

## COMMENTARY

### C. Wright Mills, Power Structure Research, and the Failures of Mainstream Political Science

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**Abstract** *“Power Reconsidered” was the theme of the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in 2006. In a steady stream of analytically focused and empirically rich books and articles over the last 40 years, G. William Domhoff had made a unique and challenging contribution to the study of power and politics in the United States. In this commentary, based on a presentation at an APSA panel sponsored by the New Political Science section, Domhoff criticizes the narrow and misleading ways in which the concept of power has been used by pluralist, state autonomy, and historical institutionalism approaches in political science. Drawing on the path-breaking work of C. Wright Mills and Floyd Hunter in the 1950s, Domhoff restates and develops his class and organizational interpretation of the American power structure. As a progressive and scholarly journal, New Political Science encourages authors to submit research articles that engage with the theoretical questions raised by Domhoff.*

#### Introduction

It was a wonderful coincidence that the meetings of the American Political Science Association for 2006 reconsidered the concept of power on the 50th anniversary of C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* (1956), a book that can be seen as a challenge to everything that political science has had to say about the structure and distribution of power in the United States before and since its publication. Along with Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure* (1953), which challenged the discipline at the local level as much as Mill's book did at the national level, *The Power Elite* created the field of power structure research within sociology and political science. It is the 50 years of research findings from this new field that will be the main focus of this indictment of mainstream American political science for its failure to realize the fact that power is far more concentrated and class-based in the United States than any of its theories acknowledge.

Mills, Hunter, and power structure research are relatively distinctive in that they see power as originally rooted in organizations, not in individuals, voluntary associations, interest groups, and parties, as mainstream political science does, nor in classes, as Marxists do, although they certainly agree that voluntary associations, interest groups, and classes can arise historically in some countries from their organizational base, as has been the case in industrialized capitalist societies. On the other hand, Mills, Hunter, and the field of research they created do not see organizations in the neutral and benign way characteristic of most

organizational theorists, whose primary focus since their field arose in the 1920s has been to help make organizations function more efficiently and smoothly. This often means that the organizational theorists are trying to help control the workforces for the managers who hire them, or get more out of them (“efficiency”), which is just the opposite of the approach Hunter and Mills would advocate.

Power structure researchers start with and are wary of organizations because they see them as power bases for those at the top due to the information and material resources that leaders control, as supplemented by their ability to reshape organizational structures, hire and fire underlings, make alliances with other organizational leaders, and many other factors. However, they do not resign themselves to this situation, as Robert Michels (1915/1958) did when he said that he who says organization says oligarchy. Power structure researchers differ from Michels in that they believe in the promise of greater equality and participation. For them, power at the top is not inevitable. Organizations can be restructured and controlled by the rank-and-file through a variety of means when people organize themselves through a combination of unions, political parties, cooperatives, and other means.

Not only was it a wonderful coincidence that political scientists were asked to reconsider how they have handled the concept of power on a major anniversary of Mills’s book, it is a scandal that the book and the research field it helped create were not really a part of that reconsideration. One of the program organizers, Richard Vallely (2006), wrote a piece before the meetings for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that said Mills and Hunter were “legendary” sociologists who had triggered the power debate, but there was nary a word about their work at the meetings except during the presidential address—think bold, like Mills did, on the big issues—and on the NPS panel for which an earlier version of this article was written. As so often, pluralists not only had the last word, they had the only word.

But Mills and Hunter should have been central to the whole discussion because the very paper that was the basis for the reconsideration, Robert A. Dahl’s (1957) “The Concept of Power,” was concerned about far more than a “dominant legalistic approach” that supposedly had “obscured fundamental relations in society,” as the Call for the meetings piously stated. In fact, Dahl’s paper was also the first shot in the counterattack by him and his students against the concepts that Hunter and Mills were putting forward, which were rightly taken by Dahl as an in-your-face attack on the idea that there was as much power sharing and democracy in the United States as most political scientists claim.

This point is seen mostly obviously in the fact that Dahl discusses Hunter’s work toward the end of the paper without even mentioning his name or the book he wrote. Out of nowhere, late in the paper, he says that “One of the most important existing studies of the power structure of a community has been criticized because of what appears to have been a failure to observe this requirement” (i.e., the need to compare the power of an individual or group on a range of issues); shortly thereafter, he asks “On what grounds, then, can one criticize the study mentioned a moment ago” (Dahl, 1957, pp. 208–209)? Apparently Dahl could not bring himself to name Hunter or cite his work, even though there are 11 citations in the References section.

The agenda underlying Dahl’s 1957 article on the concept of power, which consists of Max Weber souped up with probability equations that never proved

useful, became even more obvious in his follow-up paper on power, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," in which he summarily dismissed both Hunter and Mills with the resounding conclusion that it was "a remarkable and indeed astounding fact that neither Professor Mills nor Professor Hunter has seriously attempted to examine an array of specific cases to test his major hypothesis" (Dahl, 1958, p. 466). Dahl thereby took the substantive issues off the table and turned the argument into a seemingly methodological one, although it was actually an argument about philosophies of science that he was invoking: his single-operation definition of power actually emerged from a strand of logical positivism that had been adapted by the behaviorists within psychology to prove that they were scientific, a briefly successful ploy that was then imitated by "behavioralist" political scientists seeking the same respectability.

