Feudal America

Woods, Joshua, Shlapentokh, Vladimir

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One of the most obvious elements of feudalism in contemporary society is the role of personal relations in politics, the economy, and other spheres of social life. There are two types of personal relations. One type is based on the interaction between independent actors who attempt to achieve their goals through mutual cooperation. The other type is based on the clientele principle, or suzerain-vassal relations, which suppose a hierarchy in the relations between people. The second type serves as the main subject of this chapter (Godbout 2000).

A feudal form of personal relations is seen when people use their scarce resources to acquire other benefits, advantages, or “rent,” exceeding the level expected by the authoritarian or liberal models. The major social actors who benefit from feudal relations include rich people and corporations, government officials, and individuals who control networks of influential people.

Personal relations play a key role in the process of choosing people for important positions in society, particularly leadership posts in corporate management, politics, and culture. The use of personal relations in the selection of cadres influences the efficiency of major social institutions, as well as the levels of political, economic, and social stability. While in most cases personal preferences and nepotism clearly have a negative effect on the efficiency of social institutions, they also, at times, solidify the social and political order.

In general, there are three ways of selecting cadres and controlling their performance. First, the democratic principle of selection and supervision is based on the merits and competence of workers and on rational decision making, as
selects the best-qualified candidates, and that elected bodies supervise the quality of nonelected officials, while market competition ensures that the best managers are positioned in the economic sphere. The intrusion of personal relations into the decision-making process in politics is considered, in democratic societies, as a form of deviance (often illegal) that challenges the fundamentals of society.

The principles of an authoritarian society suppose that only those who are loyal to the leader and the dominant political or religious ideology can be appointed to important positions within the government and party apparatus. While the leadership in such societies is interested in recruiting the most highly qualified individuals to manage the economy and work in the areas of science, technology, education, and the military, loyalty to the top leadership and official ideology, as opposed to one’s friends, family members, and immediate supervisors, is a prerequisite for placement. Authoritarian systems attempt to dissuade bureaucrats from selecting people who are loyal to them personally, rather than to the supreme leader or central authority. Given its intolerance for any form of divided loyalty, the system regards nepotism and the formation of clans based on clientele or family ties as crimes, and harshly punishes such disobedience. The hierarchical principles of the authoritarian model held up quite well in the Soviet Union, particularly in Stalin’s time.¹

Unlike the authoritarian model, the feudal model supposes that organizations rely on personal loyalty rather than loyalty to institutions, ideas, or the supreme leader. In an ideal feudal society, a higher lord’s emotional and intellectual trust in his or her subordinates would transcend institutional guarantees against treason and serve as the basis for selecting cadres. The decision to install relatives in high government positions and the formation of family clans—a widespread practice in medieval society—were also dictated by the desire for loyal partners and subordinates. While competence was not ignored in the medieval selection process, it was considered less important than the cadre’s loyalty to the immediate superior.

¹ The evolution in the selection of cadres in the USSR had a tremendous impact on life in Soviet society. In the first period of Soviet history, in the aftermath of the revolution (1920s), the selection of cadres was based on devotion to the cause of the revolution; the apparatchiks thought of themselves as shareholders in a common business. During the next period, with the installation of Stalin’s cruel totalitarianism, selection depended on their loyalty to the leader and whether they looked like “soldiers of the party.” After Stalin’s death and during the softening of the regime, the selection of cadres became influenced by personal loyalty to the individual party bosses, which lowered the quality of the cadres and their performance and opened the way for corruption. The rise in the education level of cadres somewhat counteracted the negative effect of the “personalization”
Personal relations of the feudal type have the potential to damage the internal functioning of both public and private organizations. In this chapter, we focus on three types of such relations: the abuse of power inside organizations, the selection of cadres in business and politics based on personal relations (the clientele phenomenon), and the role of family clans and the “American nobility.” We will also consider how some actors have attempted to challenge these feudal elements.

Personal Relations in Social Science

Twentieth-century political science and sociology tended to underestimate the role of personal relations in the political and economic establishments and in the formation of key social developments. Those who have broached this topic have generally treated the impact of personal relations as “natural” or implicit, and therefore undeserving of special attention in the study of macro social issues. It is almost impossible to find a discussion of this crucial social phenomenon in texts on sociology and political science. While personal relations have received attention from sociologists and political scientists who examine society at the micro level, most of these studies ignore the distribution of power among the participants of human relations, though feminist studies stand as a notable exception to the rule.

The Disregard of Power in Personal Relations

The egalitarian vision of human relations dominated intellectual movements in sociology and social psychology in the postwar years. Moreno’s sociometry (1956), which became popular in the social sciences in the 1950s, assumed social and political equality among participants in various contexts, such as offices or schools. As seen in the works of Blumer and Goffman, symbolic interactionism, which became influential in the 1960s, was another egalitarian perspective on human relations. Interactionists studied the behavior of supposedly equal, independent individuals in small groups, and showed little interest in the impact of these interactions on political or social conflicts (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959). Later developments in social science only strengthened the

2. Among the social sciences, only anthropology, with its focus on nonmodern societies, was an exception. See the most recent anthropological publications on kinship in Carsten (2004). Holv
“egalitarian” perception of human relations. Game theory, along with rational choice theory, added to the emphasis placed on equality between the partners in social interactions; the “prisoner’s dilemma,” popular in social science in the 1960s through the 1980s, also assumed that participants had equal access to information within the context of games.

