



The Bohemian Club: An Empirical Investigation of the Power Elite

Brian Kamal
Mentor: Dr. Roy Barnes

Brian Kamal is a first year law student at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. The author has also written a work entitled, "Games, Ethics, and Reification," that deals with the origins of legal corporate personhood. That work was published in the 2003 edition of the Meeting of the Minds Journal.

Abstract

Social networking patterns pervade societal institutions. This academic endeavor empirically examines the link between one's participation in an exclusive social club (in this case the Bohemian Club), and one's occupation, which is discerned by examining that member's respective biographical information as stated in *Marquis Who's Who in America*. Through data analysis of the Bohemian Club membership lists coupled with biographical referencing of *Marquis Who's Who in America* lists, the aim is to examine the relationship between specific occupational attributes (e.g., business, professional, etc.) and membership in the Bohemian Club. The hypothesis is that there is a strong, positive correlation between being a member of the Bohemian Club and one's occupational attribute.

Introduction

Social networks pervade society and act as a mechanism for cohesion, information exchange, pathways of power, and economic transactions. Each party in these social networks gains something through its relationship with the other. Examples of social networks include alliances between parents and teachers, coalitions between military personnel and businesspersons, and partnerships between businesspersons and politicians.

This article will examine one such social network, the Bohemian Club, as a representative sample of the more general category of the power elite, and will measure the change in occupational composition of those members of the elite from the 1960's to the 1980's [1,2].

The Bohemian Club, a somewhat secretive institution, serves to foster group cohesion among the members

of the ruling elite (though the pertinent data cannot address this issue). This club is hidden from the public purview, and membership is difficult to attain. It is comprised of various influential people, including former presidents, congressional representatives, foreign ambassadors, businesspersons, educators, and lawyers. Under the guise of a recreational club, this institution allows for information transfer among some of the most influential Americans. *Marquis Who's Who in America* will serve as a biographical frame of reference to occupational information about these members of the power elite [3,4].

Literature Review

Pluralism

The pluralist model of American governance argues that the key features of democracy are interest groups and a decentralized governmental infrastructure. Scholars, such as political scientist Robert Dahl, claim that the basic rule of pluralism is that power is not centrally concentrated, but rather is diffuse and balanced out among competing factions so that no one group dominates the others. Divided authority, decentralization, and open access are the key aspects of pluralism [5].

One example of decentralization would be where a compromise is made to resolve a dispute between competing entities. Suppose that there are two locales adjacent to one another, City A and Town B. City A is a densely populated, industrial city whereas Town B is a rural agrarian town that is sparsely populated. Presume that a river runs along the border between the two geographic regions. Rather than granting one or the other exclusive control over the river, a governmental body exercising dominion over both would order the two entities to share the river. Such an apportionment would arguably be conducive with the pluralist model.

Another example of the pluralist model at work would be the United States Congress. The structure of this federal legislative body is intended to create a diffusion of power by creating two different sub-structures within

Research Articles

Congress: the House of Representatives accords legislative seats in proportion to the states' comparative populations as measured by the Census, whereas the Senate proportions legislative seats equally among states irrespective of population (each state has two senators). It was thought that such a juxtaposition of sub-structures would create less concentration of power among states because legislative proposals must generally be ratified by both houses to become law.

As an ideal model of how democracy ought to work, this theory seems plausible, but as a reflection of how American governance usually operates in action, it seems misguided. It is true that when countervailing interests compete, one side will not always completely overpower the other. However, even when power is shared among various political groups, it is clear that some groups will dominate (politically, economically, etc.) over others. Therefore, the pluralist theory often misses the mark.

The Power Elite

Various scholars contend that a small percentage of the American population holds a disproportionate amount of power [6,7,8,9]. More specifically, power elite theory holds that the United States government is an oligarchical system, which means that a few powerful groups dominate over and impose their wills on the general population [5].

