of three. Each part will count about half the exam grade.

Grades will be based chiefly on the papers (50 percent) and final exam (25 percent). The final 25 percent will be based on participation, defined to include both attendance at lectures and recitations (1/3) and contribution to class discussion in both lectures and recitations (2/3). Grading will be done principally by the preceptors, but under my oversight.

Final grades will be determined by ranking the class on the basis of average. About the top quarter to a third of the class will receive A’s, the middle 40-50 percent B’s, the rest C’s or—in rare cases—lower grades. Students should note that, because of this scaling procedure, final grades may not correspond precisely to what one would expect on the basis of average. Often, I give out more B’s during the term than I want to for the record. So in the final reckoning, some students with high B averages get A’s and—less often—some with low B averages get C’s.

Extensions, makeups, or Incompletes will be given only for unexpected demands on your time, such as illness or family crises—not press of other obligations (such as jobs or sports events) that can be foreseen. For illness, bring a note from a doctor or parent. Incompletes will be given only for cause and only on the basis of consultation prior to the final exam. To arrange extensions, makeups, or Incompletes, students must confer with me in my office during office hours or at other agreed times. A brief conversation before or after class is not sufficient. Students who disappear or fail to complete the required work without explanation will simply fail the course.

Course Schedule

The following is the schedule of lectures, with the reading assigned for each. Following each reading, in brackets, is the number of pages. Except for the history assignments, which run long, I’ve tried to keep the readings to around 75 pages per lecture.


I History

These initial sessions on history lay out the chief problems to be explained—how the West emerged as a uniquely dynamic civilization, and how first Britain and then America came to lead the world.


Roberts, pp. 111-23, 128-44, 148-54, 161-8, 180-205, 211-44 [105]

Jan. 24: Britain. The formation of nation states in Europe and the decline of Islam. The Reformation, the industrial revolution, and the emergence of British primacy. The rise of the United States.
Landes, pp. 200-30. [31]

**Jan. 29: America:** The major conflicts of the 20th century—the World Wars and the Cold War. The United States emerges as the dominant power.

Roberts, pp. 427-71; 480-513. [86]
Landes, pp. 292-309. [18]

**II Geography**

The geographic approach contends that a nation’s potential for wealth and power is shaped by its early development, resources, and position in the world.

**Jan. 31: Development and resources:** The differing evolution and resources of different world regions. Diamond’s argument that this largely explains which countries are rich and poor.

Landes, pp. 3-28. [26]


**Feb. 5: Geopolitics** The importance of geographical position in explaining world leadership. Advantages of Europe and the Anglo powers. Contrasts to Byzantium or Eastern Europe.


**III Economics**

The economic approach to primacy says that the organization of the economy is critical to wealth, which is the raw material of power, and that the market economy has proven superior to more statist alternatives.

**Feb. 7: The market:** The economics approach to explaining wealth. Why free exchange is efficient. Economists’ classic arguments for specialization and open markets.

*First paper due: Based on what you know now, what best accounts for American primacy?*


**Feb. 12: The defeat of collectivism:** Market economies proved superior to democratic socialism or Communism, at least in producing wealth.

Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), pp. 10-23, 32-55. [38]

**Feb. 14: Capitalism (Prof. Bertell Ollman):** The Marxist interpretation of the free economy. Capitalism as a system of class power promoting the development of the means of production.


Bertell Ollman, “Toward a Marxist Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution.” [5]

**Feb. 19: Presidents Day—no class.**

**Feb. 21: Free trade:** Openness to trade as a reason for British and then American wealth—although not always in the past.


**III Sociology**

Sociological approaches to primacy stress the development of certain attitudes and cultural traits that promote good behavior, effort, and cooperation within the society.

**Feb. 26: Introduction:** The sociological approach to explaining wealth and power. How different from economics. How to explain the special dynamism of Western society?

*Second paper due. Subject: What does the economic approach explain and not explain about American primacy?*

**Feb. 28: Individualism (Dr. Kirt Mead):** Western culture is characterized by individual initiative by high and low, yet coupled with enough discipline to permit collective action.

Landes, pp. 45-59, 200-12. [28]


**March 5: Christianity:** The Christian church as a promoter of dynamism, science, and good government from an early point in Western history.


**March 7: Protestantism:** The new energy released by the Reformation. Max Weber's thesis that motives of religious justification explain the rise of rationalism and capitalism in the West.


**Spring recess, March 12-16.**

**March 19: Science:** Rational problem-solving and inquiry into the natural world as one source of Western wealth, power, and leadership. Contrast with other culture.

Landes, pp. 200-12, 276-91.


**March 21: Social capital:** The capacity of America and other rich societies to generate trust and collaboration, despite an individualist society.