To their credit, theories of social capital and networks, which rose to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, drew more attention to personal relations. However, most researchers took the egalitarian approach and assumed the autonomy and independence of individuals, as if none of the participants had an advantage in terms of power (political, economic, or ideological) (Granovetter 1973). The literature on social capital and networks almost completely ignores the unequal distribution of power between actors, dealing with such issues as school boards, scouting, amateur sports leagues, fraternal organizations, and Internet networks (Fine 2001). Putnam (2001), a noted expert on social capital and the author of *Bowling Alone*, talked about networks of people with equal status. Coleman (1990) and Fukuyama (2000) also based their views of social capital and networks on the assumption of equality between participants.

These scholars seemed to overlook an important distinction between types of personal relations. It is one thing to have acquaintances of the same social status, but quite another to receive favors—legal or illegal—from friends or relatives who hold higher positions in government, business, education, or other institutions. People living in both the Middle Ages and modern times have used their family ties and social connections to find protectors, whether among landlords, royal bureaucrats, and the clergy or among CEOs, government bureaucrats, and trade union leaders.

*The Nonegalitarian Approach to Personal Relations*

Only a few authors who have discussed theories of human relations in the United States have taken the “nonegalitarian” approach and focused on the role of power. Even some of these authors, however, did not pay enough attention to the benefits received by those who hold the power (Eisenstadt and Ronighe 1984, 22, 33; Erber and Gilmour 1994, 5, 6, 68). Prominent authors such as Harold Kelley have talked only about the dominance-submission dimension of human relations in terms of individual differences, which seems to assume that some people choose the position of dominance, while others choose submission. This
mostly by external factors, such as the social position of the participants before they enter into the interaction (Kelley 1982).

The nonegalitarian approach has been more popular among those who studied the interaction between superiors and subordinates in factories, offices, and hospitals (Brown 1986; Vidal 2007; Coombs 2004). However, they focused mostly on relations that are essentially regulated by the formal rules of the organization. Only in rare cases do they discuss relations based on the abuse of power by superiors for their personal benefit, a phenomenon we treat as feudal. As a matter of fact, as mentioned, only the feminist literature has paid a great deal of attention to the role of power in family relations (Cancian 1985; Therborn 2004; Umberson et al. 1998).

The disregard of personal relations in politics and other spheres of public life may be explained in part by the general belief among many scholars that rationalism is predominant in modern society; merit, not personal loyalty or family ties, determines where people are positioned in government, business, and cultural institutions. Weber, for instance, believed that political and economic relations in liberal society were based on formal rules, and that the personal factor did not play a significant role. Ferdinand Toennies (1887), who followed Weber’s vision of modernization, saw Gemeinschaft—a concept involving communities with strong face-to-face relations—as a radically different type of organization than Gesellschaft, a modern society based strictly on formal principles. Parsons (1951) was also a champion of rationality and universalism. He was confident that, with modernization, people’s social status would be less and less determined by inherited or acquired power (“the ascription”), and more by “achievement” or individual merit. For both giants of sociology, lord-vassal relations and the personal bonds of loyalty belonged to the remote past (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

**Kinship as a Factor in Politics**

Given their disregard of power in personal relations, social scientists tend to underestimate the contemporary importance of kinship, which was also a key social issue in the Middle Ages (Buss and Kenrik 1989; Kenrik, Ackerman, and Ledlow 2006). Some authors also tend to water down the concept, declaring that any tightly knit group of people, whether a motorcycle club or a drug cartel, is a form of kinship (Hebert 1993). Since 1964, after Hamilton initiated studies on kinship in everyday life, a few scholars began to pay more attention to
in the 1970s on the subject of helping behavior (or altruism) and people’s willingness to help those who will carry on their genes. Almost all publications on kinship in American society concentrate on relations at the micro level (Szinovácz 1998). In a nearly one-thousand-page edited volume, Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics, (Hansen and Garey 1998), none of the sixty-two chapters was devoted to kinship in American politics. The well-founded empirical studies on kinship that exist have not inspired widespread interest in the subject, particularly as it relates to the creation and maintenance of political power.

The Marxist and Feudal Approaches to the Role of Personal Relations in Politics

Similar to Weber and Parsons, orthodox Marxists and leftists (even if for other reasons) also tend to ignore the role of personal relations in politics and business. Their focus on class as the key factor in human relations led to a deemphasis of personal loyalties between individuals of different classes. Some argued that class was the single determinant of people’s positions in liberal society. However, the vision of society based on the feudal model, and particularly societies with weak states—as in the cases of Russia and other post-Soviet countries—allows us to see another type of division based on clans, “teams,” and “cliques,” which unite people who are loyal to the same leader. The members of clans support each other, not because of their common social status or origin, as Marxists like to stress (even if these factors are indeed quite important), but because they share the same fate and will prosper or perish together—the sort of behavior and mentality seen in movies and television shows such as The Godfather and The Sopranos. Societies are divided into more than rich and poor, educated and noneducated, residents of metropolitan areas and small cities, people living in the east and west, citizens and illegal immigrants; they are also divided into different clans and groups that rely on different “roofs” or “protection rackets” and have different patrons (Shlapentokh with Woods 2007).

