EPISTEMOLOGIES OF SOCIAL INQUIRY

Political Science 790
Winter 2012

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Course Description

What difference does, or should, consciousness make to social science? Unlike the objects of physical science, the objects of social science are also subjects, in the sense that they are conscious and engage in meaningful behavior. This seemingly important difference in objects has underpinned a long debate among and between “positivists” and “interpretivists” about whether social inquiry needs an epistemology and methodology essentially different than that of the physical sciences, and if so what that should look like. This course is an introduction to this debate.

Requirements

There are three requirements for this course.

1) Come to class prepared to discuss the readings in an informed and thoughtful fashion. The success of this seminar will depend on the quality of student participation, which will accordingly be worth 20% of your grade.

2) Write FOUR 2-3 page reaction memos to class readings (two each from Parts I and II below), which are due the night before the sessions for which they are written. Together they will be worth 40% of your final grade.

3) Write a 10 page final exam, worth 40% of your grade. I am open to substituting a paper for the final in individual cases.

Readings

All readings listed on this syllabus are required. Everything is on Carmen except one required book:

CALENDAR

Mar 27: Course Introduction

Apr 3: Social Ontology

A. On Social Facts


B. Perspectives on the Fact/Value Distinction


PART I: POSITIVISMS

Apr 10: Defining the Science in Political Science

A. Political Science and its Progress

KKV, Chapter 1, pp. 3-33


B. Laws and the Social Sciences


**Apr 17: Getting Started**

**A. Descriptive Inference**

KKV, Chapter 2, pp. 34-74


**B. Problems of Concept Formation**


**Apr 24: Building Theory**

**A. From Concepts to Formal Theory?**


B. Perspectives on Causal Explanation

KKV, Chapter 3, pp. 75-114


Glennan, Stuart (2010) – “Ephemeral Mechanisms and Historical Explanation,” Erkenntnis, 72, 251-266

May 1: Testing Theory

A. The Qualitative-Quantitative Debate I

KKV, Chapters 4-6, pp. 115-230


B. The Qualitative-Quantitative Debate II


PART II: INTERPRETIVISMS

May 8: Introduction

A. The Epistemology of Understanding


B. Subjectivity, Inter-Subjectivity, and Beyond


Geertz, Clifford (1973) – “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, Basic Books, pp. 3-32

May 15: The Politics of Interpretation

A. Participatory Epistemology and the Problem of Objectivity


B. Debate


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May 22: The Productivity of Social Science

A. Power/Knowledge


B. A Phronetic Social Science?


May 29: New Directions

A. To Be Decided

B. The Idea of a Quantum Social Science