Alternative facts. Fake news. Pejorative labels like these are meant to call into question the validity of one’s empirical evidence or the interpretation one attaches to that evidence, or both. And although these labels entered the popular discourse during the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, and are thus tools wielded to discredit political opponents, scientists have contemplated the logic and empirical methods of their disciplines at least as far back as the 17th century when Descartes proposed that “I think, therefore I am.” This course provides an overview of such philosophical questions of social science as they apply to the field of political science, with some bias toward the subfield of international relations.

Philosophy of social science includes competing views on epistemology, or theories of knowledge. For example, must our understanding of the political world be based solely on objective observation (just the facts), or is it also based on something more, perhaps intuition or our capacity for abstract reasoning? Philosophy of social science also includes competing views on ontology, or theories of social being. The so-called agent-structure debate is one such preoccupation. Are freely acting individuals the prime drivers of political events, or are their choices severely constrained, even predetermined, by the social structures enveloping them? Political scientists, not least IR theorists, have given much thought to both epistemological and ontological questions attached to the conduct and accumulation of empirical research within the discipline.

The course is divided into two main parts. The first half presents and elaborates a broadly-speaking positivist view of social science wherein political scientists are encouraged to emulate an approach to research found in the natural sciences. The second half explores what are essentially post-positivist views wherein the subject matter of political science requires a philosophical approach to investigation fundamentally different from the traditional scientific perspective.

This is a required course for political science students in the undergraduate honors program and the master’s program and for doctoral students in the Public Affairs and Policy program.

Learning Objectives

The general objective of this course is to develop the student’s capacity to critically examine... These objectives are to be accomplished by exposing students to relevant literature from.... By the end of the term, students should be able to:
• grasp alternative epistemological and ontological positions in the social scientific literature, especially political science;
• connect the evolution of philosophical debates to the history of the political science discipline;
• ascertain these philosophical positions in political research even when they are not made explicit by researchers; and
• critically reflect on their own epistemological proclivities when designing and conducting social scientific research for their thesis projects.

Requirements and Evaluation

In this course, the main workload consists of assigned reading. Required readings should be read carefully prior to the session for which they are scheduled. All students are assigned readings indicated with solid bullets (•); graduate students are assigned, in addition, those with open bullets (○). A number of supplemental readings are provided should want to follow up on particular topics that interest you; none are assigned for this course.

Undergraduate course grades are based on an in-class midterm exam (35%) and either a take-home or an in-class final exam, student’s choice (65%). Graduate course grades are based on three short papers (30%), each offering a critical review of the reading assigned for that week, and a take-home final (60%). Graduate students will also be asked to make one or two brief presentations on a reading from the graduate reading list (10%).

Readings

There are no required textbooks for this course. All required readings are available online. Unless the reading includes a link to a web or D2L file, it is available online from the PSU library. You must retrieve these readings (all journal articles) by logging into the PSU library website and locating and downloading the article from one of the library’s full-content subscription services.

For those interested in background or integrative reading material on philosophy of social science most relevant to political science and international relations, there are several options, including:

• Len Doyal and Roger Harris, Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences (Routledge, 2008).
• Martin Hollis, The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
• Ted Benton and Ian Craib, Philosophy of Social Science: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Thought (Palgrave, 2001).
• Fred Chernoff, Theory and Metatheory in International Relations: Concepts and Contending Accounts (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
• Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics (Routledge, 2011).
The assigned readings generally include work from both the philosophy of science and from political science, and sometimes other social science disciplines as well. The philosophy of science readings are usually quite dense and difficult to get through, but students are asked to persevere in order to build a conceptual vocabulary that will make the philosophically-oriented political science readings more intelligible (though by no means easy). Bottom line: expect to struggle with the reading, and don’t be discouraged when you find it baffling.

Conduct and Courtesy

Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU Student Code of Conduct, especially the section concerning academic misconduct—that is, plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, consult your instructor.

Because they are distracting to others, cell phones (voice or text) and MP3 players may not be used during lecture and should be turned off at the start of class. Laptops and tablets may be used to take notes, but not for email, web browsing, or social media. Electronic devices may not be used to photograph, video, or stream course lectures or discussion, but lectures may be audio recorded with permission of the instructor.

Student Resources

If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The C.A.R.E. Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE and ASSIGNMENTS

27 Sep  Who Cares about Philosophy of Social Science?

Required
- Andrew Calcutt, “The Surprising Origins of ‘Post-Truth’—and how it was spawned by the Liberal Left.” The Conversation, 18 November 2016. (web)
- slides

4 Oct  Science, Positivism, and Political Behavior

Required
- Karl Popper, The Logic of Scientific Discovery (Routledge, 1992 [orig. 1935]), chaps. 1-2. (D2L)
- Gabriel A. Almond and Stephen J. Genco, “Clouds, Clocks, and the Study of Politics.” World
Politics 29 (July 1977), 489-522.

- slides

Supplemental


11 Oct

**Quantifiers and Their Critics**

Required


Supplemental


18 Oct  

**Rational Choice**

Required


Supplemental


25 Oct  

**Paradigms and Progress**

*Required*
• Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1970), chaps. 9-10. [D2L]

*Supplemental*
• Gabriel Almond, *A Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (Sage, 1990), chap. 1.
• Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., *Perestroika: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (Yale
University Press, 2005).


1 Nov
Midterm (undergraduates)
Discussion (graduates, NH 389)

8 Nov
Facts, Values, Politics, Policy

Required
- Ido Oren, Our Enemies and US: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science (Cornell University Press, 2003), chap. 4. (D2L)

Supplemental
- David M. Ricci, The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy (Yale University Press, 1984).
- Joseph Lepgold and Miroslav Nincic, Beyond the Ivory Tower: International Relations Theory and


15 Nov Interpretivism

Required

- Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.” In The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (Basic Books, 1973). (D2L)

Supplemental

- Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy (Routledge, 1958), chaps. 2-3
22 Nov  

**Realism**

*Required*


- slides

*Supplemental*

Skepticism and Relativism

**Required**

  - slides

**Supplemental**


6 Dec, 5:30 pm  
**In-class Final Exam**  
**Take-home Final Exam** due

This syllabus is available online at [web.pdx.edu/~kinsella/ps493f17.pdf](http://web.pdx.edu/~kinsella/ps493f17.pdf) and course materials can be linked from this address. Last updated: 29 November 2017.