Ideal Societies for the Study of Personal Relations:

Medieval Western Europe

The importance of personal relations in politics, kinship in particular, reached
suggested, the private sphere was superior to the public one in the time of classic feudalism; the “public sphere was directly linked to the concrete existence of a ruler.” As discussed in a reference book on medieval studies, “position, power, and place within society were based not on individual freedoms and impersonal relationships, but instead upon very personal relationships of reciprocal behavior, entered into contractually and described with kinship terminology” (Hekala 1996). In the political realm, personal loyalty and kinship were a person’s most important qualities (Fortes 1969). Position and power were based on the “hierarchical principle” and rooted in the social organization of those barbaric societies that replaced the Roman Empire. While Roman law during the golden era of the empire strictly separated public and private domains, barbaric societies did not acknowledge this distinction; the leader of the tribe and those warriors who were personally loyal to him carried out the functions of the state (Shlapentokh with Woods 2007).

Personal relations have served as the basis of organization in politically fragmented societies where the central administration was unable to maintain order and security was provided by a number of powerful social actors (Bloch 1964). In medieval society, almost everyone had his own personal patron, from nobles and merchants to artisans and peasants. Patronage was often hereditary, and children expected to enjoy the same advantages as their parents from being under the protection of the lord. Of course, the character of personal patronage varied depending on the social status of the boss and the client. A vassal who controlled land and one who was landless could not claim the same respect. The same was true about the vassal of a king compared to the vassal of an “ordinary” landlord. While a noble could require decent treatment by his lord, a peasant or a serf was at the total mercy of his “protector.”

This feudal ideology was a two-edged sword. It demanded obedience to the boss, but also imposed certain obligations on the lord to care for his vassals (Cantor 1994). Vinogradoff identified ceremonial bonds between the lord and tenant as an important aspect of life in the Middle Ages. “The tenant had to appear in person before the lord, surrounded by his court, kneel before him, put his folded hands into the hand of the lord and promise him loyalty. This act of homage corresponded with the ‘investiture’ by the lord, who delivered to his vassal a flag, a staff, a charter, or some other symbol of the property ownership” (Vinogradoff 1924; Shlapentokh with Woods 2007, 58).

Loyalty is a leading issue in Shakespeare’s plays, such as King Lear, in which Cordelia epitomizes loyalty to her father, as well as Macbeth and Much Ado
of classicism, Racine and Corneille first among them, but mocked by the authors of the new, bourgeois era, such as Molière and Beaumarchais. Values such as loyalty and trust, along with boss-client relations, were transferred to the subsequent eras, and became, with differing degrees of intensity, part of cultural life in many contemporary societies, primarily in Europe and Japan.  

**Kinship in the Middle Ages**

Kinship, a special type of personal relation, was very important in the Middle Ages. “People talked not about coworkers, but about kinsmen; not about peers, but about brothers; not about associations, but about fraternities” (Heers and Herbert 1977). The importance of having children, particularly sons, was connected to the basis of the political order. People were interested, if for different reasons, in having big families. The peasants’ main motivation was the need for labor; more family members in the nobility meant greater political power and an increase in the size of one’s network, which was based on marriages and other network relations (Cantor 1994).

Sabean and his coauthors describe Germany as a particularly good illustration of the political role of kinship. In the thirteenth century, each political unit in Germany was considered a territory to be divided according to the number of sons. This practice permitted the youngest son to marry well and multiplied the number of territories that were ruled by the same dynasties, which was also a guarantee against the extinction of the family. Some territories were ruled by agnates, such as sons-in-law, and not by the male heir (Sabean, Teuscher, and Mathieu 2007).

**Feudal Relations and Contemporary Society: The Office**

Let us now move to an analysis of feudal-type personal relations in contemporary American society. By referring to “elements of feudal relations” inside organizations, public and private, we mean relations in which a superior is able to use his or her power to extricate illegal favors from subordinates.

3. Feudal values, such as honor, are difficult to explain to the average citizen of a totalitarian society because the total subordination of people to their superiors has made it practically impossible to observe these values. Among more than one hundred participants in the plot to kill Hitler—all German aristocrats—none reported to the Gestapo about the conspiracy (see Gisevius, Dulles, and Hoffmann 1998). In the Soviet Union, even after Stalin’s death, where feudal traditions had com-
Sexual Harassment

The sexual exploitation of subordinates is one area of comparison with feudal relations. Count Almaviva, in Beaumarchais’ play *Figaro’s Wedding*, does not seem anachronistic to contemporary observers. In the play, the count tried to use the feudal right of the lord to “the first night” with Suzanne, the fiancée of his servant Figaro. The pursuit of sexual favors by bosses is a common phenomenon in American society (Conte 2000). Sexual harassment is found in a variety of contexts—government, business, the military, law enforcement, medicine, academia, and others. Multiple surveys suggest that almost 50 percent of women experience sexual harassment in one form or another sometime in their working lives (Petrocelli and Repa 1998; Paludi and Paludi 2003). The figures are higher in the military, where two-thirds of women have reported being harassed. Sexual harassment occurs at a greater rate in industries traditionally dominated by men (military, mining, law enforcement). Targets of sexual harassment tend to be young (under thirty-five), single, and supervised by a member of the opposite sex. A consistent finding is that only a fraction of employees take formal actions against their harassers (Paludi and Paludi 2003).

