Sophomore Seminar: Feminist Theory/State Theory

Government 261

Spring, 2007

Mon. and Wed. 2:55-4:10

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Office hours:

9-11 am, Wed.

White Hall, 3rd floor

Course Description:

Feminists have politicized the so-called "private" sphere, bringing issues such as gender inequality, the tacit assumption that women and girls ought to perform domestic labor without compensation, sexist family law, contraception and abortion rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and the gendered-racist discrimination against women of color to the forefront of contemporary political debates. Traditional State theory, by contrast, has generally failed to keep pace with this transformation. For the most part, it continues to ignore these issues as it adopts a gender-blind approach to politics. In this seminar, we will build an alternative State theory that is informed by feminist theory and activism. We will emphasize the importance of women's social movements with respect to the battles currently being waged by feminists for an egalitarian, anti-racist, anti-war, and global solidarity form of social justice.

In the spring 2007 version of this course, we will focus on the issue of women's poverty, especially in the United States. Through the course readings, discussions and writing assignments, the students will examine the causes behind the over-representation of women among the poor in America. Then we will turn to an assessment of welfare reform and we will consider feminist critiques of the TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) program. Finally we will have a look at some of the oppositional groups and organizations that are attempting to improve the condition of the American poor, and we will weigh their strengths and weaknesses from a feminist perspective.
**Course Assignments:**

Each student must complete two mid-terms and four writing assignments. Students will be asked to try their hand at a variety of writing genres -- the policy op-ed; the advocacy organization’s report; the Congressional staffer's briefing papers; and the philanthropic foundation executive's internal memo. These writing exercises are intended, first of all, to serve as stimulating vehicles for expression. They should also provide the students with an opportunity to demonstrate a mastery of the assigned readings. They are meant to be fun projects that draw the student into a thoughtful engagement with the course material. Because the student must adopt a different writing style in each assignment, the required exercises should also enhance his or her awareness of the importance of tone, style, rhetorical devices, organizational structure, and audience.

Paper due dates are noted in the syllabus. Grades will be deducted from papers that are submitted late unless the student supplies written documentation relating to a medical emergency. All written work must be submitted in hard copy either in class or to my mailbox by 4 pm. on the due date. I do not accept e-mailed assignments. Please also note that I expect each student to attend every class session; multiple absences without a documented medical excuse will result in grade deductions. Plagiarism is strictly forbidden. It also defeats the entire purpose of a writing-intensive course. Please see our university's policy on academic integrity. [http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html](http://cuinfo.cornell.edu/Academic/AIC.html)

**Course Grading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Op-ed</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>1 February</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid-term 1</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>15 February</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocacy Organization Report</td>
<td>25 %</td>
<td>15 March</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mid term 2</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>5 April</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congressional staffer's briefing papers</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12 April</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foundation executive's internal memo</td>
<td>10 %</td>
<td>3 May</td>
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For further information on writing assignments, please see the instructions at the end of the syllabus.

**Seminar Participation**

I expect everyone to arrive at each class meeting promptly. I also expect students to keep up with the reading, and to come to class prepared to engage in thoughtful discussion based upon the assigned reading. Although I will not issue a specific seminar participation grade, a student can lift a borderline grade upwards by demonstrating a sincere commitment to the course. We will experiment with a variety of class formats,
such as student presentations, peer editing, small group work, class workshops, and collective close reading, according to student interest.

**Course texts**

I have ordered the following texts from the campus bookstore.


These books have also been placed on reserve at Uris Library.

**Websites**

Here is a list of policy and activist organizations with websites that I find interesting on welfare politics. You may want to refer to them not only for basic information but also for good examples of writing in the different genres that we will be exploring.

American Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO)

[www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org)

Institute for Policy Studies (IPS)

[www.ips-doc](http://www.ips-doc)

Legal Momentum (LM) (formerly NOW-Legal Defense and Education Fund)

[www.legalmomentum.org](http://www.legalmomentum.org)

Madre (Madre)

[www.madre.org](http://www.madre.org)
Course Schedule

23 January

Introduction

25 January

Women and Poverty in the United States


30 January

Social Policy in the United States Today

1 February

Blau and Abramovitz, Ch. 9; skim 10, 11, 12

-- Op-ed due --

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6 February

Welfare Reform and Policy History


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8 February

Reese. Ch. 6-8

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13 February

Reese. Ch. 9-11

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15 February

In-class mid-term: American poverty policy and welfare reform

(study Reese, ch. 1 and Blau and Abramovitz)

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20 February

*Feminists on Welfare Reform – Child Support, Domestic Violence, Low-wage Work, Childcare, and Women’s Citizenship*


(selections to be determined by class)
22 February
Albelda and Withorn

27 February
Albelda and Withorn

1 March
Albelda and Withorn
Workshop: advocacy organization report.

6 March, 8 March
No classes – research time. Work on your advocacy organization report assignment.

13 March
Welfare Reform and Latina Immigrants

15 March
Marchevsky and Theoharis, Ch. 2
Advocacy organization report assignment due.
spring break

27 March
Marchevsky and Theoharis, Ch. 3, 4

29 March
Marchevsky and Theoharis, Ch. 5

3 April
Marchevsky and Theoharis, Conclusion

5 April
In-class Mid-term – study Reese, assigned articles from Albelda and Withorn; Marchevsky and Theoharis.

10 April
African-American Welfare Mothers as Historical Agents: The Welfare Rights Movement

Annelise Orleck, Storming Ceasar's Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005). Intro, ch. 1 and 2

12 April
Orleck, ch. 3, 4

Congressional staffer papers due.
17 April
Orleck, ch. 5.

19 April
Orleck, ch. 6.

24 April
Orleck, ch. 7.

26 April
Orleck, ch. 8.

1 May
Orleck, ch. 9.

3 May
wrap-up/catch-up
Foundation executive’s internal memo due.

The Writing Assignments
Policy expert's op-ed
grade value: 10 %
due date: 1 February, 4 pm.
strict length requirement: 800 words

The op-ed (i.e. a guest commentary that appears on the page opposite the editorial page) is a very demanding exercise. You are acting as a "guest columnist" in a prestigious journalistic setting. The first-person writing and witty remarks that are commonly found in regular columns will not do here; as a guest, you have to win the trust of your readers, and a more sober tone is required. At the same time, you want to catch the eye of the op-ed page editor who is always swamped by huge piles of submissions from the best policy commentators from around the world. Your op-ed has to be fresher and livelier than a report or an essay, for example. Write in complete sentences, but favor a crisp writing style, with short and punchy paragraphs. Start with a compelling opening, and then build your argument clearly and effectively in a logical manner. The short length means that you have to produce a concise statement, and yet, at the same time, the piece should strike the reader as a deft "tour de force" rather than a dense and inaccessible work designed for a small circle of policy wonks.

The assignment: Congress is currently considering an increase in the federal minimum wage. Write an “op-ed” on this issue. You can support or oppose the bill, or you can support it as one part in a larger package of reforms, but you should take a clear position (no wavering!) and you should emphasize the relevance of federal minimum wage policy to women’s poverty and women’s rights.

Further information: Footnotes are not used in the op-ed. But please help your fact-checker -- yours truly -- by inserting them wherever you cite specific facts or major arguments that have been crafted by others.

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Advocacy organization report.

Grade value: 25%

due date: 15 March, 4 pm

length: 2,000 words

In the key welfare rights case, King v. Smith (1968), the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund provided legal assistance to the appellees. You are the assistant to the NAACP LDEF lawyers who did so. After the case has been decided, you are asked to write a 2,000 word (5-6 pages) section of the organization’s annual report about the case. What were the main issues addressed in this case? What did the Supreme Court decide? How does the decision relate to policy history? (Hint: use the chapters in Reese. Although footnotes are very rarely used in annual reports, make sure you footnote your references to Reese.) What are the broader implications of the decision for poor women’s citizenship rights? And why is it fitting that your organization, the NAACP LDEF provided legal assistance for the appellees?
Note: recall the context of your report, namely the organization’s annual report. You are writing for funders and supporters, not technical specialists. Your report should be interesting and accessible for the non-expert. Avoid heavy legal terminology, explain your points about policy and poor women’s rights clearly, and strive to make your report visually appealing. Use sub-titles and a moderate amount of bullet points. But do not overdo the simplification and condensation. Your readers are deeply interested in social justice issues and expect to find credible discussions of major legal issues in the annual report. Note also the year of your report: 1968. Recall that the “second wave” of women’s activism was only just beginning at that time, and that the civil rights movement, for all its many virtues, did not always pay enough attention to gender issues and the needs of women of color. In addition, you should not take for granted that your readers accept the idea that the NAACP LDEF chose to support the AFDC recipients. Use your report as an opportunity to educate your organization’s supporters and to make the case that future legal advocacy in the area of welfare rights would be represent an appropriate extension of the organization’s mission.

