

Spring 2009

**Pols 385 American Politics  
“In an Era of Multiple Massive Crises”**

The U.S. enters 2009 facing many momentous predicaments. Its economy is falling into a deep recession, if not a depression; poverty is on the rise, record numbers of people are relying on food stamps, and we've seen no relief for the foreclosure crisis. State governments suffer from declining revenue just when those resources are most needed. We are still trapped in a hugely costly (in human and dollar terms) war in Iraq, while forced to step up U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Our dysfunctional healthcare system drains 16% of the Gross National Product. These are among only a few of the most immediate political issues dominating today's news. Soaring oil prices and massive global climate change impacts are on the horizon.

This course is **not** your typical U.S. Government course that examines conventional institutions and political processes. Instead it explores deeper characteristics of U.S. society and its political-economic system that both (a) create these “problems,” and (2) shape discussions about “solutions” to our present predicaments. Beyond the hoopla and the momentary, we consider:

- \* How our personal lives and institutions are shaped by society's dominant economic and political priorities.
- \* Why important human and environmental concerns have been ignored or downplayed by mainstream values and understandings.
- \* A variety of “solutions” to these troubles, which range from ideas arising from conventional Conservative and Liberal ideologies to Transformational alternatives.

**The U.S. faces troubling times** -- Even before the economy's crash, a Time Magazine poll found 47% of average Americans feared for their financial situation, and 75% thought your generation would face even greater economic difficulties than their's. The gap between the wealthy and struggling middle -and working- classes has widened considerably since the 1980s. Even then more than 47 million Americans had no health insurance at all; while 45% of those with health insurance worried about losing their coverage. Before the crash the national debt --with mega-billions in yearly interest owed to U.S. and especially foreign bondholders -- was over \$13 trillion, and increasing by \$1 trillion every 15 months. Now the numbers have risen by more trillions. No wonder an Oct. 14 poll found a record 89% percent of Americans saying the country has pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track.

America's foreign policy standing and influence has sunk to new lows, and we remain hopelessly entangled in the Iraq and Afghanistan war quagmires, with immense costs in money and human suffering, with no ends in sight.

**Mega-shocks coming.** In addition, our future will be shaped by a new set of crises. Cheap oil has been a building block of the American economy and society, fueling our big cars, construction, agriculture, logging, interstate highways and commuters living in remote exurbs, endless consumer items, and cheap air travel, etc. But the price of oil will soon soar because the world's increasing demand for oil (China and India were growing about 10% per year) is colliding with limited supplies. Soon oil production will decline. Peak Oil means that after we come out of the present economic recession (we hope), a barrel of crude oil will hit \$200, with knowledgeable experts predicting we will be paying \$300-\$500 per barrel -- by 2012-2015? [\$12/gallon gas?]

Even more devastating will be, within a decade, the impact of Global Climate Changes caused by rising CO2 emissions. Unless we drastically reduce our burning of fossil fuels immediately and globally, we will have to adapt to increasing floods and rising sea levels, ravaging droughts and deserts, catastrophic water shortages, more intense hurricanes, raging wildfires, resource wars -- with terrible humanitarian consequences. The simultaneous onset of major climate changes and the declining global oil supply represent "unprecedented challenges" for your generation.

**Yet political leaders seem unable and unwilling to respond meaningfully to these human, economic, and planetary crises.** The American "political system" is stunningly dysfunctional. As NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman put it (June 29, 2008), *We are a country in debt and in decline — not terminal, not irreversible, but in decline. Our political system seems incapable of producing long-range answers to big problems or big opportunities. We are the ones who need a better-functioning democracy — more than the Iraqis and Afghans. We are the ones in need of nation-building. It is our political system that is not working.*

**A Range of Solutions.** Regrettably Mainstream political discourse in the U.S. provides only a limited range of options to deal with our present socio-economic failures – such as a dysfunctional healthcare system, the decade-long growing income gap, the loss of decent-paying jobs -- and has been in denial about Global Warming and Peak Oil. The U.S. could adopt policies promoting **universal** health care for all its citizens and a more equitable distribution of wealth – such as found in all the other well-off nations. A French newspaper asks the obvious:

*There is an immense moral problem in seeing American households lose their homes [and/or their employment], but be forced, through taxes, to help the banks, the managers of which have been lavishly rewarded for constructing a system that led to millions of expropriations and owes its survival solely to the massive injection of public money.*

Technically the U.S. and world could shift to a low-carbon economy and mitigate the worst impacts of coming Global Climate disruptions that will sweep the planet. But socially, and politically, we seem unable to break the grip of old ideas and entrenched economic power that maintains the status-quo. The crucial question is: Will we (and each of us personally) keep sleepwalking into the future? Or choose to wake up, take the red pill (i.e. The Matrix), get involved in reinvigorating democracy, and adopt creative solutions to the many crises confronting us?

#### **PRIMARY TEXTS**

*Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schlosser.

*Democracy for the Few* by Michael Parenti (8<sup>th</sup> ed)

"*Stop Global Warming Cold*" Yes Magazine (Sp 2008)

PLUS Lots of materials on Laulima website

#### **WEEK 1 Jan 12-16 Overview Of Themes**

"Democracy in America Is a Series of Narrow Escapes, and We May Be Running Out of Luck" Bill Moyers (pdf)

Kunstler, "Making Other Arrangements – A wakeup call" (pdf)

"Climate Code Red" (pdf)

"We are 2 degrees from disaster" pg 26-27 Yes Magazine

“Pandora’s Icebox: Climate’s Vicious Cycles” p. 21  
Solutions -- “12 tips for sustainability shift” Matthew Stein (pdf) **Skim**

**OPTIONAL Video** -- James Howard Kunstler – “Welcome to the post cheap oil era”  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXITkJYGGdk>  
Trailer—“End of Suburbia” 2004  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHr8OzaloLM>

**Week 2 Jan 19-23 Getting to the roots --Exploring the “Modern” American Culture**

*Fast Food Nation*. Introduction  
Chapter 1. "The Founding Fathers" [growth of fast food industry]  
Chapter 2. "Your Trusted Friends" [mass marketing system]  
Chapter 3. "Behind the Counter" [The new job system — Minimum-wages, no benefits, the Wal-Marting of America.]

**Week 3 Jan 26-30 The American Politico-Economic System -- Work**

*Fast Food Nation* --Ch 8. "The Most Dangerous Job" [meat packing industry workers].  
“OSHA Under Bush” (pdf)

AMERICAN INEQUALITY –

“Blue Collar, Bare Cupboards” (pdf)  
“Boom Was a Bust for Ordinary People” Barbara Ehrenreich. (pdf)  
“Decline of \$20 wage – Blue collar workers” (pdf)  
“Unions – Down on Upward Mobility” (pdf)  
[OPTIONAL- “Destruction of Middle Class Working People” (pdf)]

**Week 4 Feb 2-6 Analysis -- A political system that favors the privileged**

Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*. Preface ; Ch 1 *Partisan Politics*  
Parenti Ch 2 *Wealth and Want in the United States -- getting more extreme*.  
NYT income statistics graphic (pdf)  
“New President’s Economy Problems” -- Time (pdf)

**Week 5 Feb 9-13 Solutions – a more equitable economy**

“Heart of Economic Mess” Robert Reich -- (pdf)  
“Cosco Way” (pdf)  
*U.S workers should try for French Family Values,* Paul Krugman  
“New Deal for youth” (pdf)  
“Economic Compact for Youth” Kuttner (pdf)  
“A People’s Economy is possible” (pdf)  
“A new New Deal” Borosage and Lotke (pdf)  
“Trillion Dollar Recovery Needed” (pdf)  
*Solis – New Labor Secretary*

**Week 6 Feb 16-20 The Dominant American Ideological Framework**

Parenti, Ch 3 -- **Our Plutocratic Culture** – institutions and ideologies – the gospel that capitalism breeds democracy and prosperity for all.  
“Fraud of Bushenomics: They’re looting the country” (pdf)  
Parenti – Ch 4 A Constitution for the Privileged  
Parenti, Ch 6- Politics: Who Gets What? Who's Left Out?

