

Sociology 915

Philosophy of (Social) Science

Thursdays, 4:00-6:30*

(*it may be necessary to meet later in the evening, 7:00-9:00, on one or two occasions during the semester because of conflicts with events in the science & technology studies program)

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Introduction

Like all human activities, the many branches of social inquiry — anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, and sociology — have many purposes and show a great diversity of practices and outcomes. A premise of this course is that central to their mission is a search for knowledge that permits explanation and prediction of their subject matter. Social inquiries share these goals with the natural sciences and, at least at an abstract level, they share some methods, too. As in the natural sciences, the results of observations or tests are the ultimate arbiter concerning which claims are to be believed. I broadly reject the views of those who maintain that there is a radical chasm separating the study of nature from the study of society and of those who maintain that the notion of truth is a Eurocentric or androcentric chimera.

Yet I do not deny that the various branches of social inquiry differ enormously among themselves, and that there are many dissimilarities between particular natural sciences and particular social sciences. Furthermore, I believe that there is no good way to address even the most general methodological questions concerning the social sciences without studying the details of the goals, problems, procedures, and results of these disciplines. I hold that systematic empirical investigation is central not only to the natural and social sciences, but to the study of methodology as well, which is, in fact, a sort of social inquiry itself. Philosophers of science are, I believe, weird anthropologists. Like anthropologists, they study human practices. What makes them weird are the questions they ask and the questions they do not ask. Their interests in features of particular disciplines are guided by ultimately normative questions about how such disciplines can best achieve their cognitive ends.

Sociologists cannot avoid reflecting on their methods, and philosophers of science cannot avoid questions about human practices. This course aims to bring together the preoccupations of both sociology and philosophy to address methodological/philosophical questions as they arise in the research of social researchers here at the University of Wisconsin.

Structure of the Course

The centerpiece of this course is a series of videotaped philosophy of science interviews which you will conduct with various social science researchers on campus. Here is how it will work: At the first class session we will distribute a list of faculty members in various departments (sociology, economics, political science, history) who have agreed to be guinea pigs in our seminar, along with a sample of their writings. From this list you will choose a scholar whom you wish to interview for your term project. In the second seminar session students will rank order their top three choices. On the basis of these preferences we will then form research teams consisting of a minimum of three students. During the next couple of weeks, these teams need to meet with their interview subject to get a more extended reading list and make arrangements for the interview later in the semester. On the basis of these readings, the team will then construct an interview dealing with a range of philosophy of science issues. The specific issues for the interview, of course, will depend upon the nature of the work of the scholar being studied. By around the 10th week of the semester these interviews should be carried out and videotaped (you will get some training in videography). In the last several weeks of the semester these videotapes will be presented to the seminar. The week before you present you will assign one reading of the interviewee for everyone to read. At the session in which your video is played you will give a general introduction and then some kind of commentary after the video is shown as a way of kicking off the discussion. At the last session of the seminar you will then hand in a term paper, which can be either individually or collaboratively written, on the work you have been studying.

Requirements and schedule of your work

Your work in this seminar will fall into roughly five phases:

1. (Weeks 1-3) You need to choose whose work you want to study and to form into groups of four who will work together in planning and carrying out the interviews. Representative works by all of those who volunteered to be interviewed will be made available.
2. (Weeks 1-9) You will need to learn a good deal about the work of the person you will be interviewing and to fill in relevant background in philosophy of science.
3. (Weeks 9 – 12) Preparation and execution of methodological/philosophical interviews. These should last between 45 minutes and one hour and require a good understanding of the work of the person to be interviewed.
4. (Weeks 13 – 16) Study of the work of the other researchers interviewed and viewing of videotapes of the methodological interviews. Each group will choose a work by the person they interview to be read by the other members of the seminar and should take responsibility for discussing the methodological (and substantive) issues that arise in the interviews.
5. (Weeks 14-16) Preparation of seminar papers. These may be either collective or individual.

Normally, the last class in the semester would be December 9. Since classes began on the first Thursday in September, there would normally be no class on Thursday, December 16. However, since we will miss a seminar session on Thanksgiving, I would like to hold a final seminar on December 16th if this is needed to view all of the videotapes.

