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Between All and Nothing: A Comment on G. William Domhoff's, "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal"

Kenneth Finegold

By his prolific writing and assiduous research, G. William Domhoff has contributed much to the study of American political economy. "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal" contributes some more, including a demonstration of Beardsley Ruml's role in the formulation of the domestic allotment plan that became the basis for the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The article also offers useful suggestions for future research on the Wagner Act. But Domhoff lessens the value of his substantive contributions by consistently reducing theoretical alternatives to two: all or nothing. For Domhoff, the state is either completely autonomous or completely controlled by the power elite, because experts are either completely independent of business or completely dependent within the private "policy–planning network." Domhoff has successfully battled against pluralists and other theorists who argue elites do not exist in the United States, or have no influence on public policy. But in his treatment of the Wagner Act, Domhoff demonstrates that it is equally problematic to attribute all policy influence to elites as such. Most tellingly, and most ominously, Domhoff seems to brook no partial agreement with his views: anyone who does not accept his work in its entirety must be his enemy.

We can understand the New Deal and American politics better if we allow for more variation over time and between analytic units than Domhoff's approach permits. State autonomy is not a given, but a possibility. Expertise is one potential source of state autonomy. Expertise is a particularly important potential source of state autonomy in the United States, where, as Domhoff (1990:12–13) has astutely pointed out, state autonomy could not be based on a feudal aristocracy, on an established church, or, at least until World War II, on a standing army. Experts are always subject to constraints, but just how constrained they are, and whether they are even available to the state, depends on their specific institutional settings. Robert Wagner's sponsorship of the Wagner Act and Franklin Roosevelt's belated endorsement of Wagner's bill are best understood by viewing Wagner and Roosevelt as electoral politicians as well as products of elites. Most (though not all) Southern Democrats represented a class segment, large capitalist farmers, but their power derived from characteristics of political institutions––the seniority system in Congress, and the national party alignment––as well as from their economic position. And one can challenge Domhoff's elite model of American politics or its application to the New Deal without denigrating

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Domhoff as he denigrates Skocpol, and without losing perspective on these debates. Since I have co-authored essays on the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the National Recovery Administration (NRA), and the Wagner Act with Skocpol, I will focus on these cases rather than on the Social Security Act, which Domhoff also discusses.[1]

State Autonomy and the AAA

Domhoff (1990:12–15, 186) agrees in the abstract with Skocpol's view that state power may be exercised autonomously of any ruling class or elite, but rejects claims by Skocpol and other authors that the American national state provides any examples of this autonomy. Domhoff supports his argument by reexamining the cases studied by authors who have disputed an elitist interpretation of American politics (Stephen Krasner, Fred Block), as well as authors who have pursued an elitist approach in a way that differs from Domhoff's (Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers). He finds that in each case, the facts actually fit his own model best. In "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal," Domhoff applies this favorite strategy to the AAA. I have depicted the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 as an example of state autonomy, in which a policy of production control, developed by agricultural economists from the land-grant colleges and the Department of Agriculture, was adopted over alternatives preferred by farmers and their peak associations (Finegold, 1981). Domhoff argues that this act was just another example of the usual pattern of elite domination. He traces the AAA to its support from the Farm Bureau and from a Rockefeller-financed policy-planning network headed by Beardsley Ruml.

Domhoff's view of the Farm Bureau follows that of McConnell (1953), whom he describes as "a wonderful source" (p. 5). As both point out, the Farm Bureau began in the 1910s as a business-backed alternative to agrarian radicalism and became a major obstacle to subsequent efforts at agricultural reform, such as the late New Deal's Farm Security Administration (FSA). Domhoff, however, omits the intervening organizational crisis (McConnell, 1953:55–68; Campbell, 1962: 35–41; Tontz, 1964; Finegold, 1981:9–10). The Farm Bureau experimented unsuccessfully with cooperative marketing in the mid-1920s, violated its own constitution to support Al Smith for president in 1928, participated in the fiasco of Herbert Hoover's Federal Farm Board, and like all the farm groups, rapidly lost membership after 1929. By 1933, the Farm Bureau had fewer members than one of its rivals, the Grange. In that year,

1. Skocpol (1986–87) gives her response to an earlier article by Domhoff on the Social Security Act. See also Skocpol & Amenta (1985) and Amenta & Parikh (1991).

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only about one in ten farm families belonged to the Farm Bureau, the Grange, or the smaller Farmers' Union. Domhoff thus greatly overstates agricultural unity when he says that the farmers who received AAA crop payments "were joined together in essentially one organization, the Farm Bureau" (p. 21).

