

**Power, Elites, and Ethnography**  
Graduate-Level Methods Seminar  
Wendy Y. Li<sup>1</sup>

**Overview**

What is power, and how can we study it? This graduate seminar explores how scholars can study the production, enactment, and circulation of power in society through ethnography. It is a course which understands theory, method, and practice to be tightly interwoven and interdependent.

We care about power for many reasons in sociology, but its operation is rarely studied from up close through ethnographic method. Many ethnographers instead study power's effects on the less empowered, from impoverished neighborhoods in large cities, to women's lives in the home and the workplace, to children's experiences in schools. There are many justifications for this focus, whether theoretical, moral, or practical. Yet as we will read in this course, if our focus of study is power, then our choices to study specific groups also raise the question of whose "side" we are on as sociologists (Becker 1967). This course specifically addresses issues related to what some scholars have called "studying up" (Nader 1972) or as we will discuss, if we reflect on our positionality, what may actually be studying "across" or "around." It does not call for the rejection of "studying down" or studying those subjected to power, but rather, it advocates for a relational, institutional study of power that locates and scrutinizes the production of power at its source.

There are many sociological definitions of power (see Piven 2008). The classic definition of power provided by Max Weber understands power as the probability of one actor to realize

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<sup>1</sup> This syllabus was prepared in Summer 2020 for the Ethnography Preliminary Exam at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Sociology Department. Any comments, suggestions, questions, etc. can be directed to Wendy Y. Li at [w yli@wisc.edu](mailto:w yli@wisc.edu). Please feel free to use parts of this syllabus for your own course (and let me know how it goes!). If you would like to see this course taught at your institution, please hire me.

their own will, even against the resistance of others (Gerth and Mills 1948). C. Wright Mills, in his book *The Power Elite* (1956), used this definition to understand power as exercised by specific elites, which he operationalized as the individuals leading the business, politics, media, and military sectors of the United States. Rather than speak in macro-level generalities about social or political classes, Mills explored their backgrounds, education, and social behaviors. Since then, definitions of “power” and “elite” have multiplied, generating debates on whether a power elite exists, how to define them, how to measure and study their actions, and why they matter. We will discuss how to define elites and their power, how to make valid claims from different types of data, how to represent the realities of the people we study, and what our roles can be in a political world.

Alongside our exploration of these topics, we will also read examine empirical ethnographic studies which have attended to these issues. The works we will read explore the worlds of VIP nightclub patrons (Mears 2020), investment bankers (Ho 2009), medical professionals (Jenkins 2014), prosecutors and judges (Van Cleve 2016), political media hotshots (Leibovich 2013), and many other communities and groups who are thought of as elite. Yet as we will see, despite their similarities, a tradition of “ethnography of elites” does not exist in the same way that other ethnographic traditions have developed. We will explore issues related to access, ethics, and positionality which make such research difficult. We will also draw linkages and formulate unifying concepts to explore what an agenda for the ethnography of elites and power might look like.

Each week, readings should be conducted in the order they are listed. Empirical pieces are assigned for students to conduct focused readings with the theme of that week in mind. However, all of these readings are complex ethnographic works which cannot be distilled down

to one theme. As the course proceeds, students should read, making reference to previous material and course discussion. For example, by week 10, I hope you read with a focus on the use of text in ethnography, but also with attention to issues of access, space, positionality, temporality, etc. Most weeks, empirical pieces will be assigned alongside methodology articles which speak to broader debates in the discipline.

This course is a graduate-level methods class geared towards students who are at the early stages of their dissertation. Students should have already taken an introductory ethnography or qualitative methods course. You are expected to already have an understanding of general ethnographic methods and theory; skills such as how to write field notes or conduct interviews will only be discussed as it pertains to specific issues in studying power and elites. The course is designed for students who already have an idea (even if preliminary) of their potential field site(s) or research question. Each week, we will explore themes that will help you configure your project both theoretically and methodologically, and you should be prepared to speak in discussion about how certain approaches align with or contradict your research goals. Ultimately, the goal is to provide you with a deeper understanding of how to design your ethnographic projects to advance sociological knowledge on power and elites.