According to the power elite theory, "wealth dominates politics" [5]. Though oligarchies are not necessarily a negative conception, such consolidation of power often leads to dire societal consequences. When great masses of wealth become concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, essential societal elements increasingly become commoditized. According to the Gini coefficient, a figure utilized by economists to determine comparative wealth distribution, in 1993 the wealthiest 30% in America possessed 52.5% of disposable income whereas the poorest 30% possessed a meager 11.8% of disposable wealth (the disparity is presumably increasing over time) [10]. That is to say, essential goods and services (such as life-saving medicine and medical treatment) become things to be bought and sold on the "market." Many of these medicines are cost-restrictive, which means only those who can afford to pay have "legitimate" access to the drug (by legitimate it is meant legal recognition under the law). Consequently, a conflict arises as to whether all individuals within a society have access to such goods, or whether only those with enough wealth can buy such goods. As resources become increasingly scarce and competition ensues, each party strives to protect and promote its interests. Because these interests are structured in an irreconcilable fash-

ion, the most frequent result of such conflicts is that the more powerful factions impose their wills at the expense of less powerful groups within society. The effect of such domination is exemplified in the precise nature of private property, or personal ownership, which grants individuals power and control over tangible, physical items and abstract ideas (*e.g.*, cars, houses, copyrights, patents, etc.). For the intents and purposes of the present study, the members of the Bohemian Club represent the 'fortunate few' because they possess utterly disproportionate amounts of power.

The question may be raised, who are these 'fortunate few' that hold a disproportionate amount of wealth, status, and power? Sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the phrase, "the power elite," to describe "the select individuals who are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society, *e.g.*, corporations, government, and the military" [7].

Mills's triangle of power, also known as the Big Three, includes the economy, the political order, and the military establishment [7]. Following the lead of Mills, sociologist Domhoff reformulated the previous notion of the power elite to include a fourth element, the ideological establishment [8]. These entities rely on one another and interact with one another [8]. Under Domhoff's model, the ideological network is concerned with the perpetuation of worldviews, the economic network creates social classes and exerts control over such economic processes as consumption and distribution, the military network oversees "organized physical violence," and the political network regulates territorial borders [8].

A crucial factor in differentiating the power of social networks, like those mentioned by Domhoff and Mills is the ability to find access points [8]. One aspect of access points is that an individual or a group has the ability to communicate with another group or individual. Take the case of Vice President, Dick Cheney, and his relationship with Halliburton as a former CEO. Through its previous professional ties with the Vice President, that company has access to him.

A more important aspect of access is the ability to influence outcomes. In the past, when consumer advocates pushed for increased safety in automobiles via air bags, automobile corporations successfully lobbied to prevent the enactment of legislation requiring installation of such safety measures. Because of their power, the Big Three automakers were able to delay such legislation for years:

Auto manufacturers fought a long and hard war against air bags from 1969 to 1988, despite evidence that they were technically feasible and would save thousands of lives. The Supreme Court found in a 1983 suit over the Reagan administration's revocation of the airbag

standard that, ‘the automobile industry waged the regulatory equivalent of war against the air bag and lost — the inflatable restraint was proven sufficiently effective [...] the industry was not sufficiently responsive to safety concerns’ [11].

This phenomenon indicates that corporate entities do have the power to delay, alter, or eliminate potential legislation that would be beneficial to society. The lobbying efforts of automobile companies show the potential for successful response to the desires of the elites, in this case, the delay of legislation requiring air bags, which some elites found to be financially burdensome.

Though the automobile industry succeeded in delaying air bag legislation for a significant period, pluralists would argue that another interest eventually trumped the interest of the automobile industry. Specifically, the interest of insurance companies to have air bags in cars prevailed over the automobile industry’s interest against such measures. The power elite model would depict this as a battle between two powerful entities where one side eventually won over another. Proponents of power elite theory would go on to say that air bag legislation may never have been enacted if a powerful group such as the insurance industry did not have a stake in this issue.

Understanding the methods by which the ruling class perpetuates its ideology is fundamental to understanding societal machinations. Education is one such conduit for capitalist ideology. This manifests itself in the hegemonic mode of function of educational institutions: “The intellectuals are the dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government” [12]. Intellectuals serve as conduits for the elite; using their selective focal points, they influence what society does or does not think about and sometimes how society thinks about people. A primary example of a distortion of history so that atrocities of the past are marginalized or even unstated to suit the purposes of the state and capitalism is the case of Christopher Columbus, a figure frequently venerated and romanticized in educational and social settings. Common accounts of the explorer examine his art of persuasion and his accidental success in allegedly “discovering” America. In contrast, scant attention is devoted to the fact that Columbus and his crew were responsible for the death of Native Americans in shocking numbers. Consequentially, Americans typically learn only of the legendary greatness of Columbus, but not of the genocide perpetrated by him and his crew. This illustrates that educators have the ability to shape lasting definitions of reality, regardless of their accuracy:

To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and to de-emphasize

their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves—unwittingly—to justify what was done. [...] [T]he easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress (Hiroshima and Vietnam, to save Western civilization) [...] is still with us. [...] The treatment of heroes (Columbus) and their victims (the Arawaks)—the quiet acceptance of conquest and murder in the name of progress—is only one aspect of a certain approach to history, in which the past is told from the point of view of governments, conquerors, diplomats, leaders. It is as if they, like Columbus, deserve universal acceptance [13].

