Corporations and American Capitalism

Instructor: Matthew Stimpson  Sociology 190.8
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Office Hours: Fridays, 12:30-2pm (or by appointment)  Friday, 10am-12pm
Office Hours Sign-up: https://wejoinin.com/sheets/xrset  106 Wheeler

Course Overview

Large firms like Walmart, GM, Facebook, and Apple shape our understanding of the economy and our place within it. But with a declining number of public corporations, decreased corporate investment, increased mobility of workers across firms, and an expanding "gig" economy, some have argued that corporations matter less for the average American worker than they did fifty years ago. This is a course about contemporary American capitalism and the role corporations play in channeling its effects on individuals. We will engage with a wide range of theoretical and empirical scholarship that grapples with the changing role of corporations in American capitalism.

A central theme of this course is that in many ways the fate of workers has been linked to the fate of corporations over the past half century. When corporations were prosperous during the decades following World War II, they provided a large number of stable jobs with benefits. As corporations have faced greater instability since the 1970s, they have passed this instability onto their workers. Furthermore, widening economic inequality in the United States over recent decades has been driven in large part by rising inequality between firms, as sales, employment, and profits have become concentrated among fewer and fewer firms.

In this class you will conduct an empirical research paper based on data you obtain during the first half of the semester. The goal of the paper is to examine linkages between the trajectories of workers and the trajectories of the firms they work for through an empirical analysis. You can use participant observation, interviews, surveys, or archival research—or some combination of these methods—in order to gather data on both the employment outcomes of workers and the condition of the firms they work for. This is not a research design course, and you will not be graded on how well you execute the method. The primary purpose of this assignment is to use concepts from class to interpret your data and to use your data to shed new light on the course material.

Learning Goals

1. Students will learn how American corporations have changed over the past half century and how the fate of workers over this period has been linked to the fate of corporations.

2. Students will learn to read academic texts effectively with an eye toward preparing for group discussions in a seminar-style class.
3. Students will improve their writing and analytic skills by completing a research paper over the course of the semester, incorporating feedback to produce a polished paper that makes a strong argument based on an empirical analysis.

**Course Requirements**

*Participation:* This is likely a different type of class than others you have taken in the sociology department. This is a capstone seminar for the sociology major meant to give you a chance to engage with a specialized topic through group discussion. Participation is therefore crucial for success in this class. You are expected to attend every class meeting having completed the readings. You are allowed two absences without penalty to your participation grade. (I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences.) There are many ways to demonstrate your engagement with class. Contributing to class discussions is central, but I understand that this comes more easily to some than others. Showing you are actively listening to your classmates and trying to respond to their points can make up for less frequent participation in class. Coming to office hours is another way to show you are actively engaging with the course material.

*Reading Responses:* In order to prepare for class discussions, you will write 10 reading response memos over the course of the semester. These will be short write-ups (250-500 words) meant to help you reflect and document your reactions to the week’s readings. Please do not summarize the readings; the point is to respond to them. You will receive half credit on these responses if you simply summarize the readings, if you fail to engage with the readings, or if you submit your response memo late (one purpose of these response memos is to allow you to see how others in the class responded to the readings before our class meeting). These response memos will also provide you with material you can use to contribute to class discussions. These will be due 24 hours before our class session, at 10am on Thursdays, and should be posted on the Discussions section of the bCourses website. You can choose which 10 out of the 14 total weeks you will complete a reading response.