Personal Favors

The abuse of power by managers is a lingering societal problem in the United States, especially in the context of corporations. Asking employees to perform personal favors or services (such as running errands) is a widespread form of such abuse. Secretaries (or administrative assistants) are highly susceptible to this type of power abuse because of the arbitrariness entrenched in the professional and personal relations between secretaries and bosses. The higher the position of the boss in the organization, the greater the possibility that subordinates will be asked to perform personal services (Kanter 1993).

In social studies on secretarial work in organizations, performing personal favors for the boss is classified as peripheral labor. Studies show that this type of labor is widespread and suggest that it stems from the status differential between secretaries and bosses. Peripheral labor usually involves physical tasks associated with traditional gender expectations. Peripheral labor is not recognized by the organization and is subject to personal negotiations between the boss and secretary (Wichroski 1994).

Given the difficult economic situation in the United States in the late 2000s,
issue of power abuse by managers be analyzed. A survey conducted by Ranstad USA suggested that many employees may be more willing to go the extra mile to keep their jobs, even if they may need to cross the line between professional, work-related activities and personal ones. Fifteen percent of respondents reported that they were willing to socialize with their boss outside the office, and 11 percent were willing to perform personal favors, such as running errands (Business Wire 2008).

Even though there is not enough academic research on the topic, many books have taken on the topic of power relations at work as practical guides to the inner workings of corporations and other bureaucratic organizations. They teach women and men strategies for how to build ethical relationships in the workplace and how not to comply with the inappropriate demands of managers or coworkers (DeMars 1998; Mandel 2006; Kosmoski and Pollack 2005).

Feudal Relations in American Politics: Clientele and Nepotism

Feudal behavior in politics is widespread in the United States, even if some authors are inclined to either ignore it or to describe American society as a triumph of meritocracy (McNamee and Miller 2004; Mlodinow 2008). There are two types of this behavior: when power is used to create a network of loyal people, a “clientele,” and when the network of loyalists is based on kinship or nepotism. In many countries, such as Mexico (Bailey and Godson 2000), post-Soviet Russia (Shlapentokh with Woods 2007), and Italy (Ginsborg 2003; Stille 2003), clientele relations and nepotism play a more important role than in the United States.

The Case of Clientele

The most striking case of feudal behavior in American politics is the selection of cadres by American presidents. In fact, presidents have quite often ignored merit as the main criterion for selecting people for their administrations. This happens mostly because they need to reward their donors with positions in government. President Johnson was notable in this respect. As Mackenzie (1981, 32) suggested, “few Presidents have come to office with a wider range of friends and contacts upon whom to draw in making appointments than Lyndon Johnson.” In the first years, Johnson paid a great deal of attention to ideological loy-
that appointees were personally loyal to him, not Robert Kennedy. Merit and professionalism played a lesser role. Johnson’s major political appointments were selected in return for political favors, and positions often went to his old senatorial friends or campaign contributors (Schott and Hamilton 1983). Nixon also made several cabinet selections from among his good, personal friends (John Mitchell, Robert H. Finch, and William P. Rogers) (Mackenzie 1981, 41).

President Carter was less engaged in the search for personal loyalty. Nevertheless, among his friends in business who received high positions in his administration were Griffin Bell (attorney general), Bert Lance (Office of Management and Budget), and Jay Solomon (General Services Administration). As had many presidents before him, Carter brought in several people who had participated in his election campaign, including Hamilton Jordan (longstanding manager of his campaign) and Thomas Lance (director of the Office of Budget Management), who had been Carter’s head of public transportation in Georgia. During Carter’s years, several ambassadorial appointments also went to old friends from Georgia with no experience in foreign affairs (Adams and Kavanagh-Baran 1979, 182). President George W. Bush (along with his father) not only favored his own family, but also encouraged nepotism at all levels of the hierarchy. As described by Bellow, as soon as Bush appeared in the White House he encouraged favoritism in his administration. “Michael Powell, the son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, became chairman of the Federal Communications Commission” (Bellow 2003a). It was no less remarkable that “Elaine Chao, the wife of Senator Mitch McConnell, became Secretary of Labor. Chao’s chief labor attorney, Eugene Scalia, is the son of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia” (Bellow 2003a). At the same time, Justice William Rehnquist’s daughter received a position in Health and Human Services. The relatives of Vice President Cheney also prospered: “Elizabeth Cheney, his daughter, became a deputy assistant secretary of state, and her husband became chief counsel for the Office of Management and Budget” (Bellow 2003a). Bush appointed then twenty-eight-year-old Strom Thurmond Jr., son of Senator Thurmond, U.S. attorney for South Carolina.

Helen Thomas, the former UPI Washington correspondent, declared in a column that the Bush administration had become “a family affair, reeking of nepotism.” (Nepotism is often said to reek, as though it were a pile of dirty laundry.) “You’d think an administration headed by the son of a former president might be a teensy bit leery of appearing to foster
Sullivan produced a long list of people who had gotten jobs in Washington through such connections, and concluded, “All this nepotism is a worrisome sign that America’s political class is becoming increasingly insular.” (Bellow 2003a)

The classic example in the creation of clientele in contemporary America is, of course, Chicago. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Democratic Party created a political machine that dominated the city for decades.

As previously noted, clientele is usually based on the loyalty principle and does not imply that its members are relatives of the boss. However, personal relations based on kinship play a critical role in American politics and business. The creation of clientele who are not relatives of the power holders is only one part of the feudalization of American economic and political life. Nepotism is another, probably more important, part of this process.

