PSCI 287: The Firm
Fall 2021

Professor Sidney Rothstein
Schapiro 212
sar5@williams.edu
Office hours: [tbd]

Tuesdays/Thursdays, 9.55 – 11.10a
Classroom: [tbd]

Course description

The rise of gigantic tech firms – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon – has sparked widespread worries about the role of business power in capitalist democracy. Are these firms monopolies? How can they be better regulated? Should they be? This course studies the politics of business by centering analysis on the firm. From the perspective of the workplace, we investigate the firm as an arena of power, where workers and managers meet each other in continuous contests for control. From the perspective of the public sphere, we investigate the firm as an actor whose power maps uneasily onto the channels of democratic governance. Approaching the firm as both arena and actor in a number of capitalist democracies, we will compare the politics of business across different sectors, but will focus especially on tech and finance.

Learning goals

By the conclusion of this course, students will:

(1) Focus on power
Students will acquire analytical frameworks that will increase their sensitivity to the ways in which power works in and through the firm. Rather than viewing the firm as an organization designed to produce economic value, we will study the firm as a site of power, both in its capacity to structure relations among actors and its ability to act in its own right. Our focus on power will bring us to explore multiple approaches to power, from those rooted in material structures to those that treat identity as power. How can power, whether enacted within or by firms, be channeled to produce more positive outcomes?

(2) Question democracy
Rather than accepting the hegemonic belief in the positive value of democracy, students will develop an orientation that questions democracy, not just as a norm, but also as an actually existing set of practices. Shifting our analytical lens from the abstract national level to our everyday lives, especially in the workplace, we will explore more nuanced definitions of democracy. What qualifies as democratic practices? How can organizations be designed to facilitate democracy? How can firms support democracy?

(3) Imagine institutions
Students will learn the tools of institutional analysis in order to study the firm. These tools will enable two lines of inquiry. First, students will learn about institutions that structure and regulate firms, including the intricacies of their design, as well as the frequent disconnect between design
and application. Second, students will explore and imagine how these institutions could be made more effective, whether through changes in institutional design or changes in their surrounding conditions.

**Methods**  
To achieve these learning goals, this course engages three primary methods.

(1) *Comparative*  
Firms are not the same everywhere. Indeed, the relationship between firms and democratic governance varies considerably across different countries. In this course, we will focus on the specific cases of the US and Germany. These two large capitalist countries share much in common, but firms in each country operate very differently, offering a useful set of contrasting cases for comparative analysis.

(2) *Reparative*  
While our point of departure is the observation that firms may threaten democracy at multiple levels, our goal is only partly to detail how exactly this is the case. Instead, our orientation is as reparative as it is critical. Our goal is to identify the ways in which firms can support democratic governance, both within their boundaries and within society more generally. In other words, our goal is to identify ways to “repair” the firm, rather than simply analyze it.

(3) *Performative*  
Our reparative approach to the firm will also guide our interactions within the course. Our goal is to enact as democratic a space here as possible. What that means will be up to us, and while that will likely change shape during the semester, it is nonetheless important to set a common intention to recognize that what we do in the course always performs certain conceptions of organization, and those can be more or less democratic. In this context, students are encouraged to leave behind competitive outlooks, and instead focus on mutual support. In discussion, for instance, the goal is not to say the smartest thing, but to contribute in a way that facilitates the class as a whole to come to a new level of understanding. Critique is still important, but our critical perspective will be one that builds up our learning. We adopt a performative method because this will enable us to better appreciate the possibilities for more democratic practices in our everyday lives.

**Course materials**  
All materials will be available in the course packet. One book is available for purchase at the Bookstore.

ISBN: 9781108402521

**Assignments and assessments**  
To get an “A” in this course, you will need to complete four types of assignments.

1. Participation
Discussion forms the core of this seminar. In line with the performative method described above, our discussions will be structured in order to not just deepen our understanding of the material but also to ensure that everyone can participate. That means that your performance in class will be assessed according to how well you are able to progress our common conversation, both in terms of the discussion that day, as well as the themes we’ll develop over the course of the semester. “Smart” or “original” comments are useful, but discussions are most fruitful when we think out loud together, rather than try to impress each other. We are much smarter and more original when we put our minds together, in part because that means none of us can direct where the conversation will go. That’s when real learning happens. But it only happens if we can trust each other, and part of that trust means valuing each other’s contributions, even if they may not appear valuable in the moment. This is where the reparative method, described above, comes in. Critique is useful, but it should always be motivated by trying to deepen our understanding by improving each other’s contributions.

It is everyone’s responsibility to facilitate a conversation in which everyone participates. That means that if you generally talk a lot, your task may be to develop your listening skills. If you generally don’t talk in class, your task will be to speak up.

Discussion will enable us to learn only if all students are well-prepared. Before we meet, students will prepare for each class meeting by reading the assigned material, taking notes, and bringing their observations and questions to our discussion.

2. Essays
You will write three essays in the course of the semester. The first essay will take a comparative perspective on the basic constitution of the firm. The second essay will take a reparative perspective on power within the firm, asking, more or less, how can the workplace be made more democratic? Details on each assignment will follow.

Essays will be graded in terms of the following elements: concise argument, persuasive evidence, and logical structure. If you have a concise argument, you will have a short thesis, and I will be able to disagree with you. If you have persuasive evidence, you can point to something to convince me that you are right and I am wrong. If the essay is structured logically, it will be easy to follow your line of thought, and I should find myself agreeing with you naturally. The best essays explicitly articulate a counter-argument and systematically show why their position is superior to that counter-argument. To receive full credit, an essay must refer to a comment made by one of your classmates during class discussion.