## Week 1: The Faces of Power

1. Mills, C. Wright. 1956. *The Power Elite*. Oxford University Press, USA. **Read Chapters 1, 10, 15.**
2. Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S. Baratz. 1962. "Two Faces of Power." *The American Political Science Review* 56(4):947–52.
3. Lukes, Steven. 2005. *Power: A Radical View*. Macmillan International Higher Education. **Read Ch 1.**
4. Piven, Frances Fox. 2008. "Can Power from below Change the World?" *American Sociological Review* 73(1):1–14.

## Week 2: Approaches to Studying Power

1. Nader, Laura. 1972. "Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up." in *Reinventing Anthropology*.
2. Becker, Howard S. 1967. "Whose Side Are We On?" *Social Problems* 14(3):239–47.
3. Smith, Dorothy E. 2005. *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. AltaMira Press. **Read Chapters 1-2.**
4. Desmond, Matthew. 2014. "Relational Ethnography." *Theory and Society* 43(5):547–79.
5. Tavory, Iddo, and Stefan Timmermans. 2012. "Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis." *Sociological Theory*.
6. Li, Wendy. "Policy Ethnography." Working Paper.<sup>2</sup>

## Week 3: Who are the Elites?

1. Cousin, Bruno, Shamus Khan, and Ashley Mears. 2018. "Theoretical and Methodological Pathways for Research on Elites." *Socio-Economic Review* 16(2):225–49.
2. Domhoff, G., William. 2013. *Who Rules America? The Triumph of the Corporate Rich: 13th Edition*. McGraw-Hill Higher Education. **Read Ch 1, Ch 8-9, Appendix.**

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<sup>2</sup> Manuscript in preparation.

3. Bourdieu, Pierre. 2000. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. 1984. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. **Read Ch 1.**
4. Sherman, Rachel. 2019. *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. Princeton University Press. **Read pp 1-18.**

#### **Week 4: Access and Consent**

1. Sherman, Rachel. 2019. *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. Princeton University Press. **Read pp 18-27, Appendix.**
2. Leibovich, Mark. 2013. *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral--Plus Plenty of Valet Parking!--In America's Gilded Capital*. Penguin. **Read Chapter 8.**
3. Turco, Catherine. 2016. *The Conversational Firm: Rethinking Bureaucracy in the Age of Social Media*. Columbia University Press. **Read Preface, Appendix.**
4. Mears, Ashley. 2013. "Ethnography as Precarious Work." *The Sociological Quarterly* 54(1):20–34.

#### **Week 5: Education, Habitus and Culture**

1. Khan, Shamus Rahman. 2012. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton University Press. **Read Ch 3-4.**
2. Rivera, Lauren A. 2012. "Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms." *American Sociological Review* 77(6):999–1022.
3. Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press. **Read Introduction and Ch. 1.**

#### **Week 6: Space and Embodiment**

1. Mears, Ashley. 2020. *Very Important People: Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit*. Princeton University Press. **Read Prologue and Chapter 1**
2. Ho, Karen Zouwen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press. **Read Chapter 2.**
3. Jenkins, Tania M. 2014. "Clothing Norms as Markers of Status in a Hospital Setting: A Bourdieusian Analysis." *Health* 18(5):526–41.

4. Abbott, Andrew. 1997. "Of Time and Space: The Contemporary Relevance of the Chicago School." *Social Forces* 75(4):1149–82.
5. Watch *Parasite*

### **Week 7: Positionality and Ethics**

1. Van Cleve, Nicole Gonzalez. 2016. *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*. Stanford University Press. **Read Ch. 2, Methods Appendix.**
2. Fine, Gary Alan. 1993. "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.
3. Reyes, Victoria. 2020. "Ethnographic Toolkit: Strategic Positionality and Researchers' Visible and Invisible Tools in Field Research." *Ethnography* 21(2):220–40.
4. O'Neil, Moira, and Joseph A. Conti. 2007. "Studying Power: Qualitative Methods and the Global Elite." *Qualitative Research*.
5. Khan, Shamus. 2019. "The Subpoena of Ethnographic Data." *Sociological Forum* 34(1):253–63.

