

## AMERICAN STATE FORMATION IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

### **Instructor Information:**

Mary Shi  
Email: mary.shi@berkeley.edu  
Mailbox: 410 Social Sciences Building

### **Seminar Times and Location:**

Wednesdays 12-2pm  
Social Sciences Building 420

**Office Hours:** Wednesdays 4:30pm and by appointment

Drop-in, until last student leaves

Location: Caffè Strada

### **Course Overview:**

Debate over the meaning and interpretation of American history is raging in the public sphere. Are we a nation built around the principles of equality, liberty, and freedom? Or are we a nation built on oppression and exploitation? And to what extent are slavery, settler colonialism, and empire woven into the structures of government and the national ideals that constitute the United States today?

This course doesn't offer an answer to these questions so much as it seeks to equip students with the tools to more critically understand and intervene in this debate from a *sociological* perspective. To this end, this course will be structured in three main parts. After introducing students to current debates over the interpretation of American history via the 1619 Project, students will be introduced to classical sociological approaches to studying the modern state. In the second part of this class, students will interrogate the applicability of these classical approaches to the American case while being introduced to critical epistemological frameworks that widen the perspectival lens on American political development. In the final third of this class, students will be introduced to alternative frameworks through which to interpret American state formation beyond the standard narrative of the U.S. being a revolutionary experiment in liberal democracy.

This course is built around the assumption that the strongest critique is built from a foundation of deep understanding. Therefore, this semester we'll read the work we seek to critique at length, allowing their authors to make their arguments in the strongest possible way, on their own ground, and engaged by us in the full complexities of their historical specificity. It is by successfully critiquing these arguments at their best that we can be assured our criticisms are sound. Throughout, students will be asked questions that will stimulate them to critically reflect on the assumptions and epistemic limitations of each argument and the relationship between politics and knowledge production, as well as help them refine their own interpretation of American state formation in preparation for writing the final paper.

### **Course Design and Requirements:**

In addition to supporting the main course goal, the below requirements are also designed

to help students hone their critical reading, writing, and oral communication skills. Students can expect timely feedback on all written assignments and to work with the instructor throughout the course towards writing their final paper. By the end of the course students should be able to (a) describe how different scholarly perspectives would interpret American state formation; (b) produce well-crafted, analytical writing; and (c) think critically about the relationship between power, politics, and knowledge production

To meet the below requirements, students will need to complete the readings listed under each week of the syllabus. The reading load for each week will be kept restrained (~60-70 pages/week) with the expectation that students read each text very closely. All readings will be made available online via bCourses or university e-book.

### ***Reading Responses (40%)***

Reading responses should both demonstrate a thorough reading of the texts and your initial *synthetic* efforts to digest said texts. Each response will be made up of two parts.

- The first part of your response (1 full page) should be structured around answering the guiding question provided for that week in the syllabus. Some weeks have multiple questions—you only have to answer one. Simple summarizations of the text are insufficient. Please provide evidence and citations for your answer from the texts. Reading response grades will be solely based on the quality of this first part of each response, although you are required to also do the second to receive credit.
- The second part of your response (up to 1 additional page) is your brief reaction memo. Students can use this space to say whatever they want about the readings. What particularly jumped out to you? The reaction memo is an opportunity for students to provide weekly feedback on the course, reflect on connections beyond the readings, and generate fodder for good classroom discussion.

Students are expected to submit at least **8 reading responses**, including a response for the first week and each week of the “Classics” section, although more submissions are encouraged. The final reading response grade will be calculated with the highest 8 grades from the entire semester. Reading responses will be graded according to a ✓+ / ✓ / ✓- system, corresponding respectively to 100/90/80 points.

Reading responses are due for the week they are listed on the syllabus. No substitutions of questions will be permitted. Students should upload an electronic version of their response via bCourses by **12pm on the Tuesday before class**. Reading responses should be double spaced with 1” margins and 12pt Times New Roman font.

Students’ reading responses will be made electronically available to each other before class. Students will only be able to access other students’ readings responses after they have submitted their own.

### ***Seminar Participation (20%)***

In a seminar, student learning occurs through discussion. The quality of each individual student's participation will in aggregate determine the overall quality of the course. My role as instructor is to facilitate this process and create a generative space for each student to further both the internal dialogues they have with themselves and the material, as well as the external dialogue they have with their peers.