Your grade in the seminar will depend (in descending order of importance) on the seminar paper, on the quality of the interview, and on your participation in the seminar (especially completion of the weekly written interrogations – see below). Seminar papers are due at the last session of the seminar (December 16) for everyone except those presenting during last session. Their papers will be due by noon on the following Monday, December 20. Late papers may not receive detailed comments.

Organization of the seminar sessions

This is a seminar, not a lecture class, and thus the core activity of each session will be intensive discussion. I anticipate that because of the unfamiliarity of the material I will have to give occasional mini-lectures to clarify murky matters, but still the emphasis will be on dialogue.

The agenda for each session will be primarily structured around issues you identify as salient while you read the required readings. Here is the routine:

1. Each week each participant should prepare a written *interrogation of the readings* of about 300-500 words in the length. These interrogations should **NOT** be summaries or exegeses of the texts; nor should they be mini-essays with extended commentaries on the readings. The point is to pose focused questions that will serve as the basis for the seminar discussion. While you will need to explicate each question you pose – that is, lay out what you see are the issues in play in the question, explain what you mean by it, etc. – you do not need to stake out a position with respect to the issues you raise (although you can if you want to). The important thing is to pose clear questions which you want to discuss.
2. It is fine for an interrogation to consist of a single question, although you can pose more than one if you want. It is also entirely appropriate for questions to focus on ideas, arguments, or passages which you do not understand. In fact, it often turns out that questions mainly concerned with asking for clarification of some obscure formulation in the reading provoke especially good discussions in the class. What you should avoid is a long list of unelaborated questions.
3. These memos should be emailed to me as a MS-Word attachment **no later than 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday night** the day before the seminar. I will then read the interrogations, write brief comments on them, and distill the seminar agenda from the memos. I will then email the set of memos, my comments, and the agenda to everyone before the seminar. Interrogations that arrive after 6:00 pm may not be included in the agenda. My goal will be to email the material to everyone by late Wednesday night, but sometimes this will have to be done on Thursday morning.

4. It often happens, of course, that several people will raise the same or closely linked questions. I will group these together in the seminar agenda that I circulate. At the seminar session, after I introduce a particular agenda item, the people who posed the question will speak first (I will explicitly call on you). You should therefore come prepared to talk about the issue you raise. I will make sure that everyone is called on in this manner at least once each seminar.

TOPICS FOR Sociology 915

1	Wednesday 9/1	Introduction
Part I. General Perspectives		
2	Thursday 9/9	General Perspectives I: Empiricism and Positivism
3	Thursday 9/16	General Perspectives II: Critical Realism
4	Thursday 9/23	General Perspectives III: Feminism & standpoint epistemologies
Part II. Specific topics		
5	Thursday 9/30	Concept formation
6	Thursday 10/7	Methodological Individualism and holism
7	Thursday 10/14	Mechanisms
8	Thursday 10/21	Causal primacy
9	Thursday 10/28	Methodological pluralism
10	Thursday 11/4	<i>to be selected from list below</i>
11	Thursday 11/11	<i>to be selected from list below</i>
12	Thursday 11/18	<i>to be selected from list below</i>
<i>Alternative topics for sessions 11 and 12</i>		
A		Post-modernism & epistemological relativism
B		Rational Choice Models
C		Structure and Agency
D		Formal models
E		Functional Explanation
F		Testing theories, adjudicating theories, reconstructing theories
G		Logics of theory construction in ethnography: grounded theory vs extended case method
Part III. Research Reports		
	Thursday 11/25	Thanksgiving
13	Thursday 12/2	Research reports
14	Thursday 12/9	Research Reports
15	Thursday 12/16	Research reports (if necessary)

READING ASSIGNMENTS FOR SEMINAR SESSIONS

For each session (aside from the first) readings will be divided into Required Readings and Optional Readings. Bowing to the realities of time constraints I have put asterisks by some of these required readings. These are the readings that you should be sure to read if you do not have time to read the entire set. Students are not expected to regularly do the optional readings.

Session 1. Introduction

This session will review the broad agenda of the course and the priorities of participants. I will also use the session to briefly lay out my personal stance towards a range of philosophy-of-science issues so that participants in the seminar will know my orientation to the material. The only reading expected for the session is the summer reading by Samir Okasha.