3. Presentation
Students will deliver a short group presentation in the last third of the semester. The presentation will take a reparative perspective on firms’ power in society, asking, more or less, how can firms support a democratic polity? Details will follow.

4. Final essay
Students will write an 8-10 page paper at the conclusion of the course that links power in the workplace to firms’ power in society. Details, you guessed it, will follow.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percent of grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay 1</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay 2</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final essay</td>
<td>25</td>
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**Policies**

Participation is required. Deadlines are firm. Essays must be turned in by 12p on their due date. Late essays will be penalized one partial letter grade for each 24-hour period following the deadline (e.g., a B+ becomes a B). To accommodate life’s unending surprises, you will be granted two 24-hour extensions on any of the papers. You can use them all at once or in two installments.

**Inclusive classroom**

It is important to me that you succeed in this course, no matter what else is going on in your life. If you have any disabilities or other special circumstances that affect your performance as a student (e.g., child or elder care duties, financial or other personal concerns, etc.), please let me know so that we can work together to identify adjustments that will ensure your success. Please speak up if something isn’t working for you!

**Important dates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 4</td>
<td>Essay 1 due</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 15</td>
<td>Essay 2 due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week of November 30</td>
<td>Student presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 18</td>
<td>Essay 3 due</td>
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# Course plan

## 1. Introduction

|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | *Suggested*  
|                   | - Ch. 4. Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You (123-151) |

## 2. Organizing democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday, Sept. 13</th>
<th><em>Syllabus quiz due – 12p</em></th>
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</table>
|                   | - Book VI, 488a – 489d.  
| Thursday, Sept. 16 | [Yom Kippur; no class – interview assignment] |

## 3. Centering the firm

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<tr>
<th>Monday, Sept. 20</th>
<th><em>Interview assignment due – 12p</em></th>
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## 4. Roots of the firm

- Ch. 2. Private Government (37-71)  
*Suggested*  
- Ch. 1. When the Market was “Left” (1-36) |
| Monday, Oct. 4 | *Essay 1 due, 12p (via email)* |
- Ch. 1. Work, Power and Politics (1-16)  
*Suggested*  
- Ch. 1. The Demise of Industrial Sociology (3-12)  
- Ch. 2. Toward a Theory of the Capitalist Labor Process (13-32) |
- (pp. 7-12)  
- Ch. 1. Management Discourse in the 1990s (57-103)  
*Suggested*  

### 6. Institutional change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading Material</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday, Oct. 12</td>
<td>[Reading period; no class]</td>
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*Suggested*  

### 7. Global firms

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading Material</th>
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*Suggested*  
*Suggested*  
Greer, Ian, and Marco Hauptmeier. “Identity Work: Sustaining Transnational Collective
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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- Ch. 2. Wall Street’s Orientation: Exploitation, Empowerment, and the Politics of Hard Work (73-121)  
*Suggested*  
- Introduction: Anthropology Goes to Wall Street (1-38)  
- Ch. 1. Biographies of Hegemony: The Culture of Smartness and the Recruitment and Construction of Investment Bankers (39-72) |
- Ch. 5. Downsizers Downsized: Job Insecurity and Investment Banking Corporate Culture (213-248)  
*Suggested*  
- Ch. 3. Wall Street Historiographies and the Shareholder Value Revolution (122-168)  

### 9. Working in tech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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</table>
*Suggested*  
- Ch. 2. A Company of One (32-61)
  
- Ch. 4. The Engineer (75-105)

**Thursday, Nov. 4**

- Ch. 1. Strugglers, Strivers and Success Stories (1-24)
- Ch. 3. Forward to the Past and the Early Industrial Age (61-89)

*Suggested*


**10. The firm as actor**

**Tuesday, Nov. 9**


*Suggested*


**Thursday, Nov. 11**

- Ch. 1. Corporate Control and Political Salience (1-24)
- Ch. 3. The Managerial Origins of Institutional Divergence in France and Germany (48-81)

*Suggested*

- Ch. 7. Business Power and Democratic Politics (177-198)
- Ch. 2. Patient Capital and Markets for Corporate Control (25-47)

**Monday, Nov. 15**

*Essay 2 due, 12p (via email)*
## 11. Coalitions

**Tuesday, Nov. 16**


*Suggested*


**Thursday, Nov. 18**


- Ch. 7. Growth Strategies and Employers’ Coalitions: Renewing Welfare States [Cathie Jo Martin] (227-254)

*Suggested*


- Ch. 9. Employers, Coordination, and Active Labor Market Policy in Postindustrial Denmark (170-188)

## 12. Financial firms

**Tuesday, Nov. 23**


*Suggested*


**Thursday, Nov. 25**

[Thanksgiving; no class]

## 13. Tech firms

**Tuesday, Nov. 30**


*Suggested*


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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Introduction: What about the Workers? (1-20)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Ch. 8. Analogy: The Executive of the Firm Answering to a Two-Chamber Parliament (127-153)</td>
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<td>- Conclusions (155-168)</td>
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<td>- A Reader’s Guide for Reflection and Debate about Economic Bicameralism (171-188)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturday, Dec. 18</td>
<td>Final essay due via email by 12p</td>
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