Your participation grade will reflect my evaluation of the effort you are making to actively process the course material. This will be based on your (1) quality of preparation for section, (2) verbal participation in discussions, (3) active listening, (4) conversations during office hours, and (5) regular attendance. Please see below for attendance policy

### ***Final Research Paper (40%)***

Students can write a final paper either critically evaluating one of the analytical frameworks provided in this seminar (Option 1), or proposing their own interpretation of American state formation (Option 2). ***Other topics are allowable subject to instructor approval.***

Students pursuing either option will be expected to synthesize themes and content from throughout the course to write their final papers.

- An effective *Option 1* paper will choose one of the analytical frameworks presented in this course (e.g. Weberian, idealist, settler colonial, etc.) to identify its strengths and weaknesses for interpreting American history, and make an argument as to whether, on balance, it should serve as the ***primary*** interpretive framework for American state formation.
- An effective *Option 2* paper will draw from ***at least three frameworks*** introduced in this class to propose their own synthetic interpretation of American history.

To help prepare for the final paper, students will:

- Meet with the instructor (5%) the week of March 7 or 14 to discuss potential final paper topics. To prepare for this meeting, students are required to upload a preparatory document to bCourses by **midnight of Sunday, March 6** that (a) identifies *at least* one research topic; (b) proposes 2-3 related research questions for that topic, and (c) presents a bibliography including at least 5 relevant, scholarly texts. Students may present up to 3 research topics, along with their respective research questions and bibliographies. Students are not expected to have exhaustively read any of the bibliographic materials they propose yet—this exercise is only meant to get students browsing the relevant scholarship.
- Prepare a rough draft of the introduction (5%) to their papers that will be workshopped in class on April 27th. Documents must be uploaded to bCourses by **Monday, April 25th at 12pm**. Introductions (250-500 words) should include the paper's preliminary thesis statement and be accompanied with the full bibliography of the paper, not only what is cited in the introduction.

Final papers (30%) should be 15-20 pages, double spaced with 1" margins in 12pt Times New Roman, inclusive of bibliography and exclusive of figures. Papers are to follow the norms of academic citation. Papers should be uploaded to bCourses and submitted via hardcopy to the instructor's mailbox in the Social Science Building by **Monday, May 9th at 2pm**.

### **Classroom Expectations and Guidelines**

Students are expected to arrive on time, having prepared for discussion by thoughtfully completing the readings and being ready to participate. All students are expected to engage in a thoughtful and respectful manner with one another. This includes monitoring themselves to ensure no one student holds the floor too long or dominates the discussion.

*Laptops and cellphones are not permitted in class.* Please bring hardcopies of all texts to class as you will be expected to reference the text throughout the discussion.

### **Attendance Policy**

Students are allowed one unexcused absence, no questions asked. All excused absences require documentation verifying the specific circumstances. Unexcused absences beyond the allowance will result in a grade deduction.

### **Late Policy**

Late assignments will be subject to a one-notch grade deduction for every day they are late (e.g. ✓+ to ✓, B+ to B).

### **Email Policy**

Email should be reserved for urgent issues or simple bureaucratic/logistical concerns. Please save substantive questions for class or office hours.

### **Academic Dishonesty**

Do not plagiarize under any circumstances. Plagiarism is the use of intellectual material produced by another person without properly citing its source. If you are unclear as to what constitutes plagiarism, you should immediately consult with me and/or review "Academic Honesty: A Guide for Students," prepared by the Office of Student Life. Although students are encouraged to collaborate on reading responses all students are expected to submit their own written response, providing their best answer in their own words. Any instances of cheating will not be tolerated and be addressed promptly.

### **Accessibility and Inclusivity**

The closest gender neutral bathrooms are on the sixth floor of the Social Sciences Building. Students who have been issued a letter of accommodation from the Disabled Students Program (DSP) should contact me to ensure the necessary arrangements have been made. All students should feel free to contact me with other accessibility and/or inclusivity concerns, especially in light of the ongoing COVID pandemic. If you are feeling sick or have tested positive for

COVID, please refrain from coming to class in-person and we can make arrangements for remote participation or other alternatives.

