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As far back as 1959, C. Wright Mills worried over American political science, observing that “much of political science has of late been irrelevant to understanding important political realities.”¹ As the accepted political landscape turned upside down during the 1960s and early 1970s, mainstream American political science did little to prove Mills wrong. The critical voices raised in response to the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and spreading social upheavals—those who sought an engaged and relevant political science that raised central issues of power—labored for the most part on the margins of the discipline. The discipline’s prevailing detachment from what Mills called “important political realities” seemed to worsen as the 1990s proceeded; mainstream scholars pursued ever narrower and more esoteric subjects, as the ostensible demands of scientific rigor and quantification captured the discipline’s imagination. This we all know.

We also know that as this drift hardened into an institutional rigidity, a reaction set in within the discipline itself, highlighted by the Perestroika movement’s challenge in 2000. Within a year, Theda Skocpol, a Perestroika-backed candidate, was chosen as president of the American Political Science Association, and in an effort to demonstrate relevancy and engagement, she convened a Task Force to address growing inequality in the United States. Staffed with some of the top Americanists interested in broader political questions, the Task Force in 2004 published a report, “American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality.”² While admirably descriptive of the growing problem of inequality, the report lacked any serious consideration of *why* inequality has accelerated in recent decades; it especially lacked any analysis and accounting of the expansive mobilizations of business power since the 1970s. Frances Piven, a scholar who has long labored at the margins of American political science, noted this omission when she remarked that, all in all, the report was “a timid document.”³ Jacob Hacker, a member of the Task Force, responded by noting that “[i]f the members of the Task Force were ‘timid’ . . . we were only in the appropriate sense that we were restrained by the limited state of current knowledge.”⁴

With *Winner-Take-All Politics*, Hacker—with his coauthor Paul Pierson—now seems not quite so “restrained.” Hacker and Pierson offer both a disquieting view of the current state of American politics and an analysis that admirably raises some fundamental questions about power in America. The question is, to what extent can their book shake things up in a discipline that has been rightly criti-

cized for ignoring the larger issues of power and inequality in American politics?

Certainly Hacker and Pierson jolt readers by announcing that they see a nation experiencing a “slow, steady slide toward economic oligarchy” (p. 6). They correctly counter the argument that impersonal economic forces are primarily to blame for the nation’s growing inequalities and concentrations of wealth. Instead, they fix responsibility on the new national politics promoted and reinforced by a reenergized and politically mobilized business community. Business is mobilized, of course, to promote the specific goals of particular business interests, but they have another, larger purpose as well: to overturn the New Deal and Great Society welfare-redistributive-regulatory regimes. The authors recognize that the current period of concentrated wealth and power is not a “freak departure from the normally happy interplay of American democracy and American capitalism” (p. 74). They see that tensions between capitalism and democracy have always marked American political development and that tendencies toward economic oligarchy have been ever-present in American politics.

In this sense, Hacker and Pierson depart from the prevailing view of most American politics scholars that politics and political power are more or less autonomous from economic forces and private power, and that states shape societies in a one-way determinist manner. Despite their subtitle, *How Washington Made the Rich Richer*, theirs is not a story of Washington acting on its own. They understand that politics and policies have always shaped and reshaped economic outcomes and private power relations, and as a consequence societal forces have, in turn, sought to shape politics and policies. And because expanding governmental interventionism potentially increases democratic outcomes, they find that powerful “market participants have strong incentives to resist government regulation and democratic intervention.” As a result, “those who have the most power in the market may also have the most power in politics, undermining the basic ideal on which democracy rests” (pp. 74–5).

In all, this is heady stuff for mainstream American political science and very welcome, to be sure. But I must point out that I am culling one theme—certainly a central one—from the book. I am also imputing a certain coherence to an argument that toys with an analysis of the interrelations of business power and public policy, but that resists any kind of thoroughgoing critique of power relations in the United States.