Readings:

Background reading in philosophy of science:

Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: a very short introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

Readings which lay out Erik Wright's views in Philosophy of Science (not required):

For statements of Erik Wright's methodological/philosophical approach, see:

Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis, and the State* (Verso, 1978), chapter 1
Classes (Verso, 1985), chapters 1 and 2
The Debate On Classes (Verso, 1989), chapter 2
Reconstructing Marxism (with Elliott Sober and Andrew Levine) (Verso, 1992)
Interrogating Inequality (Verso, 1994), Part III

Work which has been especially influential in Erik Wright's views on philosophy of science:

Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968)
G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory Of History: A Defense* (Princeton University Press, 1978)
Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory Of Science* (Harvester Press, 1978) and *The Possibility Of Naturalism* (Harvester Press, 1979)
Alan Garfinkle, *Forms Of Explanation: Rethinking Questions In Social Theory* (Yale University Press, 1981)

PART I. GENERAL PERSPECTIVES

In the first part of the seminar we will focus on a number of broad perspectives in the philosophy of science. These address alternative answers to some of the “Big Questions”, such as: What is science? What is distinctive about scientific knowledge? What does it mean to “explain” something? We could easily spend an entire semester on these issues, but this would keep us from engaging a range of more specific topics which, perhaps, have greater relevance for the practical conduct of research. In any case, themes from this initial exploration of general perspectives will inform many of the later discussions.

Session 2. General Perspective I: Positivism and Empiricism

Auguste Comte coined the word, “positivism” as a name for his optimistic philosophy that looked forward to a replacement of superstition by science and to the rational organization of society. What came to be known as “Logical positivism” shared Comte's enthusiasm for the sciences, but it kept its distance from any substantive sociology, and it more strongly emphasized empiricism. The movement adopted the name “logical positivism” because it was also inspired by developments in 20th century logic and mathematics. The goal was to develop abstract, content-independent characterizations of features of science such as theory, explanation, or confirmation and to contribute to the conceptual clarification and eventual formalization of the sciences. Although the movement ran into increasingly serious philosophical difficulties beginning in the 1930s, a “positivistic attitude” became increasingly influential among scientists, including social scientists until the 1960s, when more popular critiques were written and word of the difficulties with positivism began to spread. Although Karl Popper considered himself a critic of the logical positivists and does indeed have some deep disagreements with them, there are many affinities between his views and those of the positivists.

Beginning in the 1960s, and intensifying from the 1970s, within critical circles in sociology the term “positivism” became a kind of term of abuse of all sorts of “scientific” practices of then “mainstream.” While indeed there are significant problems within the philosophical schools that self-consciously called themselves “positivist”, many of the attacks against positivism by critical sociologists were

Required readings:

*Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Palgrave, 2001). pp. 1-49

*Dan Hausman, “An Introduction to Philosophy of Science”, Appendix to *The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 281-316.

Karl Popper, “Conjectures and Refutations” in *Conjectures and Refutations; The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. 3rd. ed. London: Routledge & Kegan-Paul, 1969.

Optional readings (prepared by Prof. Dan Hausman, department of philosophy):

Carl Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Prentice-Hall, 1966), ch. 1-5 provides a good, readable overview. The decisive English-language formulation of logical positivism is A.J. Ayer's 1936 *Language, Truth and Logic*. See also O. Hanfling, *Logical Positivism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981. See also the collections, *Logical Positivism* (edited by A.J. Ayer). New York: Free Press, 1959 and Hanfling's *Essential Readings in Logical Positivism*, also Oxford, Blackwell, 1981. The introduction to Frederick Suppe's, *The Structure of Scientific Theories*. 2nd. ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977 provides a simplified sketch of positivism and of reactions to it. The most important critiques of positivism are W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," pp. 20-46 of *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953, Thomas Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," pp. 91-196 of Lakatos and Musgrave, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, and Paul Feyerabend, "Problems of Empiricism" in R. Coldney, ed. *Beyond the Edge of Certainty* (Prentice-Hall, 1965) and "Problems of Empiricism, Part II" in R. Coldney, ed. *The Nature and Function of Scientific Theories*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970, pp. 275-353.

