PS210: Philosophy of Social Science

Fall 2017

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Seminars: Wednesdays 10-12pm, 202 Barrows

Office hours: Mark, Tu 11:30am-1pm, 718 Barrows
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Course Outline

This course offers an introduction to the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary social and political science. Our goal is to reflect on the epistemological and ontological assumptions inherent in methodological approaches such as rational choice, interpretivism, behavioralism, institutionalism, and post-modernism. For example, what counts as knowledge in each approach, and how is such knowledge ascertained? To what extent does each consider social reality "out there" to be discovered rather than constructed by us and "in here" (our heads)? Are there universal criteria by which one can compare the usefulness or validity of different approaches? Should there be? We will begin by reviewing some of the dualisms that currently preoccupy Western philosophy: naturalism/anti-naturalism, realism/constructivism, and objectivity/relativism. We then examine our approaches and methods in light of these conceptions of knowledge.

Course Requirements

Students must attend every seminar prepared to participate constructively. Course evaluation will be based on this participation as well as a research paper. You may write the research paper on any aspect of the course. There is no prescribed length for the paper. Make sure you have something of interest to say, and say it in as many words as it takes you to do so.

Readings and Topics

Many of the readings come from the course texts, while others are available online through the UC Berkeley library website (we identify these on the syllabus). For those readings not otherwise available, there is a course reader, which can be purchased at University Copy, 2425 Channing Way (549-2335).

The syllabus lists a couple of topics for each seminar. Although discussion will not be restricted to these topics, they are possible focuses of discussion, and also things for you to think about in preparation for the seminar.
Note: New and better readings do come to our attention. We therefore reserve the right to add/subtract from the syllabus as we feel appropriate.

**Course Texts**

The following texts are REQUIRED.


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**Week 1, Aug 23: Organizational Meeting**

**Week 2, Aug 30: What is Political Science?**

**Seminar topics**

(a) What does political science owe the world?

(b) Can we define political science by reference to an empirical domain?

**Reading**


* M. Bevir, “Meta-methodology: Clearing the Underbrush”, in *Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*.

* I. Shapiro, “Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics; or What’s Wrong with Political Science and what to do about it”, *Political Theory* 30 (2002), 588-611.
Part 1: Antinomies of Philosophical Inquiry

Week 3, Sept 6: On Explanation: Naturalism/anti-Naturalism

Seminar topics
(a) In what respects (if any) does social science differ from the natural sciences?
(b) What difference does human intentionality make?

Reading
* Moses and Knutsen “Philosophy of Naturalist Science”, “Sowing Doubts about Naturalist Methodology”, and “A Constructivist Philosophy of Science”, in Ways of Knowing.
* Fay, “Must We Comprehend Others in Their Own Terms?” and “Is Our Understanding of Others Essentially Historical?” in Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science.

Week 4, Sept 13: On Ontology: Realism/Constructivism

Seminar Topics
(a) What are we investigating when we investigate politics?
(b) Is what is real that which is observable?

Reading

Week 5, Sept 20: On Epistemology: Objectivity/Relativism

Seminar Topics
(a) Are there limits to what can be known about politics?
(b) Is “timeless” knowledge of politics possible?

Reading
* Fay, “Do People in Different Cultures Live in Different Worlds?” and “Can We Understand Others Objectively?” in Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science.

Part II: Approaches to Political Inquiry

Week 6, Sept 27: Behavioralism

Seminar topics
(a) What (if anything) is at stake in focusing on behavior rather than action?
(b) Is behavioralism a necessary let alone sufficient approach?
(c) Do any working social scientists actually practice logical positivism?

Reading

Week 7, Oct 4: Institutionalism

Seminar topics
(a) What is an institution? (If you want to refer to rules or norms in answer to this question, you should be prepared to answer the next question – what is a rule or norm?)
(b) What is at stake in referring to institutions rather than practices?
(c) Should institutionalism even be considered a distinct approach?

Reading

Week 8, Oct 11: Rational Choice

Seminar topics
(a) How necessary or helpful is it to assume that people are rational?
(b) Is it possible to defend a role for rational choice theory even if one does not believe such an assumption is either necessary or helpful?

Reading
* Brian Fay, “Must We Assume Others are Rational?” in *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*.

**Week 9, Oct 18: Interpretivism**

**Seminar topics**
(a) Do interpretive studies help us to understand actions, explain them, or both?
(b) Can an interpretive approach come to terms with the materiality of power?
(c) To what degree is interpretivism antithetical to a scientific approach?

**Reading**
* C. Parsons, “Constructivism and Interpretive Theory”, in Marsh and Stoker, *Theory and Methods*.

**Part III: Reconstructing Methodologies**

**Week 10, Oct 25: Modelling**

**Seminar topics**
(a) What is a model? (Remember that models need not always be “formal.”)
(b) Should modelling be considered a separate method, or merely a different means of executing other methods?

**Reading**

**Week 11, Nov 1: Observation: Quantitative Studies**

**Seminar topics**
(a) What assumptions do we make in describing (“enumerating”) regularities in the social world?
(b) What do statistical regularities actually tell us about the world?

**Reading**

**Week 12, Nov 8: Observation: Qualitative and Comparative Studies**

**Seminar topics**
(a) Is the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods one of degree or of kind?
(b) What, if anything, do qualitative methods offer that quantitative methods cannot?

**Reading**

**Week 13, Nov 15: Experiments**

**Seminar topics**
(a) Which methodological problems do experiments resolve? Which remain?
(b) Do experimental and non-experimental results produce different kinds of knowledge? Why?

**Reading**
* “The Experimental Method” and “Interpretive Experiments” in Moses and Knutsen, *Ways of Knowing*.
* R. Morton and K. Williams, “Experimentation in Political Science”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*.
* A. Gerber and D. Green, “Field Experiments and Natural Experiments”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology*.

**Week 14, Nov 22: Thanksgiving holiday**

**Week 15: Nov 29: Wrap-up and papers due**