Nepotism in Big Business

Small and midsized family businesses play an important role in the U.S. economy. It is almost unavoidable that the founder of a business will often choose to transfer it to his or her heir (Erven 2009). However, the situation is quite different as we move from small to very large businesses (Wagner 2006). Some studies show that the second and, more often, the third generation failed as managers (Chrisman, Chua, and Sharma 2003; Buchholz et al. 1999). It is characteristic that contemporary business recognizes the inefficacy of markets to control the efficacy of managers, by resorting to various consulting and auditing firms for the evaluation of their performance.

Personal relations, in this case kinship based on a family’s property, defy market mechanisms. This feudal behavior, with its basis in the monopoly of resources—whether temporary or long term—determines the choices of those who make decisions in corporations, be it a family or a public corporation. According to the logic of the private economy, people have the right to transfer their property to their relatives, whatever their level of competence. However, it is also supposed that a perfect market will correct wrong decisions and will remove, in one way or another, the bad manager who received his or her position based on family ties alone. As numerous data show, though, the market cannot correct bad decisions related to the appointment of relatives in key managerial positions;
The impact of kinship on the selection of managers is morally condemned in liberal society, even if the business is purely private. All texts suggesting rules for the selection of managers conspicuously ignore kinship as potential grounds for choosing managers (Joint Pension Board 2009). Joseph Schumpeter preached about the innovative character of entrepreneurs and big businesses, and developed the most critical views on the impact of inheritance on economic processes. According to Robert Solow, Schumpeter suggested that there is a mechanism within capitalist society that inevitably causes it to undermine itself. “The children and grandchildren of successful entrepreneurs, precisely the people with the right DNA, are seduced by inherited wealth into intellectual pursuits, the arts, aristocratic habits, perhaps even into left-wing or at least anti-capitalist ideologies. It is not the proletariat that blows up the capitalist edifice, which is in fact good for the proletariat. It is the second generation of successful entrepreneurs that lets the ground floor decay” (Solow 2007; Schumpeter 1954; McCraw 2007).

The Spread of Kinship in Politics

Kinship has almost always played an important role in American politics. At least eight American presidents were relatives: John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, was the son of John Adams, the second president. Benjamin Harrison, the twenty-third president, was the grandson of William Harrison, the ninth president. George W. Bush, the forty-third president, was the son of George H. Bush, the forty-first president. Franklin Roosevelt, the thirty-second president, was the fifth cousin of Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth president; his spouse, Eleanor, was Theodore Roosevelt’s niece.

Many other politicians are involved in kinship relations. Among contemporary examples, we can point to the two Udalls, father and son, U.S. senators. Marc Begich, a senator from Alaska, is the son of a former congressman from the same state (Hulse 2008). Governor Robert Casey helped his son Bob become a senator (Deparle 2006). Senator Chris Dodd could not have made his political career without his father, Senator Thomas Dodd (Bumiller 2007). It is difficult to imagine the election of John McCain as a senator from Arizona without the money of his wife (Dowd 2009). As recognized by Adam Bellow, “all over the country sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, wives and widows of
Florida’s governor, Jeb Bush, re-elected by a healthy margin. In Massachusetts, Mitt Romney, son of the former Michigan governor George Romney, became governor. In New Hampshire, John E. Sununu, son of a former governor and presidential chief of staff, beat the sitting governor, Jeanne Shaheen, for a U.S. Senate seat. In Arkansas, Tim Hutchinson, whose brother Asa was a congressman and is now an undersecretary in the Department of Homeland Security, lost his Senate seat to the state attorney general, Mark Pryor, son of the former Arkansas governor and Senator David Pryor. Lucille Roybal-Allard, who occupies the California congressional seat once held by her father, was also re-elected. And in North Carolina, Elizabeth Dole, the wife of Bob Dole, won a Senate race against Erskine Bowles, a former Clinton chief of staff (and the son of a state politician). Meanwhile, the position of House minority leader was claimed by Representative Nancy Pelosi, the daughter of a five-term Maryland congressman and Baltimore mayor, who had risen swiftly in California politics in part through her skillful use of dynastic connections. Pelosi was opposed by Harold Ford Jr., a young black congressman who had succeeded to his father’s seat in Tennessee. (Bellow 2003a, 2003b)

Kinship relations and nepotism that encourage the creation of political clans are more consequential than the casual support of relatives in their job searches. There are a large number of political clans in contemporary America. Family names such as Roosevelt, Rockefeller, Taft, Kennedy, Clinton, Cuomo, Gore, and Paterson remind one of the nobility in France (the Bourbons, Orleans, Anjou, Bourgogne, Artois) or England (the Grosvenors, Cavendishes, and Osborns) (Chaussinand-Nogaret 1985; Sanford and Townsend 1865).

Let us start with the Kennedy family, which has a number of politically active members who closely interact. Some authors, such as Hebert (1993, 19), assert that the existence of the Kennedy’s network is beneficial to the country. The functions of the Kennedy clan, however, challenge the essentials of American democracy. Each European aristocratic clan had its recognized founder. The same is true about the Kennedy clan, which was founded by Joseph Kennedy, a leader who “ran the family like a football team” (Klein 2003, 9). The Kennedy clan was like a machine that produced a number of powerful political actors, from presidents and senators to officials of lower status (White 1973).