**IV Political Science**

The political approach to primacy stresses features of the regime that help it solve collective problems, government the society rationality, and project power abroad.

**March 26: Introduction:** The political approach to American primacy. How different from the other approaches. A focus on collective rather than individual action. Assumptions made.


*Third paper due. Subject: What does the sociological approach explain and not explain about American primacy?*

**March 28: Pluralism:** The fragmentation of political power in Western societies and America, which promotes limited government and economic freedom.

Landes, pp. 29-44.


April 2: The rule of law: The early development of a law-governed regime in England during the Middle Ages and after.


April 4: Government by consent: The early development of political accountability in Britain and, later, in America.


April 9: Rational choice (Prof. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita): Can a game-theoretic approach to government help to account for American primacy? How different from other approaches.


April 11: Political culture: The attitudes underlying good and bad government. Civic values as a strength of British and American government.


V Current Issues

April 16: America vs. Europe: Why the United States and Europe differ over national security, even though both are highly developed regions. America as the new Rome.


*Fourth paper due. Subject: What does the political approach explain and not explain about American primacy?*

April 18: America vs. Asia (Prof. David Denoon): Across the Pacific, America faces rivals who may challenge its primacy.


**April 23: America vs. Islam:** Conflict between the United States and Islamic countries reflects radically different histories.

Landes, pp. 392-421.

Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-49.

**April 25: America vs. the Third World:** Conflicts between America, which was born modern, and developing regions, some of which have barely begun to develop. The immigration question.

Landes, pp. 310-34, 422-41, 491-524.


**April 30: Summary and review:** Which theories of American primacy best explain our current situation?

**Final examination**
**Format for papers**

**Due dates:** Each paper is due at the class specified in the syllabus. Late papers will be accepted but penalized:
--5 points if handed in within a week of the original due date.
--10 points if handed in later than this but prior to the time grades are submitted.

Be aware that delays due to commuting, the subway, or computer or printer problems are the student's responsibility.

Extensions without penalty will be given for serious, unexpected, and documented demands on your time, such as illness or family emergency. Students in difficulties should confer with me out of class before the paper is due. For illness, bring a note from a parent or doctor.

Extensions beyond when grades go in require an Incomplete. This also requires that there be serious, unexpected, and documented demands on your time. You must confer with me out of class before the end of the course. Students who fail to turn in required papers, or turn them in after grades are submitted, without arranging an Incomplete will fail the course.

**Submission:** Papers may be handed to me in class on or before the deadline. They may also be left in my box at the Politics Department prior to when I leave for the class when the paper is due.

Papers may be mailed, but must arrive by the time due, not simply be postmarked on that date. Papers may not be faxed to the Department or submitted by e-mail.

*Keep a copy of your paper, in hard copy or on disk, in case it should become lost.*

**Format:** Papers should observe the following guidelines. Papers infringing the rules will be accepted but incur a penalty of 4 points off per infraction, but not more than 8 points total:

--Cover page: must include name, local address, e-mail address, and all possible phone numbers. Please place this data in the upper left-hand corner, to make it easier to locate your paper in a stack.

--Cover page: *must also include the question being answered.* Write it out on your cover page. This is to make sure that you focus on it. *Students often forget to do this!*

--Length: 4 pages or less, excluding cover page and bibliography but including footnotes or endnotes if any.

--Papers must be typed or written on a computer.

--Spacing: double-spaced, with 24-7 lines to the page.

--Margins: 1-1.5" on the left and top of pages, .75-1" on the right and bottom.

--Type size: close to the size used for this assignment.

--Pages must be numbered, starting with the first page of text. Numbers may be handwritten.

--Binders--avoid. Instead, papers should be stapled at upper left-hand corner.
Sources: The paper may be written entirely from the readings required for the course. You may cite further materials, but this is not required.

Originality: Students may discuss the assignments with other students but must write their papers individually, without collaboration with others. Students may seek help with their writing in general, but the writing they hand in should be entirely their own, not edited by others.

Plagiarism: Do not use ideas or language drawn from readings without giving the source. Also, do not use an author's actual language as if it were your own. When you quote a source verbatim, it is not sufficient to give the reference; you must also put quotation marks around the borrowed language to make clear that someone else is talking. It is plagiarism not to cite a source and also to use an author's words as if they were your own—even if you do cite the source. Do not copy material out of books into your paper. Quote from the books only when the author really says it better than you can, and then make clear that someone else is speaking. Plagiarism is a serious offense that will draw heavy penalties.

At the same time, do not be self-consciously "academic." The papers are intended to test your own thought and expression. Don't feel you have to have a citation on every sentence. There is no need to document facts that are commonly known to your audience.

Documentation: See separate handout. You may use either the author/date or footnote/endnote method.