POS 6933: Interpretive Approaches to Political Science, Graduate Seminar
Fall 2016

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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, autoethnographic research, discourse analysis, and reflexive/critical historical analysis. The course readings largely consist not of methodological 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 many 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), to be presented at the course’s final session.

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 7, 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? Prepare a 10 minute presentation of your proposed project for the term’s final session (December 7) and submit the prospectus to me no later than Monday, December 12, at 12:00 pm. It will account for 40 percent of the final grade.

Required Readings: A key 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, 2nd edition (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014)—an e-book version of this volume is accessible via the UF Libraries. Additionally, there are a number of books that we will read in their entirety (or large sections thereof), by Joe Soss, Lisa Wedeen, Frederic Schaffer, Katherine Cramer Walsh, Timothy Pachirat, Oded Löwenheim, Lene Hansen, Cecelia Lynch, and Robert Vitalis—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 recommend that you purchase as many of them as you can. Other readings consist of journal articles and relatively short excerpts from books. Some of these excerpts are available electronic reserves (e-reserves). 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 24     Course Overview

August 31     The “Other”

I. FOUNDATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sept. 7     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)
  • “Wissenschaftslehre,” chapter 4 (pp. 73-115) in Sam Whimster, Understanding Weber (Routledge: 2007). [e-reserves]
Sept. 14  Philosophical Underpinnings of Interpretive Social Science


Read the following selections from *Interpretation and Method*

- “Introduction.” (pp. xiii–xxx)
- 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.” (80–96)
- Dvora Yanow, “Neither Rigorous Nor Objective? Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science.” (97–119)

II. DOING IT

Sept. 21  Unstructured Interviewing


Read the following selections from *Interpretation and Method*

- Joe Soss, “Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations: A Practice Centered View of Interviewing for Interpretive Research.” (pp. 161–182)

Sept. 28  Ethnographic Research: Participant Observation in the Developing World


Oct. 5  A “Meet the Author” Session with Frederic C. Schaffer: Conceptualization in Interpretive Research; Ordinary Language Interviewing:

Read the following works by Fred Schaffer

October 12  
No class (Yom Kippur)

October 19  
**Ethnographic Research: Participant Observation in the US**

October 26  
**Autoethnographic Research**
[Nail Tanrioven will participate via Skype from Turkey]

November 2  
**Discourse Analysis**

November 9  
**Critical Historical Interpretation**

November 16  
**Reflexive Historical Analysis; Archival Research**
[Prof. Robert Vitalis will participate via Skype]
- Read the following articles/chapters by Ido Oren:
November 23  No class (Thanksgiving)

November 30  A “Meet the Author” session with Kevin Funk, a “survivor” of this seminar
  •  Readings TBA (including a selection from Dr. Funk’s 2016 dissertation, *Between National Attachments, Rooted Transnationalism, and Borderless Utopias: Searching for Imagined Communities in Latin America’s Booming Economic Relations with the Arab World*)

December 7  Student Presentations
  •  Presentations and discussion of students’ research project prospectuses.

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December 12  Research project prospectus due at 12 Noon