Congressional staffers’ papers

grade value: 25 %

due date: 12 April, 4 pm

strict length requirement: Part A – 250 words, Part B --1,750 words

In "real life," no two legislative offices are alike. Each Representative and Senator has a unique way of working with his or her staff members. In addition, briefing papers are handled very carefully, given the potential for "leaks" to the opposition or to the media. There is, then, very little standardization in the writing that staffers perform for their bosses. The genre outlined here is therefore an imaginary one.

The assignment: Imagine that the current Congress will be “reauthorizing” TANF this session. (In actual fact, the next reauthorization lies several years in the future.) Rep. Charlie Rangel’s chief of staff wants to prepare him for hearings in which substantial changes in the work requirements will be considered.

Part A. One-page assignment memo. Rep. Rangel’s chief of staff writes a memo asking the staffers who specialize in welfare issues in his office to prepare the briefing papers. In this memo, the chief of staff needs to remind the staffers of the importance of welfare policy for Rangel. (Which committee is Rangel serving on that is relevant to this assignment? What is his position on that committee?) Also, the chief of staff quickly outlines the existing work requirements that were passed in 2006. (You will have to do the research on this and sum them up quickly with reference to the actual federal welfare law that is currently in effect.) She also lists the five different changes to the work requirements that will be considered by Congress. (Make these up yourself, and be
creative. You should not restrict yourself to proposals that would actually receive substantial support in this Congress. At least one of your proposals should represent a radical change to existing policy. Think inside and outside the box. Your proposals should be located at various points on the political spectrum. eg. You should have at least one proposal that is neoliberal, one should be moderate, another should be progressive, and so on."

Part B. The staffers' briefing paper. In a 1,750 word report, re-state the work requirements in the TANF program that were passed in 2006. Address six or seven major problems that these requirements are causing for TANF recipients, using your readings for support. (Again, integrate footnotes liberally into your text, even though you would not do so in real life.) Then address the merits and weaknesses of each of the five proposals that are going to come before Congress during this round of TANF reauthorization. Use strong organizational devices to make your paper accessible to Rep. Rangel and the rest of the staff: clear divisions between well-ordered sections and strong sub-headings. However, write in complete sentences throughout; please do not use a bullet point format.

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Foundation executive's internal memo

grade value: 10 %

due: 3 May, 4 pm

length: 1,000 words

The assignment: You are the Chair of the grant competition committee for an independent foundation that aims to support "non-governmental organizations pursuing the objective of eliminating poverty in the United States, especially among poor single mothers who are come from the African-American, Latino/a and/or immigrant communities." (The foundation is not bound by any tax laws or political campaign finance laws.) Your committee must decide how to disburse a sum of $250 million in this year's grant competition. Together, you have narrowed down the pool of applicants to three finalists: 1) the Working Families Party; 2) a joint application by UNITE HERE and SEIU; and 3) a joint application by ACORN, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, and the Tompkins County Living Wage Coalition. You have several options. You can give grants adding up to $250 million to support all three applications in equal or unequal amounts; you can give grants to only one or two, again in equal or unequal amounts; or you can decide not to award any grants this year. Set out your decision in two or three lines. Then write a four-page essay, using the material included in the course reading list, especially the general lessons about welfare rights organizing that are embedded in Orleck’s text, to persuade your fellow committee members to support your decision. You should assume that each one of them is a college-educated professional who values the
foundation's mission in his or her own way, and that they are fair-minded individuals who respond to compelling arguments.

Further information: You should take a look at these organizations' websites. Draw upon the information posted there, and review your course reading. You do not need to footnote the websites, but you should include at least ten footnotes in your essay that signal your intellectual indebtedness to the assigned readings.