One recent case that illustrates the role of this clan, and the power of political families in general, involved a much-talked-about senatorial appointment
emerged as a possible appointee. Before this time, she had mostly been private and had performed minimal public activity (Heymann 2007, 147). Kennedy seemed to want, in the words of an American journalist, “to begin her political career near the top of the ladder” (Nagourney and Confessore 2008). Without a record as a successful politician (she had not held any elected position) and without elaborating her own political program, she insisted, when asked why she wanted to be a senator, “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I would be the best” (Confessore and Halbfinger 2008). She substantiated her claim to be “the best” based on her “celebrity” and her “political connections.”

A host of politicians who were in favor of the Kennedy appointment used her origins as their major argument. The public, for its part, generally accepted her wishes as “normal” and “legitimate.” A number of politicians, national and local—among them New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, Senate majority leader Harry Reid, Senator Christopher Dodd, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, and several others—supported her candidacy.

In an editorial, the New York Times suggested that Kennedy’s aristocratic origin was a positive factor. “Ms. Kennedy has much going for her. As a public figure, she carries the glamour and poignancy of her family, the only living child of President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, an uncle of hers, has reigned for years as the liberal clarion in the Senate. Another uncle, the late Robert Kennedy, was a charismatic senator who represented New York 40 years ago” (New York Times 2008b).

Maureen Dowd, a leading columnist at the New York Times, was even more enthusiastic. She praised “the magic capital” of Caroline, which will help her “to take care of New York in this time of economic distress” and to direct Congress, which “desperately needs fresh faces and new perspectives, an infusion of class, intelligence, and guts.” Maureen Dowd was confident, without putting forth any evidence, that the Senate, which was “shamefully sparse on profiles in courage during Dick Cheney’s reign of terror,” would be lucky to get her (Dowd 2009).

The fact that Edward M. Kennedy had lobbied Governor David Paterson on Kennedy’s behalf did not arouse outrage in society. Another member of the Kennedy clan, Kerry Kennedy, daughter of Senator Robert Kennedy, said (before she promoted the candidacy of her brother Robert Kennedy Jr.), “I think that Teddy and Caroline are so incredibly close, and I can’t imagine a better team than the two of them in the Senate from Massachusetts and from New York” (Nagourney and Confessore 2008; Confessore 2008). In the end, Caroline Ken-
American political history will remain a typical example of the role of feudal clans in the United States.

The American Nobility

The founding fathers tried to build a new society that would be free from the influence of a noble class. Washington and Lafayette struggled vehemently against rule by a noble class (Lasch 1996, 48). The Constitution mentioned the nobility only in a negative sense, banning the endowment of the title of nobility to anyone. *The Federalist* brims with contempt for the “spirit of clanship” and for “barons and nobles.” Yet the founders were not idealists or romantics. Alexander Hamilton had no illusions about human nature when he wrote in *The Federalist* that the “supposition of universal venality in human nature is little less an error in political reasoning, than the supposition of universal rectitude.” He knew, in particular, how often the merits of people would be ignored in the process of “appointing offices,” and how much this process would be influenced by “private and party likings and dislikes, partialities and antipathies, attachments and animosities” (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1788).

Despite the attempts of the founding fathers to build a Jeffersonian democracy, a sort of nobility still emerged in the United States. Of course, no one who belonged to this group had a certificate that proved their noble origins. The nobility in the United States comprised families that had ranked among the wealthiest and most politically powerful groups for at least three or four generations.

The old American aristocracy consisted of two types. One was represented by the Brahmins of Boston (this term compares the leading families of Boston with the highest Hindu caste), who had come to America on the *Mayflower*. Another was the rural ruling class of the South, whose wealth was accumulated in the early nineteenth century (Bowers 2004). Over time, the composition of the American aristocracy changed. Families whose positions were based on newly acquired wealth in the twentieth century claimed to be equals of the old aristocracy. The rivalry between families from the East Coast and the newly rich of the West Coast is a well-known phenomenon (Baltzell 1987).

Close to the American aristocracy are “celebrities,” even if this title lasts

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4. The same process was well known in the Middle Ages, when the old nobility were shoved out by new families, including those who were granted nobility by a king or those who simply bought
only for the life of its holder (Schickel 1985). The main pool of current celebrities is made up of Hollywood entertainers, the owners and journalists of leading media, and some outstanding politicians who are rich with connections in the worlds of politics and business.

Scholars and writers are not a part of the celebrity club. Theories involving the new “brainy” American elite, the dominance of techno-structure, and the holders of “cultural capital” exaggerate the incorporation of intellectuals into the ruling elite. They underestimate the role of political and economic power in the contemporary world, which continues to control society. Those who possess cultural capital have only a limited impact on social and economic processes. The founders of Microsoft and Google became members of the American elite only after they became billionaires, not because of their intellectual accomplishments. Even if the composition of the American nobility changed over the last two centuries, it is still a powerful social actor, strengthening feudal relations in contemporary politics.