*Final Paper:* The two main components of this course are the class discussions of the readings and an empirical research paper you will write over the course of the semester. You will produce a 15-20 page paper using data you obtain to examine how the fate of workers is linked to the fate of their firms. See the beginning of the syllabus for more details. You will complete the final paper in steps over the course of the semester in order to help you pace yourself and to have the opportunity to get regular feedback. First, you will turn in a memo on your proposed research question and how you plan to collect data in order to answer it (1-2 pages). Second, after collecting your data, you will write up your preliminary empirical results and describe how they answer your research question (5-7 pages). Please note that these first two assignments will help you develop text that—with slight revision—will form the core of your final paper. Third, you will complete a rough draft and a peer editing exercise a couple weeks before the final paper is due in order to have an opportunity to make revisions. Finally, you will turn in your final paper during the week following our last class session.
Grade Breakdown:

- Participation: 25%
- Weekly Reading Responses: 25%
- Research Paper: 50%
  - research question: 5%
  - empirical write-up: 10%
  - rough draft/peer edit: 10%
  - final paper: 25%

Class Policies

Communication: The best time for substantive questions is during class. Emails are best for administrative questions; please check the syllabus and notes from class before emailing me.

Classroom atmosphere: Creating an environment where everyone feels free to share their reactions, interpretations, and questions will be extremely important for this class. Please engage with each other respectfully and attentively during discussions. I understand that some will be more comfortable with participating in group discussions than others, but I hope we can all push ourselves—and encourage each other—to step out of our comfort zones, whether that be by speaking up more, listening more carefully, or trying to recap and engage with comments made by others in class.

Technology: I will require that you do not use laptops, phones, tablets, or other similar devices during our class sessions. Please keep them in your bag. Research has shown that we absorb more information by reading on paper than on a screen and by taking handwritten notes rather than notes on a computer. A crucial component of this seminar is that you learn to process the course readings without the aid of a lecture, and conducting class discussions free of these devices is meant to help you towards this goal.

Readings. A reader will be available for purchase at Copy Central on Telegraph. I will require that all students bring the reader to our class sessions.

Academic Honesty: It is essential that you do your own work and properly cite the work of others that you draw on—academic honesty will be taken extremely seriously in this course. Please see UC Berkeley’s Code of Student Conduct: https://sa.berkeley.edu/code-of-conduct.

Writing. Writing pushes us to think more clearly and critically, and I hope you enjoy the opportunity this class offers to practice writing as you grapple with the course material. I can work with you on your papers in office hours, but I will not be able to read full drafts or look at your work more than once. If you are looking to improve specific aspects of your writing, ask me and I can provide those comments on your assignments. Please consider utilizing the writing tutoring offered at the Student Learning Center (slc.berkeley.edu).

Accommodation: If you require accommodations in class or on assignments, please let me know about them as early in the term as possible.
Course Outline and Weekly Readings

INTRODUCTION

Week 1 (August 30): Corporations in the United States


Week 2 (September 6): Contrasting Views on Contemporary Corporate Power


[http://review.chicagobooth.edu/economics/2017/article/market-power-superstar-companies-growing]


Week 3 (September 13): Historical Cases: General Motors and General Electric


CORPORATIONS: BUFFERS FROM INSTABILITY AND SITES FOR CAPITAL POOLING

Week 4 (September 20): The Instability of Capitalism


*** DUE SEPTEMBER 20: RESEARCH QUESTION AND PROPOSED DATA ***

Week 5 (September 27): Firms and Markets


Week 6 (October 4): Firms as Sites for the Sorting of Workers


MONOPOLY CAPITALISM

Week 7 (October 11): A Marxist Approach to Monopoly Capitalism


Week 8 (October 18): Market Concentration and Powerful Firms


Week 9 (October 25): Capital Investments: Declining or Changing?


*** DUE OCTOBER 25: EMPIRICAL RESULTS SUMMARY ***

RACE AND GENDER INEQUALITY

Week 10 (November 1): Workplace Segregation


Week 11 (November 8): Evaluation


BROADER PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

Week 12 (November 15): Postcorporate Possibilities and the Gig Economy


Gig Economy Data Hub, from the Future of Work Initiative of the Aspen Institute: https://www.gigeconomydata.org/basics

*** DUE NOVEMBER 15: ROUGH DRAFT ***
**Week 13 (November 22): Contextualizing Corporations: The Political Dimension**


**Thanksgiving Break (November 29): No Class**

**Week 14 (December 6): Fixing Corporations: Shareholder Value and Antitrust**


***FINAL PAPER DUE WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 11 AT NOON***