The institution of telecommunications also perpetuates capitalist ideology. In particular, the mass media often serves as a mechanism to bombard citizens with messages favorable to capitalism:

[T]he [...] [elite] media that [...] set [...] [the] agenda [...] are corporations ‘selling’ privileged audiences to other businesses. [...] Furthermore, those who occupy managerial positions in the media [...] belong to the same privileged elites, and might be expected to share the [dominant capitalist] perceptions, aspirations, and attitudes of their associates, reflecting their own class interests as well. Journalists entering the system are unlikely to make their way unless they conform to these ideological pressures, [...] those who fail to conform will tend to be weeded out by familiar mechanisms [14].

In addition to the ideological importance of the institution of education and the mass media, the power elite depend on some level of class cohesion with other members of the capitalist class as illustrated by the reciprocity generated through the social networking of corporate directors. Social networks are comprised of relationships based on reciprocity:

Generalized norms of reciprocity among CEO’s who also serve as outside board members may represent a primary, social psychological mechanism hindering increased board independence. [...] generalized norms of reciprocity refer to the situation in which ‘an individual feels obligated to reciprocate another’s action, not by directly rewarding his benefactor, but by benefiting another actor implicated in a social exchange situation with his benefactor and himself’ [15].

The crucial factor in such an exchange is that the two parties be of equal status and of equal prestige [15].

Research Questions

One research question for this endeavor was who were the members of the Bohemian Club? Second, how

Research Articles

has the occupational composition of the power elite changed from the 1960's to the 1980's?

Methods

For this endeavor, the Bohemian Club is assumed to represent a segment of the power elite. Occupational composition is studied in the two time periods for those members who are listed in *Who's Who* in order to detect any major changes.

In order to answer these questions, several data sets were assembled, including the following: Bohemian Club membership lists for the years of 1964 and 1986 and *Marquis Who's Who in America* for 1964 and 1986. Once the Bohemian Club data sets were compiled, *Marquis Who's Who* list was examined to determine which Bohemian members were also listed in the *Who's Who* list. Four primary empirical questions were investigated. First, what were the occupational attributes of Bohemian Club members? Second, did membership in the Bohemian Club increase, decrease, or stay about the same? Third, what percentage of Bohemian Club members was listed in *Who's Who*, and did the percentage change over time? Fourth, of those Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who*, what percentage self-reported their membership in the Bohemian Club, and did this percentage change over time?

Results

The percentage of Bohemian Club membership listed in *Who's Who* declined from 1964 to 1986. The percentage of Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* indicating membership declined drastically. It is difficult to ascertain how representative the samples are because information regarding this social organization is so limited and because little is known about roughly 85% of the subjects in 1986 and 78% in 1964 because their biographical information is not available in *Who's Who*. Self-reporting appears to be declining over time [Table 1]. Such a decrease may be attributable to a number of factors such as inaccuracy in the listings, a strong desire for privacy, and/or fear of public disclosure.

A surprising finding of this data was that the percentage of Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* as having the business/corporate executive attribute declined from 50% in 1964 to 38% in 1986. Another interesting finding was the increase from 1964 to 1986 of Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* who possessed the culture/entertainment attribute: 9% of members listed in *Who's Who* in 1964 compared with 14% in 1986. A similar pattern occurred with regard to the education/science attribute: 13% of members listed in *Who's Who* for 1964 compared to 17% in 1986. There was also an increase in

Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* possessing the lawyer/professional/engineer attribute over time: 20% in 1964 compared with 24% in 1986. The percentage of members listed in *Who's Who* with the government/military attribute changed negligibly. Taken together, Bohemian Club members with Business/Corporate Executive, Education/Science, and Lawyer/Professional/Engineer attributes account for approximately 75% of all Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who*. If the Cultural/Entertainment attribute is added, over 90% of all Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* are accounted for [Table 2].