Dahl's operationalization of power solely in terms of who wins and who loses in the decisional arenas of government attempted to constrain the study of power in political science to a power indicator that can seldom be used with any confidence without access to historical archives and/or after-the-fact revelations by participants or whistleblowers. That's not only because of the lack of access to the necessary information for reconstructing a decision while it is being made or shortly thereafter, but also due to the active efforts at credit-taking or befuddlement necessarily practiced by all politicians if they are going to placate their various constituencies and continue to be reelected. Worse, it condemned political science to a sterile argument about the "three faces of power" that was at best a side issue (Lukes, 2005).

By contrast, power structure research came to a sophisticated methodological position based on the idea that "power," even though it is a relationship, is for research purposes best understood as an underlying trait of a collectivity, such as an organization or a social class. This trait called "power" has to be studied with a number of different but overlapping indicators that together can overcome the individual weaknesses each one has (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1966; Webb *et al.*, 1981). Within this context, power structure research is based on a combination of network analysis—more specifically, "membership network analysis," as explained by Ronald Breiger (1974)—and content analysis, and it makes use of all four of the power indicators that have been developed to date (see Domhoff, 2006b, Appendix A, for a detailed statement of the methodology of power structure research). (The four power indicators—what organization or class receives the most of what people seek for and value?; what organization or class is over-represented in key decision-making positions?; what organization or class wins in the decisional arena?; and who is thought to be powerful by knowledgeable observers and peers?—are familiar to most social scientists and are commented upon throughout this indictment.)

Although the main focus of this article is on Mills and power structure research at the national level, the next section briefly discusses the local level because Hunter also played a role in the creation of power structure research and also was criticized heavily by the political scientists who set the tone for the discipline over the next 50 years. Since the original battles between pluralists and power structure researchers were fought out on an urban terrain, it is gratifying to be able to return to it with recent findings that have a little something for everyone, along with considerable vindication for Hunter.

In concluding this introduction, I want to stress that it is not my purpose to defend each and every detail of what Hunter and Mills claimed. I long ago concluded, based on subsequent research, including some of my own, that they were wrong about a number of issues, most of which I will touch on throughout this article. What is important about Hunter and Mills is that they stand outside the usual pluralist vs. Marxist debates. To repeat, they do not stress individuals, voluntary associations, and interest groups like the pluralists do, or class dynamics to the exclusion of almost everything else, like many Marxists tend to do. They point the way to what I think is a solid theoretical starting point, even though they did not themselves fully articulate that position: modern-day power structures are based on a complex mix of organizational and class factors. Empirical political scientists have done many studies that are useful in understanding the American power structure, but the failure of the discipline to start with a perspective based on the interaction of classes and organizations dooms it to failure at the theoretical level.

### **Local Power Structures**

Although most political scientists thought there was no way Hunter's conclusions about the concentration of power in Atlanta could be plausible in a country with competing political parties, a free press, and the right to assemble and organize into interest groups, the critiques of his findings were methodological in nature. His interview method for constructing elite social networks and learning about their activities, based on asking knowledgeable people to nominate the people they thought to be powerful, and then in turn interviewing those who were nominated, was later shown to be a sophisticated way to uncover networks of power (Kadushin, 1968). However, it was pejoratively called the "reputational" method by Dahl and fellow pluralists to make it seem like mere fluff. They said it used questions that were too general to be of any use—even though it did ask people to discuss their involvement in policy issues they deemed important—and was probably contaminated by what informants read in the newspapers besides (Polsby, 1980; Wolfinger, 1960).

But the reputational method was hardly the failure that pluralists proclaimed it to be. Dozens of researchers ventured into cities and communities in several different countries, usually reporting that upper-middle-class informants with professional and business occupations believed the biggest businessmen and corporate lawyers of the given locale to be at the center of a cohesive power structure (see Hawley and Svava, 1972, for a summary of many studies). The fact that business leaders were not as prominent in the foreign cities that were compared to American cities in two studies gave the method further legitimacy because it showed it could be sensitive to cross-national differences (D'Antonio and Form, 1965; Miller, 1970). When other methods were used in conjunction with the reputational method, there was usually, but not always, a considerable overlap in the findings (e.g., D'Antonio and Form, 1965; Miller, 1970; Preston, 1969; Thometz, 1963). Later the value of the method was demonstrated at the national level in Norway (Higley *et al.*, 1976), Australia (Higley and Deacon, 1985), and the United States (Higley and Moore, 1981; Moore, 1979).