*"Le néolibéralisme est-il immoral? [Is Free-Market Fundamentalism Immoral?]"*  
(pdf)

*Economic Master Narratives -- Neo-Liberalism; "Ideological Gap";* (pdf)

**Week 7 Feb 23-27 Media and Manufacturing Political Consciousness**

Parenti, Ch 13- Mass Media: For the Many, by the Few

"Dan Rather's Magnum Opus" (pdf)

"Climate of Denial," Bill McKibben, (pdf)

"Snowed" by Ross Gelspan (pdf)

Exxon-Mobil Payments of \$8 million chart, for anti Global Climate Change propaganda

[http://www.motherjones.com/news/featurex/2005/05/exxon\\_chart.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/featurex/2005/05/exxon_chart.html)

"Kid club marketing" – Inculcating consumerism

<http://www.kidclubmarketing.com/>

&

<http://directory.leadmaverick.com/Kid-Club-Marketing/ProvidenceNew-BedfordFall-River/RI/10/3433/index.aspx>

**Week 8 March 2-6 Voting and Campaigns**

Parenti, Ch 14. "Voters, Parties, and Stolen Elections"

"Let them Eat Words -- framing issues for political spin" (pdf)

"Obama Image-Making at Convention" (pdf)

"The Palin VP Choice" (pdf)

"Democrats Use Personal Touch to Coax Voters" (pdf)

"Obama Movement" (pdf)

"Obama field campaign in Iowa" (pdf)

"How Obama Campaign Won" (pdf)

**Week 9 March 9-13 Political Change – Social Safety Net (Health Care)**

*"Is your kid covered"* (pdf)

*"America's Angry Patients"* (pdf)

**Parenti, Chapter 8.** Health and Human Services: Sacrificial Lambs.

*"Universal health care – Business Week"* (pdf)

*"Physicians Support Single-Payer"* pdf

Mythbuster on *Canada's Single Payer system* Parts 1 & 2 (pdf)

*"Obama Cautious on Healthcare"* (pdf)

*"Obama Policymakers Turn to Campaign Tools --Network of supporters tapped on health-care issues.* (pdf)

OPTIONAL VIDEO -- PBS program *"Sick Around the World"* -- Examines healthcare systems of other countries and makes comparisons to the U.S. system. online.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/sickaroundtheworld/>

**Week 10 Mar 16-20 Coming Global Crises: Peak Oil and Climate Change I – Overview**

Parenti, Ch 9 "The Last Environment"

**peak oil primer** <http://energybulletin.net/primer>

*"First, Step Up"* McGibben YES Magazine, pp. 18-22 & 26-27

*"Final Countdown"* (pdf)

*"Natural Capital"* Paul Hawken (pdf)

**\*\*\* Week 11 Mar 23-27 Spring Break \*\*\***

**Week 12 Mar 30-April 3 II - Solutions: Stopping Global Warming**

YES Magazine Sp 2008 issue. pp. 28- 38; 43  
"Energy myths" –Mother Jones (pdf)  
"Energy in Hawaii" Wall St Journal (pdf)  
"Windpower in Hawaii" (pdf)  
"Five steps to a greener tomorrow in Hawaii" Jeff Mikulina (pdf)  
"10 Steps in 10 Years to 100 Percent Renewable Power" (pdf)  
Californians Shape Up as Force on Environmental Policy (pdf)  
"How many days do we have left?" interview with Lester Brown (pdf)  
[OPTIONAL] Plan 3.0 -- Mobilizing to Save Civilization Lester Brown (pdf)

**Week 13 April 6-10 III - Activism**

"Campus EcoActivism" (pdf)  
YES Magazine, pp 44-52  
"Youth+ Environment= Turnout" (pdf)  
"Van Jones --Working together on Green New Deal" (pdf)  
"Greening the Ghetto" (pdf)

**Week 14 April 13-17 Localizing the Economy**

"Virginia Town Bans Chemical and Radioactive trespass" (pdf)  
"Standup to Corp Power" (pdf)  
"Alternatives to Corp Power" (pdf)  
Localization website  
"Transition Communities in Hawaii" – proposal (pdf)  
**Overcoming Hyper- Consumptionism ?** "Eat, drink and be miserable: the true cost of our addiction to shopping"  
"Is Sustainable Capitalism an Oxymoron?" (pdf)