Session 3. General Perspective II: Critical Realism

Scientific Realism is a general term for a family of alternatives to positivist/empiricist understandings of science. "Critical" realism is one variety of realism that has been especially influential in various critical traditions of sociology. The central idea is that the observations we make of phenomena in world are jointly determined by underlying mechanisms that exist *independently of the observer* and mechanisms *internal to the process of observation itself*. The task of science is give accounts of these mechanisms and thereby generate explanations of the phenomena.

Required reading

*Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Palgrave, 2001). Chapter 8. "Critical Realism and the Social Sciences". pp. 119-139

*Ray Pawson, *A Measure for Measures* (London: Routledge, 1989), ch.5.

Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: an introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1994), pp.3-63

Optional readings

The most systematic elaboration of the framework of critical realism is in the central work of the British philosopher, Roy Bhaskkar, in particular: *A Realist Theory of Science* (Verso, 1975,

1997) and *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Harvester: 1979, 1990). A recent, solid, overview of Critical realism and methodological implications is Berth Danermark, Mats Ekstrom, Liselotte Jakobsen and Jan Ch. Karlsson, *Explaining Society: critical realism in the social sciences*. (Routledge: 2002). For a discussion of the relationship between realism and postmodernism, see Andrew Sayer, *Realism in Social Science* (Sage: 2001).

Session 4. General Perspectives III: Feminism and Standpoint Epistemologies

One of the most important challenges to conventional understandings of social science in the past quarter century has come from Feminists. Needless to say, there are many different currents on feminist thought on philosophy of science issues. Two are especially influential: an approach which has come to be known as “standpoint epistemology” and an approach closely identified with post-modernism and epistemological relativism. Because of time constraints, we will focus mainly on standpoint epistemology in this session since this is probably the more influential current in feminist sociology and bears an interesting relationship to critical realism.

Standpoint epistemology makes two central arguments: (1) all scientific knowledge is generated by people occupying specific kinds of locations within social structures, and (2) these locations impact on the kind of knowledge people are able to generate. That impact can be described as a “standpoint.” Sometimes these claims slide into the kind of cognitive relativism characteristic of post-structuralism and post-modernism: If all knowledge is generated from a standpoint perhaps all knowledge is really just subjectively relative. But a standpoint epistemology need not imply this. Knowledge can be generated from a standpoint without implying that there are no possible standards for evaluating the truth content of knowledge, or that this knowledge cannot be effectively communicated to people in other social positions. What a standpoint epistemology strongly affirms is that an account of the knowledge-producing process that ignores the problem of standpoint will misdescribe a central property of knowledge.

In the specific case of feminism the relevant standpoint is that of women – although in more recent accounts race and class have been added as additional dimensions of positionality. In this session we will examine the reasoning behind feminist standpoint epistemology and its relationship to the view of science of critical realism.

Required Reading:

*Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Palgrave, 2001). chapter 9. “Feminism, Knowledge and Society”, pp. 140-159.

*Hilary Rose, *Love, Power and knowledge*. (Polity Press, 1994), chapter 1. Introduction: Is a feminist science possible? and chapter 4. “Listening to each other: feminist voices in the theory of scientific knowledge”, pp. 1-27, 71-96

Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Palgrave, 2001). chapter 10. “Post-structuralism and post-modernism”, pp. 140-159.

Optional readings:

The most influential pieces in feminist philosophy of science are probably by Sandra Harding, especially *The Science Question in Feminism* and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Donna Haraway is also very influential, writing from outside the social sciences. See especially her book *Primate Visions* (Routledge 1989) and “Situated Knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* (14, 3 1988): 575-99.

Session 5. Concept formation

One of the inadequacies of logical positivists is that they regarded the conceptual side of science as a matter either of formal logic or of purely analytical definition. Apart from insisting on empiricist constraints on what terms are scientifically legitimate, the positivists had little interest in the conceptual explorations that characterize science. One of the decisive critiques of positivism (developed by Morton White, W.V.O. Quine, and then in a slightly different way by Hilary Putnam) was that one cannot separate the sentences in a science into analytical claims whose truth depends on definitions and logic and is independent of experience and synthetic claims that are confirmed or disconfirmed by experience. Although an abstract philosophical issue, this matter of concept formation also arises pointedly in day-to-day practice, and the chapter from my book, *Classes*, shows how I had to grapple with these issues in my work on class.

