THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

SC751 (Fall, 2008): William A. Gamson  (Ofc: McGuinn 520) <gamson@bc.edu>

SYLLABUS  (Revised: May 21, 2008)

This seminar draws on the literature in political sociology and social movements to address sustained efforts to bring about social and political change. It is geared toward the problems and issues faced by groups involved in such efforts: (a) diagnosing the opportunities and constraints provided by the system in which they are operating; (b) analyzing the problems of mobilizing potential supporters and maintaining their continued loyalty and commitment; (c) devising effective strategies for influencing targets of change; and (d) dealing with counter-efforts at social control.

The course is intended as a core course for those interested in social economy and social justice and for those students who are considering political sociology or social movements as one of their special areas. We begin by looking at the theoretical roots of the study of contentious politics and then examine overviews of the state of the field today. In Part 2, we will consider the internal problems of the field of actors attempting to bring about social change. In Part 3, we will consider the opportunities and constraints under which these agents act in their attempts to bring about change and the efficacy of the strategies they pursue. In Part 4, we consider the cultural turn in social movements and the role of the mass media in symbolic politics and framing contests.

To make the material more concrete, we will utilize both a common case and individual cases to be chosen by the class participants. The civil rights movement will provide the common case.

READING

The common readings will consist of the three books below (all paperbacks, available at the BC bookstore and on reserve in the library) plus articles and excerpts (available for downloading on Blackboard Vista). In addition, you will be expected to do reading relevant to your individual case. The books:


Reading on the Civil Rights Movement: To inform yourself about the civil rights movement, I suggest that you watch the documentary, *Eyes on the Prize* (available on videotape at the BC Library). Perhaps the two most important books in terms of theoretical analysis and influence are:

Among the other excellent books and articles that fill out the picture, I would especially recommend:


**REQUIREMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS**

You will be expected to develop a case study in historical depth. The case should be a social movement as a whole with a focus on some central organization within it. Ideally, it should be a case with which you are already personally familiar through participation and reading. We will expect you to be a resource for the class on this case and to draw on it for examples when issues arise in class discussions for which it is relevant. You will be asked to submit a caseform by the third session and your case will be the basis for the three short working papers (5-6 pages each) described below. You may also be asked to present your case to the seminar.

The three short papers will focus respectively on Parts 2, 3, and 4 as described below:

**Part I: Introduction and Overview**

Class Sessions:

Sept. 4: Introduction

Sept. 11: Historical Traditions and Theoretical Roots

**Required Reading:**

Sept. 18 and 25: State of the Field Today: Overview

**Required Reading:**
McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Ch. 1-6 (Part I and II) and Ch. 10 (Conclusions), pp. 3-190 and 305-347.

**Part 2: Issues of Agency**

Oct. 2: Rational Actors and Emotions.

**Required Reading:**
Polletta, Francesca and Edward Amenta, in Goodwin et al, Passionate Politics, pp. 303-316, Blackboard Vista Rational Actor.

Oct. 9: Loyalty, Commitment, Solidarity and Collective Identity.

**Required Reading:**

Oct. 16: Organization.

**Required Reading:**
Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1977) *Poor People’s Movements.* (Pantheon), pp. ix-xxiv and 1-37, Blackboard Vista Organization.

**(Paper #1 due (via e-mail) on Oct. 20)**

Part 3: Issues of Opportunities, Constraints, and Strategies

Oct. 23: Contentious Strategies.

**Required Reading:**

Oct. 30: Elections as Opportunities and Constraints.

**Required Reading:**

Nov. 6: Dynamics of Movements.

**Required Reading:**

**(Paper #2 due via e-mail on Nov. 10)**
Part 4: Issues of Framing and Cultural Politics

Nov. 13: Framing Contests and Collective Action Frames

Required Reading:

Nov. 20: Strategic Use of Media for Social Change.

Required Reading:

[Nov. 27: Thanksgiving]

Part 5: Case Presentations

Dec. 4: Case presentations from class.

(Paper #3 due on Dec. 8)