Hacker and Pierson are content to raise some basic issues about business mobilization and the interconnections between politics and economics, but they are reluctant to push the analysis very far. They claim that theirs is a “very different type of exploration” than that offered by “most commentators”: “The truths that we find share little in common with the familiar nostrums about the natural

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course of the American economy” (p. 5). Their foil seems to be the current conventional thinking espoused by professional pundits and commentators, just as their book seems directed at a popular, rather than an academic, audience. Still, little of what they offer is the “surprisingly uncharted territory” they make it out to be (p. 7). They can make this claim only by ignoring an entire tradition within American political science, and within the social sciences more generally, that has already fully probed many of the questions and issues they raise concerning the interplay of politics and markets, democracy and capitalism, and public and private power.

In the modern era, for a partial list of books we could start with: Mills’ *The Power Elite*, Robert Engler’s *The Politics of Oil: Private Power & Democratic Directions*, G. William Domhoff’s *Who Rules America?* Ralph Miliband’s *The State in Capitalist Society*, James O’Connor’s *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*, Charles Lindblom’s *Politics and Markets: The World’s Political-Economic Systems*, and Fred Block’s *Revising State Theory: Essays in Politics and Postindustrialism*.⁵ And concentrating just on the period covered by Hacker and Pierson, we have, among others: Piven and Richard Cloward’s *The New Class War: Reagan’s Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences*, Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers’ *On Democracy: Toward a Transformation of American Society*, Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison’s *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America*, Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers’ *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics*, Sidney Plotkin and William Scheuerman’s *Private Interests, Public Spending: Balanced-Budget Conservatism and the Fiscal Crisis*, and Stan Luger’s *Corporate Power, American Democracy, and the Automobile Industry*.⁶

These books represent a distillation of a broad effort by many scholars from different disciplines, including political science, interested in the interrelations of private and public power within capitalism. That they exist undermines Hacker’s earlier point concerning “the limited state of current knowledge” in the discipline regarding the forces promoting increasing inequality and concentrated wealth. These scholars specifically focused on the ways that private, economic power and private sector struggles impinge upon political outcomes, and the various ways that the economic system constrains the political system. During the 1970s, this work took off and inspired many within the social sciences, and even led two pillars of the American subfield within political science, Robert Dahl and Lindblom, to rethink their assumptions and conclusions about democratic pluralism in the United States.⁷ We should not forget this. This scholarship, however, elicited both a wave of criticism about the supposed reductionism and functionalism of its premises and a related cold shoulder from the mainstream of the discipline that seemed manifestly uninterested in issues of business power.⁸ And now Hacker and Pierson, in a seeming eureka moment, report

that politics actually is entwined with economic forces, and the inevitable interplay of state and economy is marked by business forces mobilized to prevent any democratic interference in private power relations.

That the authors reintroduce marginalized issues and factors into an analysis of current American politics is a positive development and should be applauded. But because they have ignored so fully the legacy of scholarship that preceded theirs, they end up with an analysis that seems purposively muddled and unfocused, an analysis that dilutes its ability to provoke the discipline and thus limits its effectiveness as a prod to further research. With the central theme of “politics as organized combat,” they produce a modified interest group analysis that stresses the advantages of organization in winning political battles. Moving beyond the preoccupation with personalities and the “circus-like” spectacle of elections, they focus instead on the “clout that huge organizations wield in American life” (pp. 104; 105). Elections matter, but it is policies that determine winners and losers, and it is organized interests that are mobilized to influence these policies on a permanent daily basis in Washington and other power centers.

This approach can hardly be considered pathbreaking. It basically recycles early criticisms of the pluralist assumption that voting can effectively counter interest group lobbying,⁹ and it leads to a simplistic and even naive conclusion that the current era of business dominance can be reversed by simply refortifying middle-class organizational strengths (as if there were any easy way to do so). Hacker and Pierson’s analysis, in the end, does not even get us back to where Dahl and Lindblom stood in 1976, when they pronounced that “[b]usinessmen play a distinctive role in [our] politics that is qualitatively different from that of any other interest group. It is also much more powerful than an interest group role.”¹⁰ If modern corporations are not simply just another set of organized interests—indeed, if they are, as Lindblom asserted, actually a “privileged” set of interests, so much so that both government and business officials can be said to “govern”—then how does this core reality influence our current political dysfunctions?¹¹ Hacker and Pierson provide no guidance on this account; beyond their perfectly fine overview of these dysfunctions, there is little here to stimulate and guide a renewed attention to business power in American politics.