**Week 15 April 20-24 Industrialization of Food Production**

Fast Food Nation [FFN] --Ch 5. "Why the Fries Taste Good." [expansion of mass manufacturing into food system].  
Ch 6. "On the Range" [mass chicken & beef production].  
Ch 7. "Cogs in the Great Machine" [cattle monopoly / ConAgra]  
"Where Have All the Farmers Gone" Brian Halweil (pdf)  
[OPTIONAL – FFN Ch 9. "What's in the Meat" [health (non) regulations]

**Week 16 April 27-May 1 Localizing Food**

Yes Magazine, pp 39-40-42 (Sust agric)  
"A gold rush to organic foods." Brian Halweil (pdf)  
"Starved and stuffed" (pdf)  
"MA`O farm - tilling the Land" (pdf)  
"Family-owned KTA Superstores is committed to Hawaii products" (pdf)  
"Local Food Systems" YES Magazine  
Michael Pollan's "21<sup>st</sup> century food system" NYT, Oct 12, 2008. (pdf)

**Week 17 May 4-6 Is a Reinvigorated Politics Possible?**

Parenti Ch 19- Democracy for the Few -- in America  
"Democrats' Strategic Challenge" (pdf)  
"Long war fallacy" (pdf) & "Populist uprising" (pdf)  
"Progressive Re-Generation" (pdf)

*"Grassroots reseeded" "Streets vs Suits"* (pdf)  
*"Mobilizing Millennials cover graphic --"* (pdf)  
*"Obama Online Supporters"* (pdf)

OPTIONAL

VIDEO interview with Andrew J. Bacevich's new book, [The Limits Of Power: The End Of American Exceptionalism](http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/08152008/profile.html), <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/08152008/profile.html>

### **POLS 385 COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

#### **1. READ READING ASSIGNMENTS ON-TIME, AND ATTEND CLASS**

**REGULARLY.** As a 300-level course, this class demands considerable readings and writing. POLS 385 follows more a **seminar discussion-oriented** than a lecture format. Although I open each class with a brief commentary or theoretical contextualization on each week's topics, I usually do not rehash the readings per se. We will divide into small groups to discuss the assignments, relating them to daily happenings in the Nation, Hawai`i and our own lives. Occasional class visitors add their insights based on their own direct involvement in Hawai`i's political life. Since much of unique value happens in class, **reading the assigned materials on time [see #3. Weekly Quizzes below], and regular class attendance, is expected and required.**

**MISSING MORE THAN 4 CLASSES WILL RESULT IN A HALF-GRADE LOWERING.**

**2. BIWEEKLY THINK-ABOUT PAPERS.** Each Friday I will hand out questions to guide your reading and reflections for the next week's classes. **Every other week, you are required to write up and hand in a succinct (2 page) reaction paper to the assigned readings.** These short papers are **due the first day** the material is discussed in class. Late papers are accepted, but are graded down.

**3. WEEKLY QUICK QUIZZES.** Each Monday's class begins with a 15-minute in-class quiz covering the major concepts presented in the assigned readings for that week.

**4. FOLLOW THE NEWS ABOUT U.S. POLITICS.** The daily happenings of the new administration led by Obama will be frequently referenced in class discussions. Tune in. Useful sources include: **The New York Time** on line, [<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todaysheadlines/>] and **Time Magazine** online [<http://www.time.com/time/magazine>]. Minimally look at Google News.

**5. TAKE-HOME MID-TERM, AND FINAL ESSAYS.** A 5 page Midterm, and longer Final essay, tie together the readings and discussions. The essays are **not** book reviews or summaries of readings, but analytical, synthesizing reflections on the assigned readings and major themes examined in the course.

#### **7. GRADING CRITERIA**

20%	Biweekly readings Think-About papers
25%	In Class short quizzes
20%	Midterm essay
25%	Final essay
10%	Class attendance and participation