

COURSE SYLLABUS
2770 Power and Social Change
Spring Semester, 2026, T3 & T4

COURSE INSTRUCTOR

Samantha Ortiz Casillas

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Samantha Ortiz Casillas is Assistant Professor of Social Innovation in the Management and Organizations area at Nova SBE. She is an ethnographer of work interested in the everyday challenges of public administration and political collective action. Her research examines how people organize and work towards social change—through government, civil society, or activism—in complex and sometimes hostile environments. Samantha holds a PhD in Management from Emylon Business School. She has published in academic journals like Organization Science, Journal of Management Studies, Regulation & Governance, and Research in the Sociology of Organizations. She co-organizes the Ethnography Atelier, a collaborative space for learning about qualitative research and organizational ethnography.

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OFFICE HOURS

By appointment

PREREQUISITE(S)

N/A

COURSE UNIT AIMS

This course is for students interested in how power is exercised by people, organizations, and the state to bring about social change. The course combines theoretical insights with practical examples and discussions to help students understand power and social change and give them tools they can apply in projects, organizations, and their everyday lives. It features classical as well as critical approaches on power, politics, policy, social movements, and organization to provide students with a more holistic understanding of the possibilities, promises, and challenges of social change.

At the end of the course, students will learn how power can be a productive yet unpredictable force in social change and, more importantly, understand the challenges of exercising power in a strategic manner. The course is designed to promote active participation and discussion in the classroom, enhance critical thinking, and collective learning.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Knowledge and Understanding:

- Classical and critical theories on power, social change, public policy, governance, social movements, collective action, and organization
- Understand how social problems are constructed and used to demand and legitimize interventions or mobilize people
- Understand how and why people mobilize and organize for social change
- Understand how to design and implement public policies
- Examine organizational control, commitment, and responsible and sustainable organizing towards social change goals.
- Learn how people can use power to challenge the status quo in their organizations, communities, or society

Subject-Specific Skills:

- Applying a systematic and critical analysis to efforts to bring about social change in society and within organizations
- Developing frameworks for responsible organizing that favor social change goals and protect the wellbeing of those working towards these goals

General Skills:

- Effective and responsible communication that fosters discussion, collective learning, and inclusivity
- Become a critical thinker that can understand both the potential of power and organization and the challenges and drawbacks that might emerge from collective action efforts

COURSE UNIT CONTENT

Session 1: Introduction to Power and Social Change

In this first session we will get to know each other, discuss course requirements and set mutual expectations for the term. We will also discuss key ideas for the course: what is power? How does power work? What is social change and how does it happen? We will end the session by forming teams and choosing topics for the group assignment.

Required reading: Fung, A. (2020). Four levels of power: a conception to enable liberation. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 28(2), 131-157.

Session 2: Activating Social Change Agents

How do people become change agents? Who can be a change agent? We explore theories and concepts of what makes a change agent, leadership for change, and how people mobilize towards social change.

Required reading: Ganz, M. (2024). *People, Power, Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal*. Oxford University Press. Introduction: Why Me, Why Us, Why Now, pp. 1-13

Session 3: Designing Interventions for Social Change

How can we design interventions that lead to a desired social change goal? We will learn about how to define a social problem, identify its causes and consequences, outline change theories, and design interventions that can lead to social change.

Required reading: Stone, D. A. (1989). Causal stories and the formation of policy agendas. *Political science quarterly*, 104(2), 281-300.

Session 4: Implementing Social Change

How can we implement social change projects and interventions? What can we learn from implementation failures? We will learn about the social and organizational challenges of social change projects and how best to prepare for them.

Required reading: Sager, F., & Gofen, A. (2022). The polity of implementation: Organizational and institutional arrangements in policy implementation. *Governance*, 35(2), 347-364.

Session 5: The Work of Social Change Organizations

The work of social change often takes place within and across organizations. What are social change organizations? What are the challenges of pursuing social change goals? And how can we build more responsible and resilient social change organizations? In this session we will explore insights from management and organization theories and the sociology of work.

Required reading: Effler, E. S. (2010). *Laughing saints and righteous heroes: Emotional rhythms in social movement groups*. The University of Chicago Press Chicago and London. Introduction, pp. 1-22.

Session 6: Group project presentations

In the last session of the course, groups will present their projects to the rest of the class. We will conclude with a collective reflection and discuss exam expectations.

DEMONSTRATION OF THE COHERENCE OF THE SYLLABUS WITH COURSE UNIT AIMS AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The syllabus is structured to discuss power and social change from the perspective of the state (public policies, government organizations, and political actors), social movements, organizations with social change goals (for-profit or non-for-profit), and the individual. Students learn both the promises and challenges of social change in these domains.

TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS

The course is designed to promote active participation and discussion in the classroom, to enhance critical thinking and collective learning. Students will be expected to discuss the assigned readings in depth and offer their own opinions and interpretations. Students are encouraged to share personal experiences with power and social change or to bring in real-world examples for discussion in the classroom.

DEMONSTRATION OF THE COHERENCE OF THE TEACHING METHODS WITH COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Active participation in each session will help students process and expand the content learned through readings and in the classroom. The group project and exam will help students practice systematic and critical thinking on issues on power and social change.

ASSESSMENT

Grading overview:

Exam	30%
Group project presentation	35%
Reading quizzes	10%
Peer group evaluation	10%
Participation in class	15%

The exam will consist of a small number of long answer questions based on the content discussed in class and required readings. Attendance is necessary but not sufficient to secure participation points each week. Students are expected to participate each class through comments, feedback, questions, or reflections—actively and respectfully. At least three short pop quizzes will be conducted to test if students are reading. These quizzes will consist of one question related to the required reading that week.

In the team project, students will design an intervention to address a social problem, from the lens of activists, private or social sector innovators, or government. Students will choose the social problem they want to address and the lens they want to adopt. Teams will prepare a presentation for the last session of the course. Team members will be asked to evaluate each other based on how well the group worked together.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to the required readings outlined for each session, students are encouraged to consult the following resources:

- Alinsky, S. (1989). *Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*. Vintage.
- Ganz, M. (2009). *Why David sometimes wins: Leadership, organization, and strategy in the California farm worker movement*. Oxford University Press.
- Polletta, F. (2009). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tronto, J. (2020). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- Battilana, J., & Casciaro, T. (2021). *Power, for all: How it really works and why it's everyone's business*. Simon and Schuster.
- Stone, D. A. (2022). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making*. WW Norton & Company.