

# Power and Society

**Lecture series for second-year BA students  
Mondays 13:15-16:30, Building 33, Room 1313**

Dr. Endre Dányi  
Guest Professor for the Sociology of Globalisation  
Faculty of Social Sciences, Bundeswehr University Munich  
Werner-Heisenberg-Weg 39, 85577 Neubiberg, Germany  
Office: Building 33, Room 3113  
Email: [e.danyi@unibw.de](mailto:e.danyi@unibw.de)

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## Course description

‘Power’ is one of the central concepts in the social sciences, and yet there is no single definition in use. The aim of this lecture series is to provide an overview of the most important understandings of power in sociology and political theory. It does so through a close engagement with the works of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler and Bruno Latour, as well as a series of group exercises centred around such contemporary phenomena as the upsurge of populist parties, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the #MeToo movement and the Fridays for Future demonstrations.

The lecture is part of Modul 1422 “Macht-Herrschaft-Gesellschaft”, and is offered as double sessions between the 6<sup>th</sup> May and the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019. The successful completion of the course requires regular attendance and active participation in the group exercises. Detailed information about the individual lectures, including literature and background material, is available on Canvas.

## Course outline

### *Lecture 1) Power and conflict (Marx), 6 May 2019*

The first half of this session focuses on Karl Marx and his analysis of capitalist production. In his detailed descriptions of work in the wake of the industrial revolution, power usually appears as something that can be possessed, similar to money and other resources. Consequently, in Marxist studies the history of modern societies tends to be described as series of conflicts between powerful and suppressed groups – or classes. The hope associated with Marx and his followers’ work throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the possibility of changing the power-relation between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and thereby creating a just society.

How relevant are Marx's ideas in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? Some say Marxism is buried under the rubble of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. Others, however, suggest that recent financial crises, like the one in 2007-2008, make Marx and his analysis of capitalism more valid than ever. In the second half of this session we discuss the significance of Marx's thoughts today with the help of a documentary titled ‘Marx Reloaded’.

### ***Lecture 2) Types of authority (Weber), 13 May 2019***

Max Weber is regarded as one of the founding fathers of sociology. Similar to Marx, he considered capitalism an organising logic that is central to the understanding of modern societies. Unlike Marx, however, he considered capitalism as a historically and culturally specific phenomenon, rather than an abstract economic system. This phenomenon, according to Weber, could not be understood without having a close look at the radical transformation of Western thought associated with Protestantism. In the first half of this session, we discuss the relationship between Protestantism and rationalisation, and the ideal types of authority – traditional, charismatic, legal/rational – in contemporary societies.

In the second half of the session, we discuss the interplay among these ideal types of authority through the rise of populist movements across Europe and North America, and the challenge they pose to ‘the establishment’. We do this with the help of a BBC documentary titled ‘The rise of the people’.

### ***Lecture 3) Power as a relational effect (Foucault), 20 May 2019***

This week’s take on power is centred around Michel Foucault’s work. It differs both from Marx’s concern with the ongoing economic conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and from Weber’s analysis of the legitimate uses of power by the State. Foucault’s main interest lies in particular power/knowledge configurations that constitute historically contingent models of governance.

In the first part of this session, we discuss Foucault’s analysis of the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power. In the second half of the session, we watch a recent documentary titled ‘Nothing to Hide’ and explore what forms panopticism and surveillance take in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the era of permanent connectivity, big data, mobile communication and the proliferation of social media platforms.

### ***Lecture 4) Power performed (Goffman & Butler), 27 May 2019***

As the Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking put it, Michel Foucault helped us understand the mechanisms through which things become sayable and thinkable, but we need Erving Goffman to grasp how these things become incorporated in our everyday lives. In the first half of this session, we discuss Goffman’s work on social interactions and his dramaturgical analysis. We also examine the practical implications of ‘normalisation’ through Goffman’s studies on mental hospitals and the management of stigmatised identities.

In the second half of the session we trace the connections between Erving Goffman’s and Judith Butler’s understandings of performativity and discuss recent challenges to dominant patterns of gender relations in popular culture – especially in the film and fashion industry – with the help of a documentary titled ‘Codes of Gender’.

### ***Lecture 5) Power in the Anthropocene (Latour & Co.), 3 June 2019***

As we have seen, in popular culture masculinity is often associated with domination and femininity with subordination. But the inverse of this statement also holds: domination/subordination is often conceptualized in gendered terms – just think of the sculpture ‘Nature unveiling herself before science’. Where does this peculiar image of the

relationship between nature and science come from? In the first half of this session, we discuss this topic by revisiting Max Weber's, Robert Merton's and Thomas Kuhn's understandings of science as a specific domain in modern societies. We then examine how sociologists and anthropologists of science introduced a radically different understanding in the 1970s and 1980s, which then was further developed in a series of works in laboratory studies and Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

In the second half of the session, we discuss how an ANT-informed understanding of the relationship between nature and science could be put to use in the era of climate change, when the possibility of rethinking politics on a global scale is not simply an option, but an obligation. We do this with the help of a recent documentary on the Anthropocene – a new epoch that foregrounds human activity as a geological force.

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## *Documentaries*

Beyond Good and Evil (Foucault documentary):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQHm-mbsCwk>

Codes of Gender (Sut Jhally): <https://thoughtmaybe.com/the-codes-of-gender/>

Karl Marx and Marxism (Stuart Hall):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y5gC\\_hNx-c&t=1000s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y5gC_hNx-c&t=1000s)

Marx Reloaded: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ke9grEMUvfk>

Max Weber documentary:

<https://www.br.de/mediathek/video/campus-doku-max-weber-die-entzauberung-der-welt-av:5c151a84bdbb71001816a80a>

'Nothing to Hide' <https://vimeo.com/189016018>

The Rise of the People (BBC) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bwhsCVb8Vw>

Story Telling for Earthly Survival (Haraway) <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/donnaharaway>

The Anthropocene: The age of mankind <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AW138ZTKioM>

Titicut Follies (Frederic Wiseman) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeeNFH15VRM>