Despite all this evidence for the usefulness of this social network method, Hunter's findings seemed dead and buried by the early 1970s. However, political

scientist Clarence Stone (1976, 1989) unexpectedly renewed the debate by returning to Atlanta to study the city in the context of its more recent battles over urban renewal and its transition to black political leadership. The results, using different methods than Hunter did, including the decisional method advocated by pluralists, were basically a vindication of Hunter through two of the best case studies ever done on an American city. Even better, Stone's findings fit with the newly emerging idea that land owners, not industrial capitalists, are the major movers and shakers in most cities, with the main goal of increasing real estate values through the intensification of land use (Molotch, 1976). To the degree that this pro-growth coalition faces opposition, it comes from neighborhoods that want to protect their amenities against downtown expansion, high rises, and freeways.

More abstractly, this means there is a built-in conflict between exchange values and use values in cities that is resolved or compromised in a variety of ways, some halfway reasonable, some very ugly, as in the case of the urban renewal program that cleared the way for downtown elites to remake their cities (Domhoff, 2005a; Logan and Molotch, 1987). This conflict leads to some unexpected but understandable alliances, with building trades unions often siding with the growth elites in a vain attempt to create more jobs in the overall economy, whereas environmentalists, university students, and left-wing activists usually line up with the neighborhoods even though there is nothing inherently progressive or environmentalist about neighborhood protection (think racial or ethnic exclusion, for example).

Based on my review of the literature in the early 1980s, I concluded that the idea of the city as a "growth machine," dominated by landed elites and their allies, fit with all the case studies that had been done up to that point (Domhoff, 1983, Chapter 6). Then the idea gained further support in later studies by Todd Swanstrom (1985), John Mollenkopf (1983), and Richard Gendron (2006). This strong claim even encompasses New Haven, a fact I demonstrated in a case study based on documents unavailable to Dahl at the time of his study, along with my new interviews and a reanalysis of Dahl's own interviews, which he graciously shared with me in 1975 (Domhoff, 1978, 1983). My New Haven study is now updated with more recent archival documents discovered in the papers of Mayor Richard Lee and his main aide, Edward Logue, which became available in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These papers reveal that Yale played an even larger role than I originally thought in obtaining federal funds for the city in a timely manner. The paper trail on this issue is near-perfect (Domhoff, 2005b).

So, 50 years later, we can say that Hunter's basic findings on the dominance of cities by land-based growth elites have emerged triumphant. Although some differences remain among the theorists I have mentioned, which I have spelled out elsewhere (Domhoff, 2006a), just about every power investigator at the urban level now starts with the downtown land owners and developers as the primary suspects, and just about everyone agrees that growth is their primary focus.

### **The National Power Structure**

Mills's theoretical emphasis in claiming that a small and reasonably cohesive elite dominated the national levels of power was on the people who held leadership positions in the major bureaucratic organizations that had arisen in the United States in the course of its history, starting with large corporations in

the second half of the 19th century, the federal government during the New Deal and World War II, and the military during World War II and the postwar era. Working together due to common social backgrounds, similar experiences in large-scale organizations, and the realization that they had shared interests, the people Mills called the corporate rich, the political directorate, and the warlords were closely enough knit and took in each other's washing just frequently enough to be a "power elite." To the degree that national-level decisions were made, Mills said, the power elite were the ones who made them.

But how did he know that the power elite were powerful if he didn't study any decisions? In effect, he assumed they were powerful because they managed large and strategically located hierarchies that dwarfed labor unions, farmer's associations, middle-class voluntary associations, political parties, and Congress in terms of their resources and connections. As just mentioned, they also had the ability to work together for common goals, especially when they joined together to defeat their common enemy, the liberal-labor coalition, and of course we know that there is nothing like a common enemy to bring people together. So, if you run a corporation, or the Department of State, or the Pentagon, then you are a Decider, to use the new term introduced by the current main Decider in the United States.

Methodologically speaking, however, there is a little more to it than that. Although he did not say so directly, Mills was making use of two of the power indicators I mentioned in the introduction, now often called the "who benefits?" and "who governs?" indicators of power. Specifically, Mills showed in detail that the corporate rich and their corporations had a disproportionate share of all privately held wealth and income, and that they were over-represented in the key decision-making positions in the executive branch of the federal government.

As might be expected, these two power indicators were no more convincing to Dahl and most other mainstream political scientists than the reputational method. According to pluralists, disproportionate wealth and income cannot be used as power indicators because some of these skewed distributions may be accidental. They may even be due to events and decisions in foreign countries. Furthermore, maybe the elites had purposely conferred benefits on the poor, which would distort matters. As far as over-representation, there was the possibility the people in the key positions did not make the important decisions. Perhaps they were primarily figureheads, as Dahl claimed to be the case with the few business leaders involved in urban renewal in New Haven (Dahl, 1961; Polsby, 1980).

These criticisms point to plausible defects in these two power indicators, but they are not reasonable concerns when it comes to the general thrust of the findings on the wealth and income distributions in the United States, which are highly skewed even if the rich do give some of their money to the poor. It is equally unlikely that someone behind the scenes was making the decisions for the corporate leaders who have served in consistently large numbers in the cabinet and other high-level government positions down through the decades (e.g., Mintz, 1975; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 2006). The pluralists' niggling critiques once again overlook the fact that there are defects in all indicators, and perhaps most of all in the decisional—who wins?—indicator.