By thus isolating their work from the tradition of critical scholarship and the more serious questions about corporate power raised by this scholarship, the authors limit their book’s impact. They deny themselves a springboard that would enliven their analysis while further marginalizing work that could support their own. By ignoring scholarship that promoted, as Block and Piven note, “the relatively basic and obvious truth that business exerts disproportionate influence in U.S. politics,” Hacker and Pierson are reinforcing the message that it just will not do for Americanists to go too far down the road of critically

understanding the role of business power within a capitalist society.¹² In this way, they implicitly reflect and reinforce the stigma attached to such work as unscientific and ideological.¹³

Maybe, despite the concerns noted here, Hacker and Pierson's book will shake things up and help encourage more engaged scholarship and more thoroughgoing critiques of power in America. To really make progress on this front, however, we would need to finally heed APSA President Lindblom's plea, in 1982, "that mainstream political science ought to bring ["radical" political science] in from the cold."¹⁴ And we have seen at least some movement in this regard. Recently, in the pages of *Perspectives on Politics*, Jeffrey Winters and Benjamin Page explicitly extolled scholarship that exposed the ways that business pressure impacted politics and policy development.¹⁵ And they issued a very appropriate charge: "[O]ur basic point is that political science as a whole and the American politics subfield in particular needs to treat power, especially in its material form, much more seriously than it recently has done."¹⁶ To more fully engage with the issues and questions that Hacker and Pierson raise in their stimulating book, we need to more fully engage the legacy of work that has already gone down this path. Maybe Americanists can remember that the state of their knowledge is not so limited, and that the time is more than ripe to recover from the amnesia that has limited their understanding of power in America.

Notes

- 1 Mills 1959, 84; see also p. 99.
- 2 APSA Task Force Report 2004.
- 3 Piven 2006, 45.
- 4 Hacker 2006, 47.
- 5 Mills 1959; Engler 1961; Domhoff 1967; Miliband 1969; O'Connor 1973; Lindblom 1977; Block 1987.
- 6 Piven and Cloward 1982; Cohen and Rogers 1983; Ferguson and Rogers 1987; Bluestone and Harrison 1990; Plotkin and Scheuerman 1994; Luger 1999.
- 7 Paradoxically enough, it was only in the wake of the democratic upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, which had led to some major expansions in regulatory and welfare policies, that Dahl and Lindblom revisited their pluralist assumptions about power in the United States to find that business power entailed very significant limits to democratic policy-making in the United States.
- 8 See e.g., Skocpol 1980.
- 9 Robert Engler, in his 1961 book *The Politics of Oil*, provided a very similar analysis, noting the decline of citizen-centered democracy, and commenting on "the distractions of the mass media with their accent on trivia and personalities." As he continues: "The

public behaves as if it is unable to sustain interest in the great issues and as if it is devoid of the tools and the will required for democratic citizenship and survival. In this vacuum the modern corporation moves with purpose and plan" (p. 8). Engler's analytical focus on modern corporations as "private governments" exercising unaccountable powers and thereby producing "the deepest assault upon the tenets of a free society" sadly seems quaint and even archaic today, but his analysis provides a deeper understanding and appreciation for power in America than Hacker and Pierson deliver (p. 494).

- 10 Dahl and Lindblom 1976, quoted in Manley 1983, 371.
- 11 Lindblom 1977; 1982a.
- 12 Block and Piven 2010, 206.
- 13 See Block and Piven 2010 and Domhoff 2007. As Jeffrey Isaac (1987, 193) has noted, the postwar generation of "[p]luralist theorists . . . never [took] Marxism very seriously, except insofar as it seemed to them to represent a manifestly unscientific, and thus clearly illegitimate, intellectual exercise." And Lindblom (1982b, 334), in his essay "The Market as Prison," recognized the unwillingness of the social sciences in general to really question the basic power premises of the entwined market-political: "You will note what I am saying—and here I make it explicit—that the prison is strong enough to incarcerate not only popular thought but professional thinking in the social sciences."
- 14 Lindblom, 1982a, 20.
- 15 Winters and Page 2009, 741.
- 16 Winters and Page 2009, 732.

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