Core reading:

*Carl Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Prentice-Hall, 1966), ch. 7, pp. 85-100.

*Erik Wright, “The Biography of a Concept,” Chapter 2 in *Classes* (Verso, 1985) pp. 19-63.

Ray Pawson, *A Measure for Measures* (Routledge, 1989), pp. 225-254

Arthur Stinchcombe, “Scientific Concepts”, in *Constructing Social Theories* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 38-45

Max Weber, “Objectivity and Understanding in Economics,” in D. Hausman, ed. *The Philosophy of Economics: An Anthology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 69-82.

Optional Readings:

An illustration: three different strategies for defining the concept “market”:

Richard Swedberg, “Markets as Social Structures,” *Handbook of Economic Sociology* (Princeton University Press, 1994) pp.255-82

Wolfgang Streeck and Philippe Schmitter, "Community, market, state -- and associations?: the prospective contribution of interest governance to social order," in Streech & Schmitter (eds) *Private Interest Government* (Sage, 1985), pp. 1-29

Polanyi, K., 1957 (1944): *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, esp. Part Two, "Rise and Fall of Market Economy, I: Satanic Mill", pp. 33-134

Putnam's arguments on concept formation can be found in: Hilary Putnam. "The Analytic and the Synthetic," pp. 358-97, esp. pp. 368-89 of Herbert Feigl and Grover Maxwell, eds. 1962. *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 3. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Session 6. Methodological Individualism and Holism

The works of Hayek and of Popper at the time of World War II initiated a controversy concerning methodological individualism, although discussions about individualism versus holism go back to the 19th century and are particularly prominent in the works of Durkheim. Both Popper and Hayek saw the enemies of liberalism -- especially fascism and communism -- as committing a methodological mistake, as offering theories in which collective entities possess causal efficacy unmediated by the actions of individuals. This is alleged to be a methodological mistake because entities such as societies do not exist (Margaret Thatcher's view) or, more moderately, cannot act independently of the people who constitute them. Fully satisfactory explanations in the social sciences must be entirely in individualistic terms. Although individualism is supposed to be a methodological doctrine, it has been intertwined with political struggles and with ontological disputes (that is disputes about what exists or is real).

Required reading

*Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 3-27.

*Erik Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober. "Marxism and Methodological Individualism," in *Reconstructing Marxism*, pp. 107-127

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts*, pp. 373-405.

Julius Sensat, "Methodological Individualism and Marxism," *Economics and Philosophy*, 4 (1988): 189-220.

Optional reading:

Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*. 8th ed. tr. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller and edited by George E.G. Catlin. New York: Free Press, 1964. Many of the classic contributions to the modern debate are collected in J. O'Neill. *Modes of Individualism*

and Collectivism. London: Heineman, 1973. David Ruben's, *The Metaphysics of the Social World* (London: Routledge, 1985) is an extended argument for ontological holism by an analytical philosopher. For a brief recent view, see Harold Kincaid, *Individualism and the Unity of Science* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 31-48.

Session 7. Mechanisms

Even if one does not buy into the whole philosophical structure of critical realism, the idea that an explanation consists of specifying a set of causal mechanisms has become quite prominent in sociology. The basic idea is simple: in order to distinguish mere correlation from a valid explanation, one must make an argument about how something comes about. This means specifying an underlying mechanism that generates the postulated effect. In the absence of such a specification we have at best a “black box” in which something happens, but we know not what, and at worst a vague and ungrounded theory in which real explanations are absent. One of the criticisms often raised against the most abstract kinds of sociological theory, in these terms, is that they lack plausible mechanisms.

Required Reading:

Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg, *Social Mechanisms: an analytical approach to social theory* (Cambridge, 1998)

Session 8. Causal primacy

In both nature and society, events usually depend on a multiplicity of causal factors. If the sun had exploded in 1916, the Bolshevik revolution would never have happened. But the continued existence of the sun does little to explain the revolution. Among factors that are more strongly explanatory, some seem stronger than others, and some seem to explain the revolution in a qualitatively different way than others. How can we discriminate among causal factors such as the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Serbia in 1914, the terrible human costs in Russia of the first world war, the autocratic structure of the Russian government, and the return of Lenin? This is both a practical problem for historians and social theorists and a theoretical problem. In particular, how can a theory of causal explanation permit one to distinguish among kinds and strengths of causes?

