POS 6933: Interpretive Approaches to Political Science, Graduate Seminar
Fall 2011

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Office Hours: MWF 3:00–5:00 or by appt.

Course Description and Requirements

Naturalism, the idea that empirical social research should be patterned after the natural sciences, continues to enjoy a hegemonic status in the discipline of political science even as the shaky philosophical foundations of this idea have been exposed by major thinkers from a variety of philosophical traditions, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, and post-analytic philosophy. This course is designed for students whose research interests, or intellectual curiosity, or activist temperament incline them toward a non-naturalistic, that is, interpretive political science. The purpose is to help such students build both the requisite intellectual capital and a sense of intellectual community. I want you to be able to present interpretive research findings to a general audience of political scientists with a sense of intellectual confidence, without apologizing for the fact that your empirical analysis does not consist of developing general causal models and/or “testing” the “predictions” of such models.

The course has two parts. First, we will discuss the philosophical critiques of naturalism and the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of interpretive social science: that the meaningfulness and historical contingency of human life sets the social realm apart from nature and that (to most interpretivists) social science, rather than being separate from its object, is situated within the webs of meaning and historical context that it studies. In the second, longer part of the semester, we will cover a variety (if by no means an exhaustive list) of empirical research strategies rooted in these presuppositions, including unstructured interviewing, ordinary language interviewing, ethnographic (participant-observer) field research, discourse analysis, reflexive/critical historical analysis, and interpretive analyses of space. The course readings largely consist not of methodologic cookbook recipes so much as of the published work of researchers who have “done it.” We will read and discuss exemplars of fine interpretive scholarship, paired in most cases with brief essays in which the authors reflect upon their careers and/or their interpretive methodological strategies.

The requirements of the course include (1) class participation; (2) one book review (1,500–2,500 words), to be presented in class; and (3) a research project prospectus (10–15 pages).

Participation: You will be expected to have done all the week’s reading before each class and to come to class prepared to discuss the readings in depth. Your active participation in class is very important; it will account for 25% of the final grade.

Book review: By September 9, in consultation with me, select a book that features interpretive analysis (and is not already part of the syllabus). Prepare a 5–10 minute class presentation on this book—the date of the presentation will be determined so that the methodological strategy employed in the book you selected corresponds, more or less, to the readings assigned for that week. A 1,500–2,500 word book review is due to me the week following the presentation (no later than the following week’s seminar session). Although you are welcome to discuss your chosen book’s substantive argument(s), your presentation and written review should address primarily the book’s epistemological/methodological aspect. The presentation and book review will account for 35 percent of the final grade.
Research project prospectus: You may think of this assignment as a proto-dissertation prospectus. In 10–15 pages, outline (a) a research question/puzzle; (b) the state of the relevant literature; (c) an interpretive research strategy—what will you actually do to address the question? (d) The merits of your chosen strategy—why is it appropriate for the question at hand? The prospectus is due no later than Monday, December 12, at 10:00 am. It will account for 40 percent of the final grade.

Required Readings: The principal textbook that will accompany us throughout the semester is Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds., Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006)—please purchase it from Orange and Blue Textbooks (309 NW 13th Street) or order it promptly from your favorite online vendor. Additionally, there are several books that we will read in their entirety, by Joe Soss, Lisa Wedeen, Lene Hansen, Cecelia Lynch, and possibly (depending on the publication schedule) Timothy Pachirat—the titles and full citations of these books are listed in the course schedule below. These books have been placed on 2-hour reserve at Library West, but I highly recommend that you purchase them (online; I did not place an order with local bookstores). Other readings consist of journal articles and excerpts from books. The latter will be available either on electronic reserves in the library or, in hard copy, in the graduate student lounge on the third floor of Anderson Hall. At the beginning of each class session, I will briefly explain where you may find the readings assigned for the following week.

COURSE SCHEDULE

August 26 (a) Course Overview; (b) The “Other”

Sept. 2 No class (APSA meeting)

I. FOUNDATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sept. 9 Max Weber’s Methodological Contributions: “Understanding;” Ideal Type
- Read the following selections from Sam Whimster, ed. The Essential Weber: A Reader (London: Routledge, 2004):
  - The ‘Objectivity’ of Knowledge in Social Science and Social Policy (pp. 359–404)
  - Basic Sociological Concepts (310–58) [this essay constitutes the first chapter of Weber’s Economy and Society]
  - The Vocation of Science (270–87)

Sept. 16 Philosophical Underpinnings of Interpretive Social Science

Read the following selections from Interpretation and Method
- Introduction (pp. xi–xxvii)
- Dvora Yanow, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences” (5–26).
- Mary Hawkesworth, “Contending Conceptions of Science and Politics” (27–49).
- Robert Adcock, “Generalizations in Comparative and Historical Social Science” (50–66).
- Dvora Yanow, “Neither Rigorous Nor Objective? Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science” (67–88).

II. DOING IT

Sept. 23 Unstructured Interviewing: Ordinary Language Interviewing

Sept. 30 No class (Rosh Ha-Shanah)

Oct. 7 Ethnographic Research: Participant Observation in the Developing World

October 14 Discourse Analysis

October 21 Critical Historical Interpretation
October 28  Back to Ethnographic Research: A “Meet the Author” Session with T. Pachirat
[Note: this is a joint session with Prof. Bernhard’s Qualitative Methods seminar]
- Timothy Pachirat, “We Call It a Grain of Sand: The Interpretive Orientation and a Human Social Science,” pp. 373–79 in *Interpretation and Method*.

November 4  No class (Homecoming)

November 11  No class (Veterans Day)

November 18  Interpreting Space
- Read the following articles/chapters by Dvora Yanow:
  - “How Built Spaces Mean: A Semiotics of Space,” pp. 349–66 in *Interpretation and Method*.

November 25  No class (Thanksgiving)

December 2  Reflexive Historical Analysis
- Read the following articles/chapters by Ido Oren:

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December 12  Research project prospectus due at 10:00 am