As Domhoff notes (p. 16), the Farm Bureau played a central role in uniting farm groups behind the domestic allotment policy of the incoming Roosevelt administration. But it did so only after the Roosevelt camp had won the Farm Bureau over from its prior advocacy of the McNary–Haugen Plan for export marketing (Johnson, 1963). The Farm Bureau regained its organizational strength by staging membership drives that capitalized on the AAA, particularly in the South, where the Bureau had previously been weak. This growth gave the Farm Bureau the power to fight the FSA and defend against threats to its ties with the Extension Service. The Farm Bureau, then, was more a beneficiary than a source of the shift to production control as the basis for U.S. agricultural policy.

Beardsley Ruml asked John D. Black to study the domestic allotment plan; Black helped get M.L. Wilson to work zealously for its adoption; Wilson made contact with Rexford Tugwell of the Roosevelt Brains Trust; and Wilson and Tugwell convinced Roosevelt to accept the plan. For Domhoff, this makes the AAA a product of Rockefeller influence, for Ruml was director of the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial. The Memorial also funded the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and its agricultural programs, with which both Black and Wilson were involved.

In electrical networks, nodes are either connected, and so supplied with power, or unconnected and so without power. Applying this logic to policy research, Domhoff (1967:5–10) considers any member of the power elite who is born into the social upper class, is educated in its universities, or participates in its institutions as effectively controlled by this upper class. In "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal," Domhoff tries to demonstrate that figures like Ruml and Wilson were connected to the corporate policy–planning network, and so can be understood as acting in the interests of the corporate elites who financed and controlled that network.[2]

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2. This tendency is most evident in Domhoff's either/or classification of members of the Council of Economic Advisers. See especially his contrast between network member Edwin Nourse and non–member Leon Keyserling (1987a:195).

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The network metaphor conveys the ubiquity of corporate ties in a society where neither labor unions nor radical parties have been able to sustain counter-hegemonic cultural institutions. But the network metaphor can also oversimplify relationships among participants. Though the AAA was more directly descended from Black's plan, an earlier domestic allotment proposal was published by W.J. Spillman, a scientific and economic expert who spent most of his career within the Department of Agriculture and served alongside Wilson in the Office of Farm Management (Malone, 1935/36:458–459; McConnell, 1953:71; Rowley, 1970:33–38). Under Ruml's leadership, the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Memorial operated with more independence from its benefactors than other Rockefeller family foundations or similar foundations organized by other wealthy philanthropists, and distributed much of its money in the form of block grants that allowed extensive discretion to recipient institutions (Bulmer & Bulmer, 1981:401–2, 406). Black, Wilson, Spillman, and other experts who contributed to the origin and implementation of the AAA may have been less independent than contemporary university professors, but that does not mean they were completely dominated by the Rockefellers or the Farm Bureau.[3]

State Capacity and the NRA

Domhoff not only assumes that experts can be dominated by corporate leaders, but that experts with skills appropriate to given tasks exist, allowing corporate leaders to choose among them (1990:183). He rejects the argument Skocpol and I have made that the NRA was unable to draw on officials trained for industrial planning, relying instead on business executives who lacked the will or ability to plan, while the AAA in contrast was implemented by officials trained for agricultural planning in the land-grant system and the pre-New Deal Department of Agriculture (Skocpol, 1980; Skocpol & Finegold, 1982; Finegold & Skocpol, 1984). We conclude that the NRA failed, and the AAA succeeded, because the necessary kind of expertise, and thus the necessary state capacity, was more available for agriculture than for industry.

One way in which Domhoff attacks this argument is by citing Brand (1988) to show that some experts did participate in the NRA. But what kind of experts? Domhoff (p. 20) makes much of the recruitment of lawyers and economists. Lawyers were and are generalists, steeped in legal

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3. Kirkendall (1966) provides an institutional analysis of the agricultural economists. Kirkendall's conclusion that they were more than "servants of power" (1966:6, 257) refers not only to "their intentions and self-images," which is how Domhoff (p. 14) interprets him, but to their accomplishments, which Kirkendall sees as more substantial from 1933 to 1940 than after 1940.