Although the pluralists' critique of these two power indicators was misguided, power structure research took the high road in responding to the insistence on decisional studies by creating a framework within which good historical case

studies can be carried out to test pluralist claims on their own methodological turf. In the process, most researchers in this tradition came to believe, contrary to Mills, that the corporate rich were the heart of the power elite. Drawing on a detailed tracing of linkages among individuals, institutions, money flows, and policy issues, this decisional model suggests there are four relatively distinct but overlapping processes through which the corporate community, and more generally the power elite, control the public agenda and then win on most issues that are taken up by the federal government. They are the special-interest, policy-planning, opinion-shaping, and candidate-selection processes, with the last term referring to the individually oriented and relatively issueless political campaigns that have predominated in the American two-party system.

The special-interest process deals with the narrow policy concerns of specific corporations and business sectors. It operates through lobbyists, company lawyers, and trade associations, with a focus on congressional committees, departments of the executive branch, and regulatory agencies. This is the process that is usually examined by those who study the American government. There are literally thousands of such studies by now, a great many of them by political scientists, that explain the hows and whys of corporate victories in this arena. Most of the relatively few defeats for any specific company or industry usually come at the hands of other industries, and only rarely at the hands of the main opposition to the power elite, the liberal-labor coalition (see Domhoff, 2006b, pp. 173–176, for a more complete discussion of wins and losses for corporations in this process).

Most political scientists do not think the overwhelming success of corporations in the special-interest process adds up to dominance by a power elite because there is supposedly not enough coordination among the many business sectors. More importantly, the special-interest process does not deal with the broader-gauged policies that are important in shaping the general contours of the society, a criticism voiced long ago by one of the very best of the interest-group analysts, Grant McConnell (1966), whose conclusion that various interests controlled a substantial part of the American government made him something more than a pluralist. Nevertheless, he thought that the corporate community was fragmented enough to be “incapable of exercising political domination save in exceptional circumstances and for very limited objectives and very limited times” (McConnell, 1966, p. 254). He concluded that “the party system, the Presidency and the national government as a whole represent opposing tendencies” (McConnell, 1966, p. 8).

A good part of the answer to McConnell’s critique can be found in the policy-planning process, which strives to formulate policies concerning the general interests of the corporate community. It operates through a policy-planning network of foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups that are financed and overseen by corporate leaders, with a focus on the White House, relevant Congressional committees, and the high-status newspapers and opinion magazines published in New York and Washington. It has what Mills called “sophisticated” and “practical” conservative tendencies within it, which I prefer to call “moderate-conservative” and “ultraconservative” orientations. The discovery of this network allowed power structure researchers to explain how most of the major policies of the 20th century were developed, but this is not the place to provide the details (e.g., Domhoff, 1990, 1996).

However, it is worth noting that the policy-planning network also has proven useful in arguments with the state autonomy theorists who came along in the 1970s. Although Mills, and most power structure researchers, start with the assumption that states are potentially autonomous, thereby anticipating the state autonomy theorists' main claim for originality, they did not think that the evidence reveals any autonomy for the American state. It is this conclusion, not abstract theoretical differences, that distinguishes state autonomy theorists from Mills. It led state autonomy theorists to ignore Mills and doubt power structure research, but new studies of their favorite cases soon showed the state autonomy theorists had not done their homework thoroughly enough.

For example, new archival research refutes claims by Stephen Krasner (1978) concerning the alleged role of autonomous state elites in developing the postwar foreign policy that eventually led to the Vietnam War (Domhoff, 1990, Chapters 5 and 6; Hearden, 2002). Even more satisfying, subsequent research using the policy-planning network to study the origins of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and Social Security Act shows just how wrong Theda Skocpol (1980) and her students (Amenta, 1998; Finegold and Skocpol, 1995; Orloff, 1993) are about the New Deal because they rely exclusively on secondary sources that miss all the important issues (Domhoff, 1996, Chapters 3 and 5). In fact, these latter two cases are best described as "state building by the capitalist class," something that is not conceivable to state autonomy theorists.

The policy-planning model also proved useful in refuting claims by Gregory Hooks (1991) on the industrial mobilization for World War II, which did not lead to the autonomous Pentagon he imagines, but to the incorporation of the generals and admirals into the corporate-based leadership group (Domhoff, 1996, Chapter 6; Waddell, 2001). Mills (1956) had made this same point nearly 40 years earlier, although subsequent research has shown, contrary to his original claim, that the military leaders are only junior partners in the power elite, as seen most clearly in the speed with which they are fired if they disagree with the eager civilian militarists from the corporate community and associated think tanks.