## WEEKLY SEMINAR READINGS AND THEMES

### **Week 1 (January 19): Introductions**

Review syllabus, in-class introductions, schedule introductory office hours

### **Week 2 (January 26): Introducing the Debate (required RR week)**

*\*\* Answer both guiding questions this week \*\**

1. According to Hannah-Jones and Sandefur, why is it important how we tell the story of America?
2. The debate around the 1619 Project is largely a debate between historians. Think to your sociology classes. What do you think a “sociological perspective” (whatever that means to you, but please define what you mean by this) could add to these debates that isn’t already represented in this week’s readings?

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019. “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.” The 1619 Project. *The New York Times Magazine*. Online. 14 August 2019.

Sandefur, Timothy. 2020. “The 1619 Project: An Autopsy.” *The Dispatch*. The Cato Institute: online, 27 October 2020.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2021. “Origins.” *The 1619 Project*. New York: One World. xvii-xxxiii.

## PART I. CLASSICAL APPROACHES TO STATE FORMATION

### **Week 3 (February 2): The Characteristics of the Modern State (required RR week)**

1. According to Weber, what distinguishes the modern state from other forms of political organization? And what are the origins of this form of organization?
2. What is the role of *values* like equality or freedom in Weber’s conceptualization of the state and its operation?

Weber, Max. 1958. Selections from “Politics as a Vocation.” *From Max Weber*. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 77-111

Weber, Max. 1958. Selections from “Bureaucracy.” *From Max Weber*. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 196-230.

**Week 4 (February 9): The Fiscal-Military Theory of State Formation (required RR week)**

1. Both Weber and Tilly begin from the premise that the modern state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical violence. Compare and contrast their different theories of state formation.
2. To what extent are Weber and Tilly's theories of state formation applicable to all modern states and to the United States in particular? Identify specific features of each theory that make them particularly generalizable and historically specific.

Tilly, Charles. 1992. Selections from *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992*. Cambridge: Blackwell. 14-33, 76-107; 114-126.

— 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." *Bringing the State Back In*. Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 169-186.

**Week 5 (February 16): Cultural Theories of the State (required RR week)**

1. While Weber and Tilly focus on the institutional features of the "modern state," other scholars have pointed to how thinking through the lens of territorially-bounded "states" that can be identified as part of some sort of "public" sphere separate from the "private" is itself a new phenomenon. According to Mitchell and Anderson, what is the origin of this mode of thinking? Do you see any connection between this focus on "national" thinking to the intense debate over the 1619 Project?

Mitchell, Timothy. 1999. "Society, Economy, and the State Effect." *State/Culture*. George Steinmetz, ed. *State/Culture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 76-97.

Anderson, Benedict. 2006 [1983]. "Introduction," "Creole Pioneers," and "Census, Map, Museum." *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso. 1-7; 47-65; 163-185

**PART II. THE PECULIARITIES OF THE AMERICAN STATE AND THE  
LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL APPROACHES**

**Week 6 (February 23): The United States as an Exceptional Case**

1. Debates over American exceptionalism illustrate how scholarship and politics are intertwined. Nonetheless, the idea that the United States is uniquely organized around principles of liberty and democracy has long held sway in both scholarship and public discourse. How would classical theories of state formation accommodate the argument that the ideals of republicanism and liberty played a particularly important role in the United States' founding and its subsequent political development?

Bailyn, Bernard. 1967. First paragraph of Chapter 2 (thesis statement to the book),

Introduction and Section 3 of Chapter 5 (“Sovereignty”), and Introduction and Section 4 of Chapter 6 (“Whether Some Degree of Respect... Superiors”). *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.  
Onuf, Peter. 2012. “American Exceptionalism and National Identity.” *American Political Thought* 1(1): 77-100.

### **Week 7 (March 2): The Delegated and Decentralized American State**

1. How does the classical approach to state formation occlude or selectively emphasize particular features of the American state? How do you understand the relationship between this “American political development” debate and the 1619 Project debate?
2. Scholars now identify the unique degree to which the United States relies on indirect and delegated means of exercising authority that are fragmented across multiple different levels of government. How does this “delegated state” synthesis incorporate both institutionalist and cultural accounts of state formation? What do you think is still missing?

Mettler, Suzanne. 2011. “Introduction.” *The Submerged State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1-30.

Novak, William J. 2008. “The Myth of the “Weak” American State.” *The American Historical Review* 113(3): 752-772.