Children of Alumni: The Formation of the American Nobility

Despite the push for equal opportunity in the nation’s best universities, the offspring of the rich and powerful have a better chance of being accepted by Harvard and Yale than those of the middle or lower classes. As noted in the Economist, “the biggest insult to meritocracy, however, is found in the country’s top universities. These institutions, which control access to the country’s most impressive jobs, consider themselves far above Washington and its grubby spoils system. Yet they continue to operate a system of ‘legacy preferences’—affirmative action for the children of alumni” (Economist 2004). According to the article, in most Ivy League colleges, children of alumni make up between 10 percent and 15 percent of every freshman class. “Legatees are two to four times more likely to be admitted to the best universities than non-legatees” (Economist 2004). Some university administrators try to justify the “legacies” by citing their need for fund-raising from alumni. Others regard the advantages that legatees receive as either very small, or simply the result of self-selection. It is impossible to verify, but according to the 1990 Department of Education report, “the average Harvard legacy student is ‘significantly less qualified’ than the average non-legacy student in every area except sports” (Economist

5. Unlike American nobles, the Soviet ruling elite was proud to communicate with outstanding
2004). The case of the University of Illinois is quite illustrative of the role of personal relations in the admission policies of many American colleges. The conspicuous violation of the merit principle in recruiting students had reached such a level that the governor created a special commission to investigate the matter. It established that the chancellor of the main campus, Richard H. Herman, was the “ultimate decision maker” for politically connected and other favored students. The chancellor ultimately resigned (Steinberg 2009).

Mills (1956) and other Marxist critics of American capitalism (Domhoff 1970, 1980), as well as leftist sociologists in France such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), wrote about the role of one’s origins in the process of promotion and upward mobility in bourgeois society. However, they connected this phenomenon to the class composition of capitalist society. In fact, we are dealing not with a liberal capitalist society, but with feudal relations. The elite class lives in segregated communities—in some cases, gated communities (as discussed in an earlier chapter)—and “send[s] its children to the same exclusive schools, marr[ies] within its own class, and acts in other ways to pass on its accumulated wealth, position, and privileges” (Bellow 2003a).

The Elitist Justification of Family Nepotism

The feudal or elitist ideology asserts that only the rich and noble have the talent and preparation to run society. The ideology praises family dynasties in politics and business, and sees nepotism as a positive development. It supposes that the offspring of successful families are more likely to perform efficiently in any sphere of public life than people from lower classes. The promotion of members of successful families is seen as a service to society. The ideology, which holds contempt for ordinary people and democratic procedures, is deeply hostile toward social equality and indifferent toward social polarization.

Those who defend the special rights of nobles often cite examples of courage and altruism among this class. The U.S.-made movie Valkyrie (2008), for instance, glowingly praised the leading participants (there were more than a hundred of them) who plotted against Hitler in 1944. They were all members of the German nobility. None of them betrayed their comrades-in-arms or made reports to the Gestapo, in order to save their own skins. Polish media, even in communist times, praised the leading Polish noble families (Radziwiłł and Potocki) for refusing to collaborate with the Nazis or the Stalinists.
political and social equality, some American authors have tried to justify nepotism and other elements of the elitist ideology. Bellow (2003b), for example, develops this line of reasoning in his book *In Praise of Nepotism*. Citing many examples of nepotism among the American elite, Bellow rejects the opinion of those who “voiced alarm that we are returning to a society based on hereditary status, complete with a corporate aristocracy and a political House of Lords.” He does not see this trend as “an ominous departure from American principles.” He claims to not understand the difference between “the professional dynasties” in music, literature, and the circus, as well as other areas of “entertainment, the arts, and sports,” and the political and business dynasties. In the first case, the children inherit real talents and their parents serve as models. In the areas of music and literature, they are literally tested each day by the public. Indeed, who will object to the prominence of dozens of second-generation actors, such as Jane and Peter Fonda or Michael Douglas, or to the fame of Martin Amis, the son of Kingsley Amis? The children of politicians and business moguls, on the other hand, inherit political and economic power, so society must acquiesce to them whatever their actual talents may or may not be.

Without analyzing the political and economic consequences of nepotism, Bellow (2003b, 16) justifies it by referring to “the natural impulse to pass something on to their children, just as children wish to accept whatever their parents have to give.” The same logic suggests that greed is “a natural instinct,” yet society does many things to control it, to keep it from damaging other people and society in general. Bellow insists, following the elitist ideology, that the best families in America advance the best people to engage in politics and run the economy.

**The Fight Against Feudal Privileges**

Even if some parts of the population accept certain forms of corruption as normal, society has tried to reduce the role of feudal elements. American society has devised various ways of diminishing the impact of feudal style cadre selection, including the influence of the American aristocracy (old and new) on the political establishment, education, and science. In fact, the fight against nepotism began in this country with the abolition of English inheritance practices in the eighteenth century. Thomas Jefferson was a champion of meritocracy and an enemy of feudal practices, such as inheritance rights and the consoli-
Nepotism and Government Regulations

The assassination of President James Garfield on July 2, 1881, by Charles Guiteau, a man greatly disgruntled by unsuccessful efforts to obtain a federal post, increased American public support for civil service reform (Sampson 2001). In 1883, the Pendleton Act was the “first attempt to reduce nepotism in the federal government”; two years later this led to the state civil service reform in the states of New York and Massachusetts (Sampson 2001).