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procedures but ill–trained to run an industrial economy. Even the NRA's economists, trained in the conventional economic wisdom of their day, were less well–suited to the tasks of planning than their AAA counterparts, whose background in the distinctive discipline of agricultural economics emphasized practice over theory:

> The circumstances under which agricultural economics began to develop as a separate field of study gave the profession an advantage in the practical world of politics and business. Unlike the workers in most social sciences, including general business economics, the agricultural economists really knew their industry. Moreover, their innocence of theoretical economics enabled them to appreciate the power relationships of the market and to see the wide gap between the textbook principles and the way the economy actually functioned. (Soth, 1982:47)

The experts who did become important within the NRA gained power too late. Over eighty percent of the NRA industrial codes were issued during the first six months of the program, when the demand for speed convinced Hugh S. Johnson, the Recovery Administrator, not to

> precede definite recovery action by a slow academic study of all the complications and contingencies to be met in code drafting punctuated by expert testimony and oriented in the long–term effects of those changes in economic balance that would inevitably result from the new recovery set–up––that is, in the opinion of men who, however rich in academic learning, never knew the weight of a business responsibility in their whole lives....The choice was between academic conjecture and action and the decision was for action. (Quoted in Lyon, Homan, Lorwin, Terborgh, Dearing, & Marshall, 1935:46)

Had the NRA been able to draw upon an industrial equivalent to the agricultural land–grant college system, Johnson's choice between conjecture and action might have been less stark.

Domhoff also attacks the concept of state capacity by offering his own explanation for the contrasting outcomes of the NRA and the AAA. Industry, he suggests, was less organized and more complicated than agriculture. As we have already seen, his statement that farmers receiving AAA subsidies "were joined together in essentially one organization, the Farm Bureau" (p. 21) is inaccurate, since only about four percent of all farm families were Farm Bureau members in 1933 (Tontz, 1964:145–147). A variety of other observers have, in contrast to Domhoff, emphasized farmers' inherent tendencies toward *dis*organization (Smith, 1937:429; Marx, 1963:124; Olson, 1965:148; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960:414–416; Lewis–Beck, 1977:559). Domhoff's comment that the

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AAA "simply gave out money to several million farmers growing seven major commercial crops in exchange for acreage limitations" (p. 21) glosses over the difficulty of the tasks faced by "those staff positions deep in the bureaucracy that provide information on parity targets, processing and benefit rates, and acreage bases" (pp. 16–17). Like many scholars who are more familiar with industry, Domhoff also understates the complexity of agricultural production, which involves as much interdependence as industry and is further complicated by the uncertainties of weather.[4]

Elite Power and the Wagner Act

Five sets of actors were central to the politics of the Wagner Act: industrial capitalists, industrial workers, Southern agricultural capitalists, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Senator Robert F. Wagner. Domhoff's "class–segment" interpretation of the Wagner Act yields valuable insights into the behavior of the first three groups. The class–segment approach is less useful for understanding Roosevelt and Wagner, who behaved not only as products of their respective elites, but as politicians seeking to form and maintain electoral constituencies.

In his book, *The Higher Circles* (1970), Domhoff traced the Wagner Act to corporate liberals or moderates who supported the policy of union recognition, as a means to achieving labor peace or industrial recovery, or as an alternative to craft fragmentation. Domhoff's more recent work (1987b; 1990; 1991) recognizes that American business was almost unanimously opposed to the labor relations bill that became the Wagner Act.[5] The real division among industrial capitalists was between employers who sought to keep out unions in any form, and employers who developed company–controlled unions, which grew rapidly under Section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933. Virtually no capitalists supported unions independent of company control or the Wagner Act's dangerous combination of majority rule, administrative enforcement, an outright ban on company unionism, and an affirmation of the right to strike. Even Gerard Swope and Walter Teagle, who served on the NRA's National Labor Board and are often presented as corporate liberal leaders, did not endorse the new labor policy, and the Business Advisory Council, to which they belonged, opposed it (Vittoz, 1987:149–

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4. The complexity of agricultural production is nicely illustrated by the input–output diagram in Scrimshaw & Taylor (1980:86–87).

5. Domhoff thus disputes both his own earlier work and that of Thomas Ferguson, who traces the Wagner Act to executives of capital–intensive firms that could afford to accommodate labor in order to maintain production (Ferguson, 1984, 1989).

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150). Henry Harriman, who is also frequently presented as a corporate liberal, as in Domhoff's discussion of the AAA (pp. 13–14), testified against the Wagner bill (U.S. Congress, Senate, 1935:462–66).