The efforts within the special-interest and policy-planning processes are supplemented and sometimes made a little easier by a third process, the opinion-shaping process, which attempts to influence public opinion and keep some issues off the legislative agenda (an aspect of the "second face of power," which is not a problem at all if full-scale power studies of the kind suggested here are undertaken). Often drawing on rationales and statements developed within the policy-planning network, this process operates through large independent public relations firms, the public relations departments of large corporations, and many small opinion-shaping organizations, with middle-class voluntary organizations, educational institutions, and the mass media as its target (Domhoff, 2002). My emphasis in discussing this process is on "attempts" to influence public opinion. That's because public opinion is far more independent than is believed by those who claim that the American public is largely bamboozled, a notion that is at the heart of the mistaken idea that there is a "third face of power," which leads to an overemphasis on ideology at the expense of organizational factors in explaining why most wage workers do not more regularly and actively challenge the power elite. The process does not so much shape opinion as it muddies the water on specific issues and creates a degree of momentary political cover before everyone moves on to the next crisis or issue. To the degree that it has a major impact, it is

through the corporate public relations departments and public relations firms that make large financial contributions to middle-level voluntary associations and sometimes sit on their board of directors, thereby reinforcing the apolitical tendencies of such organizations, which are not hothouses of discussion and democracy in any event (Domhoff, 2006b, Chapter 5; Eliasoph, 1998).

Due to the independence of public opinion and the existence of liberal-labor and conservative Christian coalitions that have agendas of their own, it is insufficient to look to the special-interest, policy-planning, and opinion-shaping networks in order to understand how the power elite dominates federal decision-making. It is also necessary to look at Congress and the political parties, where both Hunter and Mills came up short by neglecting their critical roles. Elections do matter, and they could matter much more to average working people if the power elite did not have ways to exercise their influence in these arenas.

The candidate-selection process, a term I adapted from Walter Dean Burnham (1975) to indicate that American political parties have had little to do with policy formation or political education, is concerned with the selection of elected officials who are sympathetic to the agenda put forth in the special-interest and policy-planning processes. It operates first and foremost through large campaign donations and hired political consultants. However, there are many other ways that members of the power elite involve themselves in the careers of the politicians they favor, including the cushy jobs as lobbyists, motivational speakers, and corporate directors that are available to reasonable elected officials when their political careers are over.

The emphasis on campaign finance, long a critical issue for power structure researchers, gradually gained traction within political science as an explanatory factor, thanks in good part to the work of Alexander Heard (1960) and Herbert Alexander (1992), which has been followed up by more recent political scientists as well. Now, if anything, the issue is overdone. As pluralists never grow tired of reminding us, the candidate with the most money does not always win, so there are other factors to be considered. Still, as Heard (1960, p. 34) said way back when, money can provide a “choke point” in the primaries, an insight that makes the main point as far as power structure researchers are concerned.

And yet, this hardly means that all politicians are bought and paid for by the power elite. There are numerous liberal and ultraconservative elected officials who disagree with the perspectives preferred by members of the power elite. However, there aren't enough of them, they aren't well organized, and they don't have the staying power of those who are sympathetic to the corporate point of view on most issues. Historically, the general result of the candidate-selection process was a set of ambitious and relatively issueless elected officials who knew how to go along to get along. More recently, the corporate-oriented politicians often have conservative views on various “social issues” as well. This emphasis on social issues helps them get elected because some of their constituents care passionately about them, but those issues are not of substantive concern to the corporate rich. Either way, the candidate-selection process leaves an opening for the pro-corporate policies provided to elected officials through the special-interest and policy-planning networks.

In considering the candidate-selection process from the point of view of the power elite, it is important to stress that there are structural and historical reasons why money has mattered so much in American politics. The electoral rules

leading to a strong tendency toward a two-party system, that is, the single member district plurality system, when combined with the historic division of the country into Northern and Southern regions with very different political economies, adds up to a situation where the parties have been such complex coalitions that until recently it was not always clear to voters what one or the other stood for. Given that state of affairs, personalities, and name recognition can matter a great deal, which provides an opening for campaign finance to help boost one candidate over another.

Over and beyond the issue of campaign finance, the party system is important because the independence claimed for the executive branch by Mills is in good part premised on the structure of power in Congress. From the 1790s until fairly recently, elite control at the legislative level started with the fact that the Northern industrial and finance capitalists controlled the Republican Party (and its predecessors) and the Southern plantation and merchant capitalists controlled the Democrats in a context where it is near impossible for a third party on the left or right to arise—or last very long—due to the nature of the electoral rules (Domhoff, 2003, Chapter 2; 2006b, Chapter 6). So, to the degree that the liberal–labor coalition that developed during the New Deal could exercise any power, it had to do so inside the Democratic Party and in the context of a bargain with the segregationist Southern Democrats that included acquiescence in elite domination of the low-wage labor force in the South, especially African Americans. It also meant tacit acceptance of the exclusion of African Americans from craft unions and good jobs in the North, which assuaged the feelings of the many Northern white workers who saw African Americans as racially inferior or as potential threats to their job security.

