

# Epistemology and Methodology of the Social Sciences

Licence 2, 2017-2018

ECTS: 5



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## *Outline and aims of the course*

What is the relationship between political science and the social reality it attempts to analyze, interpret, and represent to a wider audience? Is political science a path to domesticate politics by providing objective empirical knowledge or is it yet another battlefield for political views disguised as expertise on an elevated level? The course offers an introduction to fundamental epistemological and methodological questions in the social sciences and political science more particularly. Irrespective of concrete research interests and domains of inquiry, be it the history of war and peace between major powers or the current environmental policies of the European Union, social science research is defined by its aspiration to be scientific and the authority that comes with scientific methods and results. As this course will also indicate, however, how exactly (social) science can be demarcated from other truth claims has always been essentially contested. Torn between the supposed example of the natural sciences and the special features of culturally and socially constituted subjects of inquiry, methodological and epistemological issues in the social sciences have developed in perpetual conflict with each other and thereby produced a variety of distinct approaches. This course traces this struggle over what proper social science would be and at the same time introduces students to the most dominant methodological approaches for the conduct of empirical analysis. Students will thus acquire a broad understanding of social science research as well as a reflexive sensibility about the truth claims involved in it.

## *Exams and Tutorials*

The course takes stock of acquired skills and knowledge in both the lecture and the tutorials. There will be two 2-hour exams, one mid-term and one final (30% and 40% of the overall grade, respectively). While the mid-term exam will primarily focus on epistemological concepts and arguments discussed in the readings and the lecture during the first part of the course (sessions 1-6), the final exam tests basic notions of research-design and methodology that form the bulk of the second part (sessions 7-12). The tutorial evaluates students' understanding of main approaches and concepts in short exercises throughout the term (accounting in total for 30% of the overall grade).

## *Readings*

From both a consumer's and producer's perspective social science is first and foremost a text-based enterprise. Working with original texts is therefore in the essence. Some of the writings by social scientists and philosophers of science are difficult to access, but it is imperative that you become acquainted with them, instead of relying exclusively on textbook chapters. Yet when in doubt it is helpful to consult guide books, at

least with regard to basic concepts and methodological issues in political science. Apart from specific chapters assigned as required reading, the following textbooks present optional readings for this purpose. Beware, however, that the guide books differ on specific questions and that indeed none of them provides a completely objective introduction or overview. After all, as this course will illustrate, any scientific inquiry and methodological choice is always already part of a 'political' endeavor.

### *Helpful textbooks*

Van Evera, S. 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. (*A short introductory textbook of standard positivist political science methodology. Chapter 1 of this book is a compulsory reading for this course.*)

Moses, J.W. and Knutsen, T.L. 2012. *Ways of Knowing: Competing Methodologies in Social and Political Research*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. (*A general and accessible introduction to different epistemological and methodological approaches in the social sciences.*)

della Porta, D. and Keating, M. (eds.) 2008. *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (*Several chapters of this textbook are assigned as compulsory readings in this course, and many of the other chapters – as well as the glossary on pp. 348-356 – will be useful to further understand and illustrate the core notions and methods presented in this course.*)

Surel, Y. 2015. *La science politique et ses méthodes*, Paris: Armand Colin. (*A general introduction to political science research methods, written in French. You will not be able to rely exclusively on this textbook for this course, as you will also need to understand the relevant terminology in English, but it is a useful guide for methodology.*)

### *Course structure and required readings*

Note – All readings listed below are compulsory unless otherwise noted. Both the lectures and the tutorials will **assume that you have read the texts in advance** of the lecture for which they are assigned.

## **1 Introduction: Science and Politics**

Keohane, R.O. 2009. "Political Science as a Vocation", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 42 (2), pp. 359-363. (*Please read this very short text as soon as possible after the first lecture, it touches upon many themes discussed in the course.*)

## **PART I: Epistemological and Ontological Dimensions of (Social) Science**

### **2 Facts, Causality, and Explanation**

Hempel, C.G. 1942. "The Function of General Laws in History", *Journal of Philosophy*, 39 (2), pp. 35-48.

Van Evera, S. 1997. *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, chapter 1 ("Hypotheses, Laws, and Theories: A User's Guide"), pp. 7-21.

### **3 Establishing Theories and Testing Hypotheses**

Popper, K. 2002 [1935]. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London and New York: Routledge, chapter 1 (“A Survey of some Fundamental Problems”), pp. 3-26.

Tutorial #1

### **4 Objectivity and Progress?**

Kuhn. T.S. 2012 [1962]. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th edition, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, (“Introduction: A Role for History”), pp. 1-9.

Motterlini, M., 1999. “Introduction: A Dialogue”, in: Lakatos, I. and Feyerabend, P. (ed. Motterlini, M.), *For and Against Method*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-18.

Tutorial #2

### **5 ‘Understanding’ and Interpreting Social Reality**

Schütz, A. 1954. “Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 51 (9), pp. 257-273.

Tutorial #3

### **6 Narrating, Representing, and Re-Making Social Reality**

White, H. 1980. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality”, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (1), pp. 5-27.

Tutorial #4

– Mid-term Exam –

## **PART II: Methodological Approaches**

### **7 Comparative Methodology and Case Studies**

della Porta, D. 2008. “Comparative Analysis: Case-oriented versus Variable-oriented Research”, in: della Porta, D. and Keating, M. (eds.) *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 11, pp. 198-222.

## **8 Quantifying and Calculating Social Reality: Statistics**

Franklin, M. 2008. "Quantitative Analysis" in: della Porta, D. and Keating, M. (eds.) *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, chapter 13, pp. 240-262.

Tutorial #5

## **9 Rationalist Approaches and Formal Modeling**

Martin, L.L. 1992. "Interests, Power, and Multilateralism". *International Organization*, 46 (4): 765-792.

Tutorial #6

## **10 Ethnomethodology**

Scott, J.C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, preface and chapter 1 ("Small Arms Fire in the Class War"), pp. xi-27.

Tutorial #7

## **11 Discourse Analysis and Reinterpretation**

Cohn, C. 1987. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12 (4): 687-718.

Tutorial #8

## **12 Wrap-Up: Science and Sorcery**

Jackson, P.T. 2011. *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations. Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, chapter 1 ("Playing with Fire"), pp. 1-23.