PHILOSOPHY AND METHODS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

The aim of this course is to introduce students to the methodological and philosophical problems posed by the human sciences. It is composed of a series of modules designed to provide students with a toolkit of approaches to social inquiry. The diverse branches of social science – sociology, anthropology, economics, history, political science, psychology, and history – share the aim of producing knowledge that explains “social” phenomena. How have the distinctive techniques of these fields come into being over the last century? What rival or complementary methods can make sense of the actions, intentions, and beliefs of individuals and groups? Are the social sciences continuous with the natural sciences? What normative assumptions are nested in social inquiry? The course will include a series of guest lectures from faculty in History, Economics, Sociology, Psychology, Government, and Social Studies.

I. Conceptual Backdrop

Course Introduction
• David Brooks, “Social Science Palooza III”

1. What is a Social Science?

A Brief History of Theories of Science and Social Science
• Rene Descartes - Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy,
• Francis Bacon - Novum Organum or True Suggestions for the Interpretation of Nature
• John Graunt - Natural and Political Observations Made upon the Bills of Mortality
• Condorcet - Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit
• Edmund Burke - Reflections on the Revolution in France
• Immanuel Kant - Critique of Pure Reason (third antinomy)
• J.S. Mill, A System of Logic, Bk VI, Ch. III

Is Social Science Possible?
• Jon Elster, “Explanation,” Explaining Social Behavior, pp. 1 – 66
• Alaisdair MacIntyre, “Is a Science of Comparative Politics Possible?”
• Max Weber, “The Meaning of Ethical Neutrality”

What Does It Mean to Understanding Ourselves and Others “Scientifically”
• Alaisdair MacIntyre “The Character of Generalizations in Social Science and Their Lack of Predictive Power”
• Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”
• David Brooks Social Animal: How the new sciences of human nature can help make sense of a life (selection)

2. Individual and Social

Individualism & Holism
• Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, “Structural Explanation in Social Theory”
• Emile Durkheim, Suicide: A Study in Sociology (selection)

“All Models are Wrong, Some are Useful”
• Milton Friedman, “The Methodology of Positive Economics”
• Amartya Sen, “Rational Fools”
• Andrew Gelman, “Freakonomics: What Went Wrong?”
3. What is Rational Action?

Rational Explanations

- William English, “A Brief Introduction to Statistical Inference and the Question of Micro-foundations”
- Jon Elster, “Rational Choice,” Explaining Social Behavior
- Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, “Introduction” to The Predictioneer’s Game: Using the Logic of Brazen Self-Interest to See and Shape the Future

Limitations of Rational Choice: Structures and Experiments

- Debra Satz and John Ferejohn, “Rational Choice and Social Theory”
- Esther Duflo, “Poor but rational?”
- Jon Elster, “Games and Behavior”

*First Assignment Outline (recommended) Due Thurs. 21 Feb.*

Social Construction, Guest lecture: Sally Haslanger, Department of Philosophy, MIT


Agency: Real and Ideal

- Jon Elster, “Rationality and Behavior” and “Persons and Situations”
- Daniel Kahneman, Thinking Fast and Slow (selection)
- Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, Poor Economics, Chapter 1, “Trapped in Poverty?”

*First Assignment Due Fri. 1 Mar.*

II. Objects and Methods

1. Interpretation and Ethnography

Guest lecture: Nicole Newendorp

- Erving Goffman, “On Fieldwork”
- Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”
- Nicole Newendorp, introduction, Uneasy Reunions

Entering the Field

- Mitchell Duneier, “How Not to Lie with Ethnography”
- Eric Klinenberg, Heat Wave, Prologue – Chapter 2
- Mitchell Duneier, “Scrutinizing the Heat: On Ethnic Myths and The Importance of Shoe Leather”

2. Social Statistics

Guest Lecture: Professor Amanda Pallais, Department of Economics and Social Studies

Guest Lecture: Professor Nahomi Ichino, Department of Government

- Nahomi Ichino and Matthias Schundeln, “Deterring or Displacing Electoral Irregularities?”

Causation in Social Science

- Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, Poor Economics, Chapters 2-3
V. 4.99
MATERIALS

Course readings are available in PDF on the restricted-access course website (Harvard ID required):
http://my.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k52321&pageid=icb.page229629

ASSIGNMENTS

(1) Participation (30%):

I. Active participation in discussion and engagement in lectures (15%)

II. Reading Responses (15%): Students will submit (<150 words) reading responses on the Philosophy/Methods Blog. Responses are due Wednesdays at 8p.

(2) First Assignment (15%): A five-page paper is due on March 1. An outline is encouraged, due on the February 21.

(3) Second Assignment (25%): There are three stages: (1) A first draft of this seven-page paper is due April 17. (2) Students will exchange the first draft with a peer, who will compose a two-page response, due on April 23. (3) Then, in light of the peer-reviews, a final draft of the paper is due May 1. We will make available handouts on paper topics, guidelines on writing papers, and the mechanics of the paper exchange.

(4) Final Take-Home Examination (30%): The open-book/open-notes exam is intended to integrate the lectures and readings of the course, due May 9.

The following policies apply to written assignments: (1) Both assignments are to be submitted to your Teaching Fellow’s mailbox by 5p, e.g., a paper submitted at 5:10p is one day late; (2) Late papers will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade a day; (3) This grade penalty will only be waived in the case of documented medical emergencies; (4) Plagiarism, the presentation of another person’s work as one’s own, will be reported to the Harvard administration; (5) All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

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AVAILABILITY

Eric Beerbohm
Department of Government, Social Studies, and the Safra Center for Ethics
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Office Hours: Mondays: 11a – 12p and Wednesdays 11:30a – 12:15p / 2:30p – 3:30p (CGIS North, K421)
and by appointment. To sign up for Professor Beerbohm’s Wednesday office hours, please visit:
http://goo.gl/7AHZB

William English
Safra Center for Ethics
124 Mount Auburn St Suite 520N

Office Hours: Wednesday 3:00p – 4:00p (Safra Center for Ethics, 124 Mount Auburn St.)
Also available immediately following class every Tuesday.
wenglish@ethics.harvard.edu

Alex Prescott-Coach
Ph.D. Candidate, Philosophy
prescott@fas.harvard.edu

FEEDBACK

There are two venues for feedback on this course: 1) An anonymous survey will be posted on the course
website twice during the semester; 2) We encourage you to come to office hours.

COLLABORATION POLICY

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you
are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You
may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the
same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation
is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You
must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles,
websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Students who need academic accommodations for a disability should contact Student Disability Resources,
20 Garden Street, (617) 496-8707, TTY: (617) 496-3720, sdr@fas.harvard.edu.