Thus, the liberal–labor coalition, with fewer than a majority of senators and only 100 or so seats in the House, had far less power within the Democratic Party than liberal analysts and historians usually suggest. When it came to domestic spending, the liberal–labor coalition had to agree that the South received more than its share of the pork and that the Southern whites could exclude African Americans if they so desired (Brown, 1999). On the occasions when the Northern liberals could convince the urban machine Democrats to support them on an issue in opposition to the Southerners, the Southerners joined with Northern Republicans after 1938 in a highly successful conservative voting bloc to stop any legislation they did not like, which usually involved issues related to control of labor markets in both the North and the South (Manley, 1973; Patterson, 1981; Shelley, 1983).

The importance of the conservative voting bloc to the smooth functioning of the power elite until the 1990s can be seen through an analysis of two major pieces of liberal legislation that changed the United States dramatically in the 1930s and the 1960s, the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although it was most certainly the militancy of industrial workers in the 1930s and the civil rights movement in the 1960s that put these issues on the public agenda, and it was most certainly liberals in Congress who crafted and pushed the legislation sought by these movements, it was in fact rare differences in interests and opinions between the Northern and Southern segments of the capitalist class that made passage possible. In the case of the National Labor Relations Act, the liberal and labor Democrats gained the support of Southern Democrats by excluding the great bulk of the Southern

labor force—that is, agricultural, seasonal, and domestic workers (Domhoff, 1990, Chapter 4). This emphasis on the key role of the Southern rich recently has been endorsed by Ira Katznelson and one of his co-workers (Farhang and Katznelson, 2005).

If there is any doubt that the plantation capitalists and their elected representatives could have stopped the act cold, recall their close relationship with Franklin D. Roosevelt, their control of congressional committees through the seniority system, and their willingness to use the filibuster on issues of deadly concern to them, which in those days could not be ended with a vote. Perhaps the best proof of this analysis is that the brief usefulness of the National Labor Relations Act soon began a fateful decline when the Southerners turned against it in 1937 and 1938, due to their opposition to integrated organizing in the South and the use of sit-down strikes in the North by the militant Congress of Industrial Organizations. The handwriting was on the wall as early as 1939 when the Southern Democrats entered into negotiations with the ultraconservatives in the National Association of Manufacturers and the leaders of the American Federation of Labor, which was by then feeling threatened by the fast-growing Congress of Industrial Organizations, to decide on the changes in the law that became the Taft–Hartley Act. This handwriting was temporarily obscured by the need to delay the counterattack on labor until the successful completion of World War II (Gross, 1981).

As for the Civil Rights Act, it passed because enough Northern Republicans finally agreed to stop the Southern filibuster, which by then could be accomplished with 67 votes. This Northern Republican support came at the urging not only of moderate Republicans outside of Congress, who were supporters of civil rights, but at the behest of the many corporate leaders who did not want to see further disruption and upheaval for a variety of reasons, including its effect on downtown real estate values and its embarrassing impact on foreign policy in a day when the power elite was fighting for the hearts and minds of people of color in the Third World.

### **“The Privileged Position of Business”**

Dahl and other pluralists completely ignored the four-process model for understanding decision-making. Any debates with sociologists were over by the early 1960s as far as they were concerned. However, they could not so easily ignore events of the 1960s, so some of the pluralists, led by Dahl and his long-time colleague and co-author, Charles Lindblom, took a forward step that most pluralists refused to accept, asserting that business has a “privileged position” in a market economy because it controls the right to invest. If politicians are to succeed in office, they therefore have to do whatever is necessary to “induce” business to invest, which gives business a privileged position over and beyond that of a mere interest group (Dahl and Lindblom, 1976).

Unfortunately, Dahl and Lindblom believe that this argument is sufficient to explain the great power of business and makes the kind of work done by the likes of Hunter and Mills unnecessary. As Lindblom (1977, p. 175) haughtily put it, “To understand the peculiar character of politics in a market-oriented systems requires, however, no conspiracy theory of politics, no theory of common social origins uniting government and business officials, no crude allegations of a power

elite established by clandestine forces.” Instead, “business simply needs inducements, hence a privileged position in government and politics, if it is to do its job.”

However, this theory really only concerns the relationship between business and government, leaving out the fact that there are workers in the society who may not acquiesce in the current arrangements if they suffer unemployment during a lengthy depression or develop the strength through unions to challenge corporations. At such times workers may destroy private property, refuse to work, or even take over private property, as in the sit-down strikes in the 1930s, a powerful tactic that was of course banned by the Supreme Court in 1939 (Domhoff, 2006b, pp. 46–48). In disagreement with Marxists, I do not believe the state originated 5,000 years ago to protect private property, but it did take on that function in Western civilization many centuries ago, and capitalists have to ensure that it continues to do so in a volatile capitalist system filled with uncertainties.

Nor is it simply in dire situations that capitalists need to dominate the state on the issues of concern to it. For example, the first version of the Employment Act of 1946, created by liberals and leftists inside the federal government, included a provision that mandated government investment if studies showed that private investment would fall short of what was needed for full employment in any given year. True, the provision was removed soon after the legislative process began, at the behest of pro-corporate senators, but other liberal aspects of the measure remained in place, and the corporate community had to fight them vigorously through the conservative voting bloc, a story that was first told in detail by political scientist Stephen Bailey in *Congress Makes a Law* (1950), and which I have supplemented and used for theoretical purposes as part of a general argument about why the corporate community needs to dominate the state in order to endure (Domhoff, 1990, Chapter 7). The corporations have structural economic power, but there is more to social power than that one dimension.