Discussion

It is unclear whether these findings are representative of a general trend or if they represent an aberration. The sample size of this endeavor is small and may therefore not be representative of Bohemian Club members as a whole. Additionally, Bohemian Club membership lists exist for the years of 1972 and 1990. If these data sets are analyzed, they may give greater credence to claims about trends over time. Further research on this matter should involve compiling the other two lists and attaining occupational information about the members via the *Who's Who* list.

From the data collected here, it may be concluded that occupations of the Bohemian Club members listed in *Who's Who* were comprised mostly of lawyers, physicians, scientists, businesspersons, CEOs, politicians, judges, professors, bankers, venture capitalists, and so on.

Also desirable would be more information about all Bohemian Club members since the organization's inception as well as all their respective occupations. Given the somewhat secretive nature of the Bohemian Club, the lack of a more comprehensive biographical frame of reference, and given the relatively limited scope of this research, these shortcomings are currently difficult to resolve.

Acknowledgements

This work was done in consultation with Dr. Roy Barnes, Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Flint in conjunction with the University of Michigan-Flint Office of Research, which awarded the said author and co-author a Research Initiative Partnership. Research assistant Rachel Sharrard edited errors in the data. The author would like to thank Dr. Roy Barnes for his patience and assistance, the Office of Research, and the Philosophy, Political Science, and Sociology Departments for their continuous encouragement of his endeavors. The author would also like to thank his family and friends for their endless support and affection.

Table 1: Who's Who Coverage of Bohemian Club Members

	Year	
	1964	1986
Number of Members in the Bohemian Club	1927	2300
Number of Members Listed in <i>Who's Who</i>	424	355
Percent of Members Listed in <i>Who's Who</i>	22.0	15.4
Number of Members Listed in <i>Who's Who</i>	424	355
Number of Members Listed in <i>Who's Who</i> Indicating Membership in Bohemian Club	299	199
Percent of Members Listed in <i>Who's Who</i> Indicating Membership in Bohemian Club	70.5	56.1

Table 2: Occupations of Bohemian Club Members as Listed in *Who's Who*

	Year			
	1964		1986	
	N	%	N	%
Business/Corporate Executive	212	50.00	134	37.75
Cultural/Entertainment	38	8.96	49	13.80
Education/Science	57	13.44	61	17.18
Government/Military	32	7.55	25	7.04
Lawyer/Professional/Engineer	85	20.05	86	24.23
Total	424	100.00	355	100.00

References

- Bohemian Club Membership List. 1964.
- . 1986.
- Marquis Who's Who in America*. Wilmette, Illinois: Macmillan Directory Division. 1964.
- . 1986, 44:1, 2.
- Janda, Kenneth, Jeffrey M. Berry, and Jerry Goldman. *The Challenge of Democracy: Government in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999, 42-3.
- Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by Frederic L. Bender. New York: Norton, 1988.
— *Early Writings*, Tr. Rodney Livingstone. New York: Penguin, 1992.
— *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, tr. by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, 3-4.
- G. William Domhoff. *The Power Elite and the State: How Policy is Made in America*. New York: Aldene deGruyter, 1990, 2-3.
- Maurice Zeitlin. *The Large Corporation and Contemporary Classes*. Polity Press and Rutgers University Press, 1989.
— *Landlords & Capitalists*. Princeton University Press, 1988 (with Richard E. Ratcliff).
- Politics and Economy Losing Ground: Global Inequality*. 17 May 2002. Now with Bill Moyers <<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/income.html>> 8 Jan. 2005.
- A Fuel Economy Canard: The Auto Industry's History of Obstructions on the Road to Safety*. Public Citizen. <http://www.citizen.org/documents/Auto_industry_safety_obstruction.pdf> 13 May 2004, 2.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Intellectuals and the Hegemony of the Dominant Class in Modern Western Democracies. Classes & Elites in Democracy and Democratization: A Collection of Readings*, Ed. Etzioni-Halevy, Eva. New York: Garland, 1997, 12-17.
- Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: Perennial Classics, 2003, 9.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Boston: South End Press, 1989, 8.
- Westphal, James D., and Edward J. Zajac. *Defections from the Inner Circle: Social Exchange, Reciprocity, and the Diffusion of Board Independence in U.S. Corporations*. Administrative Science Quarterly. 1997, 42, 161-183.
- Barnes, Roy C. and Emily R. Ritter. *Networks of Corporate Interlocking: 1962-1995*. Critical Sociology. 2001, 27.2, 192-220.