### **Week 8: Actions and Attitudes**

1. Van Cleve, Nicole Gonzalez. 2016. *Crook County: Racism and Injustice in America's Largest Criminal Court*. Stanford University Press. **Read Chapter 3.**
2. Turco, Catherine. 2016. *The Conversational Firm: Rethinking Bureaucracy in the Age of Social Media*. Columbia University Press. **Read Chapter 2.**
3. Maxwell, Joseph Alex. 1996. "Validity: How Might You Be Wrong?" in *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. SAGE Publications.
4. Jerolmack, Colin, and Shamus Khan. 2014. "Talk Is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy." *Sociological Methods & Research* 43(2):178–209.
5. Lamont, Michèle, and Ann Swidler. 2014. "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 37(2):153–71.

## Week 9: Temporality and History

1. Vaughan, Diane. 2016. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA, Enlarged Edition*. University of Chicago Press. **Read Preface, Ch 1, 8.**
2. Sewell, William H. 1996. "Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille." *Theory and Society* 25(6):841–81.

## Week 10: Text and Documents

1. Vaughan, Diane. 2016. *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA, Enlarged Edition*. University of Chicago Press. **Read Ch 2, Appendix B, C**
2. Eastwood, Lauren E. 2005. *The Social Organization of Policy: An Institutional Ethnography of UN Forest Deliberations*. Routledge. **Read Chapter 3, 6**
3. Prior, Lindsay. 2003. "Following in Foucault's Footsteps: Text and Context in Qualitative Research." Pp. 317–33 in *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice*, edited by S. N. Hesse-Biber and P. Leavy. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Week 11: Writing and Representation

1. O'Riain, Sean. 2004. *The Politics of High Tech Growth: Developmental Network States in the Global Economy*. Cambridge University Press. **Read Chapter 8.**
2. Medvetz, Thomas. 2012. *Think Tanks in America*. University of Chicago Press.
3. Li, Wendy. "A Cultural Theory of Regulatory Capture." Working Paper.
4. Small, Mario Luis. 2018. "Rhetoric and Evidence in a Polarized Society." Presented at the Coming to Terms with a Polarized Society, ISERP Lecture Series, March 1, Columbia University.
5. Churchill, Christian J. 2005. "Ethnography as Translation." *Qualitative Sociology* 28(1):3–24.
6. Abbott, Andrew. 2016. "Against Narrative: A Preface to Lyrical Sociology" *Sociological Theory*.

## **Week 12: “Public” Sociology: Concepts**

1. Morris, Aldon. 2017. “W. E. B. Du Bois at the Center: From Science, Civil Rights Movement, to Black Lives Matter.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 68(1):3–16.
2. Burawoy, Michael. 2005. “2004 ASA Presidential Address: For Public Sociology.” *American Sociological Review* 70(1):4–28.
3. Hartmann, Douglas. 2017. “Sociology and Its Publics: Reframing Engagement and Revitalizing the Field.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 58(1):3–18.

## **Week 13: “Public” Sociology: Practice**

1. Irwin, Neil. 2017. “What If Sociologists Had as Much Influence as Economists?” *The New York Times*, December 22.
2. Vaughan, Diane. 2006. “NASA Revisited: Theory, Analogy, and Public Sociology.” *American Journal of Sociology* 112(2):353–93.
3. Graizbord, Diana. 2019. “Toward an Organic Policy Sociology.” *Sociology Compass* 13(11):e12735.
4. Watch Tressie McMillan Cottom’s testimony to the Senate:  
<https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/reauthorizing-the-higher-education-act-strengthening-accountability-to-protect-students-and-taxpayers>
5. Recent/topical policy memos written by sociologists