### Explaining the Right Turn

Just about the time power structure researchers provided satisfactory explanations for the big legislative decisions that mainstream political scientists usually refer to as evidence for pluralism, the power elite took a right turn. Explaining that right turn became a new acid test for rival theorists. One thing was for sure. It finished off the state autonomy theorists, who by and large deduced from their flawed studies of the Progressive Era and New Deal that the economic problems of the 1970s would be solved through the expansion of the state. They already had egg on their faces due to the clear involvement of moderate conservatives in decisions they thought were made without any capitalist participation, such as the Social Security Act, but those decisions were made decades earlier, so the new research could be ignored. What they could not explain away was capitalists so blatantly and straightforwardly taking charge of the state and trying to shrink parts of it right in front of their noses. According to them, something like this could never happen.

Although the right turn did in the state autonomy theorists, who now call themselves historical institutionalists and are largely indistinguishable from the pluralists, except for their rediscovery of “institutions” as a substitute for “interest groups,” it did provide an opening for a new brand of pluralists with a new angle. Now neo-pluralists could say that big business had not ruled in the 1960s and

1970s, but that it did take charge once again after 1980, a tack best exemplified in the work of David Vogel (1989) on the “fluctuating fortunes” of business. According to Vogel, the previously disorganized corporations, with their interests under siege, finally were able to pull themselves together and reverse the tide. But we already knew through mountains of research that the corporations were highly organized among themselves, and closely linked to the policy-planning network and the federal government, so this is a completely inadequate explanation that I have dismantled elsewhere (Domhoff, 1990, Chapter 10).

How do power structure researchers explain the change? By looking at the shifting constellation of forces between the power elite and the liberal-labor coalition. In a word, the civil rights movement dynamited the power arrangements that persisted from the New Deal to the mid-1960s. The story begins with a correction of what turned out to be Mills’s biggest mistake as a power analyst: his conclusion that there were no longer any potential power bases in the middle and lower levels of the society. This belief led him to ignore the possibility of independent mobilization and political action by African Americans using what turned out to be a surprisingly resourceful and resilient organizational base—the black churches of the South, which provided organizational skills, money, cultural and social solidarity, and charismatic leadership (Morris, 1984). However, the churches did not act alone. Traditional black colleges and the sleeping car porters union also provided power resources that Mills had overlooked.

There is one more mistake by Mills that has to be addressed before we can understand the right turn. He thought there was a “truce” between organized labor and the moderate conservatives in the power elite that was a stable and permanent one, with class conflict contained within administrative and judicial structures. Contrary to that claim, which Mills discussed for only a sentence or two in *The Power Elite* after giving it several paragraphs in *The New Men of Power* (1948), we now know, based on historical research by James Gross (1974, 1981, 1995) on the origins and activities of the National Labor Relations Board, that there never was any real acceptance of unions on the part of the moderate conservatives.

Moreover, thanks to Gross’s (1995) now-it-can-be-told interviews with corporate lawyers and National Labor Relations Board officials, we also know that the moderate conservatives felt so threatened by a labor board decision in 1962 giving unions the right to bargain over outsourcing, subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court, that in 1965 they quietly started to organize a counteroffensive to reverse the decision. It was victory in this battle, finally achieved in the early 1970s, in conjunction with the attack on construction unions that began in the late 1960s as part of the fight against inflation, that spelled the beginning of the end for the limited power labor unions had achieved. Once outsourcing was no longer an issue that could be contested by unions, the internationalization of American corporate production could take place at a faster pace in the face of the increased European and Japanese competition in American markets. This corporate effort also led to the creation of the Business Roundtable, which became the central policy group in the power elite in the mid-1970s, to the shock and awe of many observers, including Vogel (1989), who then decided that business had become powerful because it had finally organized.

In other words, Mills underestimated the inherent class conflict within a capitalist economic system over wages, working conditions, and control of

the production process, as well as the desire on the part of most capitalists to eliminate unions if they possibly can. I do not believe that capitalism contains an inevitable and uncontainable crisis due to an unfolding dialectic that involves overproduction, underconsumption, a falling rate of profit, and increasingly unmanageable depressions, but it does contain ongoing conflict between capitalists and workers, with most capitalists favoring low wages, minimal taxes on their profits, and minimal regulation of their activities, while most wage workers desire just the opposite, along with help from the government in creating unions (Hahnel, 2005). Mills was therefore wrong to downplay a conflict which inevitably leads to battles over state policy.

Within the context of civil rights militancy on the one hand and capital–labor conflict on the other, the old power arrangements fractured. To begin with the South, the civil rights movement set in motion a train of events that led to the abandonment of the Democratic Party by the Southern rich because it could no longer help them keep African Americans powerless. Southern white elites, who were industrializing the region in any case, thanks to runaway northern corporations and defense contracts directed their way by the Southern Democrats, therefore began efforts to carry a majority of white Southerners into the Republican Party with them on the basis of appeals to racial resentments, religious fundamentalism, super-patriotism, and social issues like gun control (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Carter, 2000).