Appropriately, Domhoff presents the unity and militancy of industrial workers as essential to the passage of the Wagner Act, but only in combination with favorable circumstances that led the state to respond with reforms rather than with repression. I would add that the mobilization of workers was itself a product of Section 7(a), which spurred the creation of new unions and revitalized lethargic ones despite its ambiguous provisions and equivocal enforcement.[6]

Domhoff is also correct in pointing out that the Wagner Act would never have passed without the acquiescence of Southern Democrats, and that the price of this acquiescence was the exclusion of agricultural workers from national labor laws, which continues today. Political institutions gave Southern agriculture more power in Congress than in the national economy. The peculiar Democratic coalition between Southern capitalists and Northern workers made conservative Southerners part of the congressional majority. Had the liberal dream of an ideological realignment been fulfilled, Southern conservatives like Carter Glass and Howard Smith would have been relegated to the anti–Roosevelt minority party. The seniority system expanded the influence of Southerners within the congressional party. In effect, Southerners received committee chairs and leadership positions beyond their proportionate share, rewarding them for their constituents' pre–New Deal Democratic loyalties.

Domhoff's account of the Wagner Act is weakest in his treatment of the other two crucial actors: Roosevelt and Wagner. Domhoff describes Roosevelt and his advisors as "upper–class centrists and liberals" (p. 35) who represented the power elite as a whole (1987b:178). Roosevelt was indeed a product of the Hudson Valley Dutch aristocracy, of Groton, and of Harvard. Roosevelt had this background in 1934, when he opposed Wagner's labor relations bill and got it replaced by the much weaker Public Resolution No. 44. He had the same elite background in 1935, when his belated endorsement greatly eased the Act's passage. As Skocpol and I have argued (Finegold & Skocpol, 1984:181–182), Roosevelt's shift on labor legislation is best explained by his increasing conflicts with industrial capital as the NRA collapsed.

Domhoff emphasizes Robert Wagner's connections with corporate interests through the American Association for Labor Legislation and the

6. This and related points are debated in Finegold & Skocpol (1984), Goldfield (1989), and Skocpol, Finegold, & Goldfield (1990).

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Brookings Institution. He dismisses descriptions of Wagner as an urban liberal who acted to carry out progressive ideas (Huthmacher, 1962, 1968; Buenker, 1973; Plotke, 1989). Domhoff rejects the view that machine politicians like Wagner (a product of Tammany Hall) were liberals, quoting his earlier (1972:99–103) depiction of machine Democrats as conservatives who frequently allied with Southerners in national party politics. Domhoff's assessment is valid for most machine politicians, including Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago and Royal S. Copeland, the other Democratic senator from New York during the New Deal. But again, Domhoff's categories offer only the choice between all and nothing: machine politicians are either all liberal reformers, or all reactionaries. Though all machine politicians were not urban liberals, Wagner and some others were. If they were the creatures of local capital, as Domhoff suggests, why didn't they vote against the Wagner Act, which was even more threatening to small businesses than to large corporations? The influence of Wagner and like–minded Senators peaked after the elections of 1934, when several Northern Democrats were added to an unusually large liberal contingent within the party. The liberal bloc was weakened by the elections of 1938. The resulting revival of Southern dominance within the Democratic party, together with the AFL–CIO fratricide described by Domhoff, made possible the conservative coalition which sponsored the anti–CIO Smith Committee investigations and eventually passed the Taft–Hartley Act of 1947.

Norms of Scholarly Discourse

Domhoff's interpretation of the AAA overstates the roles of the Farm Bureau and the Rockefeller network while understating the independence of the agricultural economists. Domhoff's interpretation of the NRA too easily dismisses the difference between planning by appropriately trained experts and planning by business executives, lawyers, or economists. His alternative explanation for the different outcomes of the NRA and the AAA underestimates the complexities of agriculture and overestimates the extent to which commercial farmers were united in the Farm Bureau. Domhoff's current "class–segment" interpretation of the Wagner Act is more accurate than the corporate liberal interpretation he presented earlier in his career, but still offers little insight into the actions of Senator Robert Wagner and President Franklin Roosevelt, who were even more important to the success of the bill than the Southern Democrats whose acquiescence Domhoff now emphasizes.

All of these points represent useful disagreements that can stimulate us to clarify our thinking and uncover relevant new evidence. What disturbs me about Domhoff's article is not that he disagrees with what Skocpol or I have written, but that he makes our disagreements so

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personal. "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal" suggests that Domhoff chooses to find his enemies, not in the people, processes, or institutions responsible for war, poverty, oppression, disease, and environmental catastrophe, but in other academics--those who dare to disagree with him. I hope that in this respect, "Class, Power, and Parties in the New Deal" is misleading.

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