A set of laws and regulations (statutes) was developed over the next few decades to “prevent public agencies from favoritism and conflicts of interest in hiring employees and to ensure that hiring is based solely on merit rather than relationship” (Taylor 2006). The New Deal was a prominent milestone in this war. Nepotism statutes date back to 1933 and have been interpreted by a series of attorney general opinions. The statutes prohibit the “appointment” of a relative to any position of “trust or emolument.” The civil rights legislation passed in the 1940s through the 1960s, which was intended to uproot the legal barriers to equal opportunity, including anti-nepotism policies, began to be widely adopted by most large-scale public and private institutions (Bellow 2003b).

Today, almost half the states bar legislators from hiring their relatives. In these states, it is unlawful “for a person or any member of any board, bureau, or commission or employee at the head of any department of this state or any political subdivision of this state to appoint to any position of trust or emolument any person related or connected by consanguinity within the fourth degree or by affinity within the second degree” (Section 2-2-302, MCA). It is also unlawful to “enter into any agreement or any promise . . . to appoint [a relative] to any position of trust or emolument” (Section 2-2-303, MCA; Taylor 2006).

In states where nepotism is not directly prohibited by a statute, special conflict-of-interest laws or hiring guidelines for legislators are designed to restrict nepotism. The states also rely on their ethics committees for advice and authority on nepotism cases. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, for example, do not have laws that prohibit nepotism, but they do have conflict-of-interest laws (National Conference of State Legislatures 2009). Many states differ in the way they regulate the relationships between legislators and their relatives who serve as employees. Arizona, Iowa, and Mississippi prohibit legislators from

6. “Emolument” is defined as “any perquisite, advantage, profit, or gain arising from the possession of office.” “Nepotism” is defined by the statute as “the bestowal of political patronage by rea-
hiring a relative of the third degree by blood or marriage; Texas, Missouri, and Montana hold different restrictions for relatives related by blood than those by marriage (National Conference of State Legislatures 2009).

The creation of a federal civil service, which is supposed to be based on merit and efficiency, was an important development in the war against nepotism. Many institutions explicitly forbid people to work under the direct command of their relatives (Sampson 2001). In some cases, job applicants are asked if they have friends in the given unit. Those who wanted to join the Obama administration filled out a questionnaire as part of a painstaking screening process that was aimed at, among other things, identifying friendly relations that could create a conflict of interest.

Inconsistencies in the anti-nepotism rules have created some problems for the states, though. For example, “under Nebraska’s current anti-nepotism law, state employees are only barred from hiring or supervising immediate family members or blood relatives if they live under the same roof” (Boyle 2008). The law is obviously weak and invites violations. According to the Omaha World-Herald, in June 2007 the auditors revealed that five daughters of five managers had been hired for temporary summer jobs in the Nebraska Department of Labor and received higher wages than other full-time employees (Boyle 2008).

The Fight Against Nepotism in the Private Sphere

Researchers estimate that the number of organizations that enact formal anti-nepotism policies ranges from 10 to 40 percent. Almost 60 percent of organizations have some kind of informal policy (Ford and McLaughlin 1986; Newgren, Kellogg, and Gardner 1988). The anti-nepotism regulations vary from company to company. Many businesses have enacted no-spouse rules for their employees, prohibiting spouses from working together. Many companies prohibit any relatives from working together. While companies are free to enact anti-nepotism regulations, some have been found to be discriminatory, deemed unconstitutional by the courts, and overturned.

The Fight Against Nepotism in Academia

Most universities have a nepotism policy stating that “no employee may participate in decisions which would involve a direct benefit or detriment (ap-
(Taylor 2006). However, in reality, many people—especially in academia—work under the supervision of their relatives. Some additional rules have been developed to ensure that the selection and treatment of employees is fair and based solely on merit. For example, when someone applies for a position that is supervised by a relative, a designated authority may be assigned to oversee the fairness of the situation (Taylor 2006).

The most controversial issue is the employment of marriage partners. Many critics of anti-nepotism laws believe that such laws discriminate against qualified applicants on the basis of marital status and that, in most cases, they discriminate against married women. Several organizations, especially universities and colleges, while being bound by the existing nepotism laws, work to make sure they do not deny an applicant the opportunity for a position because he or she is related to another employee. There is a general rule in many universities that a person related to an employee can be hired under a competitive search by an independent hiring committee. Supervision of a relative-employee is another problematic issue. Some believe that supervision of a relative does not violate the nepotism statutes unless the supervising relative has the authority to select, hire, or provide job-related benefits to the relative-employee (Taylor 2006).

Conclusion

Feudal-type personal relations permeate the fabric of society. Contrary to the assumption that the participants of personal relations represent equal partners, there is an unequal distribution of power in many spheres of life, from families to private firms to government offices. The abuse of power by bosses, a common occurrence, is evidence of the feudal character of American society. The reliance on personal relations, nepotism, or loyalty in decision-making processes in business and politics contradicts the principles of political equality and meritocracy. When used as the basis for selecting cadres, these feudal elements hinder the efficiency of the given organization.

The impact of kinship, a special type of personal relations, on American political and economic life deserves special attention. Kinship interferes with the promotion of qualified people to important positions in society. It forms the basis of powerful political clans, which unceremoniously influence the
These clans are part of the American nobility, who, not unlike the medieval nobility, play a significant role in political life, challenging democratic and egalitarian principles. American society is well aware of the consequences of feudal personal relations. While some attempts have been made to diminish nepotism and the use of personal relations in the decision-making processes in government and business, this fight has been only moderately successful.