But it was not just racial conflict in the South that destroyed the New Deal coalition within the Democratic Party. It was also racial conflict in the North, as historians are now revealing in detail as they reexamine the documents and press statements showing that the words spoken by right-wingers in the late 1960s were being said quite openly in the early 1960s by the many white trade unionists who were not prepared to share jobs or power with African Americans (e.g., Sugrue, 2001). There were a few notable exceptions among labor leaders, of course, but enough of the rank-and-file resisted integration in housing, schooling, and unions to put the Democrats on the defensive in the North as well as the South. This point is seen most dramatically in the votes for Alabama Governor George Wallace in Democratic primaries as early as 1964—30% in Indiana, 34% in Wisconsin, and 47% in the former slave state of Maryland, where he won 16 of 23 counties, the state capitol, and the “ethnic” neighborhoods of Baltimore (Carter, 2000, p. 215). Then, in the 1972 Democratic primaries, Wallace presaged the more coded and symbolic politics of the New Right by mixing tirades against busing and welfare with revivalist religious appeals to win majorities in Michigan and Maryland just as he was forced to drop out of the race by the assassination attempt that left him paralyzed and in excruciating pain (Carter, 2000).

Nor was it just racial conflict that led rank-and-file white trade unionists to inadvertently aid in the weakening of their unions at a time when they were starting to come under more pressure than most members realized. Many of them did not like the feminists or environmentalists either, whom they saw as a danger to their jobs or threats to their status as proud white males. Moreover, many white union members did not like what they saw as the anti-Americanism of the anti-war movement. They were not crazy about the war, but they came to dislike the protestors even more (Mueller, 1984). All of these factors contributed to the disintegration of the liberal–labor coalition and made it possible for Nixon and his

right-wing allies to attract more and more white Middle Americans (blue collar and white collar, union and non-union) into the Republican Party.

The nationwide white turn to the Republicans made it possible for the moderate conservatives to make a right turn on many policy issues in the 1970s once the inner cities were finally calm and the corporations were faced with new economic problems due to spiking oil prices, inflation, and rising unemployment, as well as the previously mentioned challenge to their markets and profits by German and Japanese corporations. We know in detail about this decision to turn right because the issues were debated in the policy-planning network, thereby making content analyses of their policy intentions possible. For example, Joseph Peschek (1987) showed in a study of the policy positions proposed in the 1970s by five different think tanks and policy-discussion groups that centrist groups like the Brookings Institution turned rightward in the face of the new problems and possibilities, with former Democratic appointees leading the way.

The same scenario is revealed by the deliberations at a moderate-conservative policy-discussion group, the Committee for Economic Development, where the majority of corporate trustees rejected permanent wage and price controls as well as other plans for greater government involvement in the economy that some members had been entertaining. Instead, they advocated monetary policies that would throw people out of work, cutbacks in the welfare state, deregulation of key business sectors, and continuing attacks on unions (Domhoff, 2006b, pp. 97–100; Frederick, 1981).

This analysis of the right turn might momentarily gladden the hearts of pluralists because it reveals some temporary alliances and even some complicated cross-class coalitions, as in the case of the corporate–conservative coalition that now dominates the country (Domhoff, 2006b). But it differs from pluralism because the fundamental axis runs along class lines, with the complications being added by the historic differences between the Northern and Southern political economies and by the introduction of racial, religious, and gender issues into the candidate-selection process. The shifting coalitions for the most part involve class segments, and the driving force of the process is rooted in the functioning of the corporate-dominated economy. Most of all, this account disagrees with any version of pluralism because it shows the continuing domination of the government by the corporate-based power elite, first tacking “leftward” in the face of the militancy of the Civil Rights Movement and its offshoots, then rightward when it had to choose between government-oriented and market-oriented solutions to the new economic problems that it faced in the 1970s.

## **Conclusion**

I think the American power structure of today looks far more like what Mills and Hunter would have expected than what pluralists, state autonomy theorists, or historical institutionalists within mainstream political science projected. Even the idea that business has a privileged position falls far short of what is needed. If political scientists had used the 2006 meetings to reconsider power in the light of events and research over the past 50 years, then they would have ended up with an open-ended, empirically grounded, and historically contingent class domination theory of the kind briefly sketched in this article. They wouldn’t have to become Marxists because there are power networks other than those that

are class-based, a statement that includes the claim that states are potentially autonomous. Moreover, they could still say there is democracy because there is freedom of speech, regular elections that are often vigorously contested, and occasional victories for labor, liberals, and environmentalists on class-oriented issues, along with the more numerous victories for people of color, feminists, and other previously marginalized groups on a variety of social issues relating to individual rights. But they would have to abandon pluralism, state autonomy theory, or historical institutionalism as their starting point, replacing them with a theory based on the mix of class and organizational factors that have been spelled out in this article.

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