CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ANALYSIS

FRANÇOIS BRIATTE

PRESENTATION

This course introduces some core notions for contemporary political analysis. A science of politics aims at the production of theoretical explanations and contextualised accounts of political phenomena, informed by the collection and analysis of empirical data. It looks at the real world using concepts that are put into operation through rich frameworks that use deductive logic and inductive interpretation to understand as precisely as possible the current state of affairs. Better understandings of our world should lead us to want to change it more effectively, in accordance with our conceptions of justice and humanity.

In practice, the course will offer an introduction to complex material taken from current political science, in order to encourage students to think in abstract terms about the political dimension of the real world. The course is taught entirely in English, and a firm grounding in political science is necessary to engage with the reading material. For both reasons, the course will be an interesting challenge, and an unusual one: as far as I know, this is the first postgraduate-level political science course that will be taught in English at this University. Welcome!
REQUIREMENTS

As for any MSc course, attendance is compulsory and students are required to read the required material before class. For further information about the course as well as additional material and instructions, please refer to the course website: http://f.briatte.org/teaching/copola/.

Exams will consist in two short assignments worth 2 × 25% of the final grade, and class participation for the remaining 50% (yes, participation is that vital to the course). I can be reached by email at all times about the course: f.briatte@ed.ac.uk—however, please do not wait the last minute to ask questions about class or about exams.

CONTENTS

Methods
I. Introduction
II. Comparison
III. Case studies

Notions
IV. History
V. Organizations
VI. Culture

Themes
VII. Opinion
VIII. Collective action
IX. States
X. Globalization

The first section of the course introduces social inquiry and the standard research methods used by political scientists. All three sessions cover methodological challenges that apply to virtually any research design.

The second section of the course concentrates on some crucial notions that we routinely refer to without necessarily thinking about their precise scientific content. These notions are ambiguous yet essential to political analysis.

The third and final section covers four core themes in political science research. The objective of this section is to think about the concrete application of the methods and notions learnt from the previous sessions.
READINGS

In addition to a selection of articles and book chapters, the course lectures borrows heavily from the following book—read from it after the lectures, during which you will get a preliminary overview of its content:


Some additional readings are listed below if you feel confident enough to delve into more detailed research material:

Mark I. Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (eds), *Comparative Politics. Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 162–192. This edited volume can be used as a handbook on comparative politics.


*West European Politics* 41 Special Issue 1–2 (2008). This journal issue has rounded a very impressive list of scholars to review their research interests, which makes up for a good survey of contemporary research agendas, including many not covered in this course.

Finally, the following readings provide additional insights on social science explanations:

Josep Colomer, *The Science of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2010). The author’s take on political science is readily positivist, which helps to distinguish some very valuable results and theories within all parts of modern political science.


SESSIONS

A note on the readings: each session lists three readings, but you will be assigned only one per week, in order to avoid mid-term burnout and to make sure that you find the time to complete the weekly reading on time for class. The two remaining texts will be covered by the lectures and discussed at length in class, which is why attendance and participation are so vital to the course.

Part 1 — Methods

I. INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY This session asks fundamental questions about political science: what makes a science of politics, and what exactly does it try to understand? The session discusses the foundations of political science and introduces the rest of the course.


II. COMPARISON

SUMMARY This session explores comparisons beyond theoretical concerns: under what practical conditions can we compare specific phenomena, like guerrilla warfare or social revolutions, across space and time?

Theda Skocpol, States and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China (Harvard University Press, 1989), 47–111.
III. CASE STUDIES

SUMMARY
This session concentrates on qualitative (small-n) case studies, for which a specific methodological approach has gradually emerged in the recent years.

READINGS


Part 2 — Notions

IV. HISTORY

SUMMARY
This sessions looks at how we can integrate historical trends and data to the study of social and political facts.

READINGS


Sven Steinmo, “Historical Institutionalism,” in della Porta and Keating, ch. 7.

V. ORGANIZATION

SUMMARY
This session explores the dynamics, characteristics and common patterns that apply to the organization and mobilization of individuals in very different social settings.

READINGS

Diego Gambetta, “Can We Make Sense of Suicide Missions?” in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 259–299.

VI. CULTURE

**SUMMARY**
This session discusses the status of culture in social research: can we use culture as an explanatory variable, or should we try to remove it completely from our analysis?

**READINGS**


*Part 3 — Themes*

VII. OPINION

**SUMMARY**
This session entirely revolves around the quantitative analysis of public opinion and voting patterns in the United States.

**READINGS**


VIII. COLLECTIVE ACTION

**SUMMARY**
This session focuses on the mobilization of interest groups, and the impact that collective action can bear on politics and policy.

**READINGS**


IX. STATES

**SUMMARY**

This session discusses the formation of the state apparatus, its methods of control over its subjects, and resistance to these methods.

**READINGS**


X. GLOBALIZATION

**SUMMARY**

This session discusses transnational and international processes, and also discusses the ethical commitments of the political scientist: should we try to use political science to change the world? The question cannot be avoided in a world of violent conflicts, collapsing economies, widespread poverty and persistent prejudice.

**READINGS**


SOUNDTRACK

Just for the fun of it, this will be the official playlist of the course, which you might hear playing if you come to class a few minutes in advance:


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