### **Week 8 (March 9): A Paradoxically Founded Ideal**

1. The United States’ history is one of contradictions. How can we, both as scholars (and, more specifically, sociologists) and individual members of this political community, make sense of these contradictions? Why is it important that we undertake this work?
2. Reflect on the 1619 Project debate introduced at the beginning of the course. Now that you’ve been introduced to a political sociology perspective on state formation, what would you say the debate around the 1619 Project misses *analytically* in its debates over the American founding? Why do you think that is?

Lepore, Jill. 2018. “Introduction” and part of “Chapter 2: The Rulers and the Ruled.” *These Truths*. New York: Norton. xi-xx; 31-64.

Morgan, Edmund. 1972. “Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox.” *Journal of American History* 59(1): 5-29.

### **Week 9 (March 16): Critical Epistemological Perspectives**

\* *Final paper proposals and preliminary bibliographies due Sunday, March 6 at midnight via bCourses. Sign-ups for individual office hours over the next two weeks will be done in class.*

1. What, to use Chakrabarty’s language, would the “historicist” story of American founding would be? Why, according to Chakrabarty and Go, is it important to critique

historicist analytical frameworks? Compare and contrast their logic to that of the 1619 Project and its critics.

2. What happens when we expand the analytical frame to de-center white, colonial experiences of American founding? What does such a circumscribed perspective leave out? And with what consequences?

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. "Introduction." *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press. 1-23.

Go, Julian. 2020. "Race, Empire, and Epistemic Exclusion: Or the Structures of Sociological Thought." 38(2): 79-100.

Buck-Morss, Susan. 2000. "Hegel and Haiti." *Critical Inquiry* 26(4): 821-865.

\*\*\* Spring Break \*\*\*

### PART III. ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS

#### **Week 10 (March 30): Economic Self Interest**

1. Would you argue that the ideals professed by America's founding fathers served as *motivation* or *justification* for their Revolution? How would you describe the role of ideas in determining action and influencing history?

Beard, Charles. 1913. "The Constitution as an Economic Document." *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. New York: Macmillan. 152-188.

Wood, Gordon S. 1987. Selection from "Interests and Disinterestedness in the Making of the Constitution." *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter, eds. University of North Carolina Press. 81-109.

#### **Week 11 (April 6): Slavery**

1. "The vigorous protection of local power is an expression of the divisions of slavery-based society." Agree or disagree? Discuss. To the extent that so much of American political ideology is centered around the veneration of limited government, would you say that slavery is an organizing principle of American political development?
2. How, according to Cedric Robinson, are race and capitalism intertwined? And how, according to Donald Robinson, did slavery influence the Constitution?

Robinson, Cedric. 2000 [1983]. "Racial Capitalism." *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. 2nd ed. Durham: University of North Carolina Press. 9-28; 52-68.

Robinson, Donald. 1970. "Slavery and the Constitutional Revolution: The Debate over Federal



Powers.” *Slavery in the Structure of American Politics*. New York: Harcourt Brace  
Jovanovich. 207-247.

### **Week 12 (April 13): Empire**

1. To what extent have the United States’ imperial possessions been incidental or essential to the formation of the American state?

Go, Julian. 2011. “Imperial Paths to Power, 1688–1939.” *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 28-66.

Frymer, Paul. 2017. “Introduction.” *Building an American Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1-31.

### **Week 13 (April 20): Settler Colonialism**

- I. Acknowledgements of the role of Indigenous dispossession in American history often do not extend past the moment of dispossession. What lasting legacies has settler colonialism left on American political development?

Frymer, Paul. 2014. “A Rush and a Push and the Land Is Ours.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12(1): 119-144.

Calloway, Colin. 2006. “Introduction” and part of “Chapter 4: Setting Boundaries.” *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America*. ” 92-100.

Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 2015. “Settler Colonialism as Structure.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(1) 54–74.

### **Week 14 (April 27): Student Workshopping of Final Papers**

\* Paper introductions and full bibliographies due **Monday, April 25 at 12pm** via bCourses

**\*\*\* RRR Week \*\*\***

*Students are encouraged to meet individually with the instructor to discuss final papers.*

**Final Papers Due:** May 9th at 2pm, online and hardcopy in mailbox