Required reading:

*Andrew Levine, Elliott Sober and Erik Wright, “Causal Asymmetries,” chapter 7 in *Reconstructing Marxism* (Verso, 1993). pp. 129-175

Session 9. Narrative methods and Methodological pluralism

There is a strong current in sociology which draws a very sharp distinction between the social sciences and natural sciences. Typically such claims revolve in one way or another around arguments about the distinctive character of knowledge that is bound up with *agency*, with the fact that people are actors within the social processes studied by sociologists. The problem of agency, in turn, is sometimes seen as radically subverting the possibility of causal explanation and prediction, the hallmarks of natural sciences.

Recently one of the rubrics under which these issues have been discussed is the importance of “narrative” methods in the social sciences, where “narrative” is taken to be a family of methods centering on the lived experiences, stories, temporal trajectories of the concrete actors in social settings. An *understanding* of such narratives, it is argued, yields a distinctive kind of knowledge. In a provocative recent book, Bent Flyvbjerg argues that this kind of knowledge is distinct from the *episteme* of the natural sciences and should be identified with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* which (as I understand it) is roughly translated as wisdom and judgment. David Laitin strongly criticizes this view, arguing that empathy and understanding of the narratives of actors can lead to serious errors in analysis if these are not combined with more conventional forms of social science method, especially statistical studies and formal models. He thus argues for what he calls a “tri-partite method” that combines these three ways of advancing knowledge of human affairs: narrative, statistical analysis, and formal modeling.

Required Reading:

*Bent Flyvbjerg. *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge 2001)

*David Laitin. “The Perestroika Challenge to Social Science”, *Politics & Society* vol.31:1, March 2003, pp. 163-184

David Laitin. “Comparative Politics: the state of the subdiscipline” in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner, eds. *Political Science: The State of the Discipline* (New York: Norton, 2002).

Session 10. *Topic to be selected in class from list below*

Session 11. *Topic to be selected in class from list below*

Session 12. *Topic to be selected in class from list below*

Possible Topics for sessions 10-12

A. Post-Modernism and Epistemological Relativism

Currently there are a variety of different intellectual currents that in different ways challenge the pretensions of “science.” Some sociologists and historians of science maintain that evidence and rational argument has little or no role in science. Some social constructivists argue that the sciences construct the world they purport to describe and that a change in science is ipso facto a change in the world. Deconstructionist views of science are extensions of a perspective in literary theory that emphasizes the role of the reader in the construction of the literary text. If one assimilates not only the words of scientific theories but their objects of science to texts, then deconstructions challenge the reality of the objects of science or argue that that reality results from the collaboration between the author and reader of scientific texts. Post-modernists challenge the privileged status of cognitive genre. In place of arbitrarily and unjustifiably privileged cognitive criteria, we must rely on performative criteria, so that the success (or “truth”) of a discourse is simply the degree to which it achieves agreement and support from members of the relevant community of experts. Rather than aiming at consensus, inquiry should aim at maximizing variety so as to keep science open to new ideas. Some leftists and some feminists discern a natural alliance between deconstructionism or postmodernism and a political challenge to the status quo. According to all of these positions, the view that science aims at discovering the truth about an independently existing world is hopelessly naive and politically repressive.

Required readings:

* Ted Benton and Ian Craib, *Philosophy of Social Science* (Palgrave, 2001). chapter 10. “Post-structuralism and post-modernism”, pp. 140-159.

*Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Impostures Intellectuelles*, ch.3.

The following three listings can be found on the internet at

<http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/index.html>:

Alan Sokal “A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies” and “Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword.”

Bruce Robbins, “Anatomy of a Hoax” with Sokal's reply.

Stanley Aronowitz, “Alan Sokal's ‘Transgression’” with Sokal's reply.

Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press, 1984, esp. sections 5, 7, 11, 13.

Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*. Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 341-44.

Optional readings:

Stanley Fish, "Professor Sokal's Bad Joke,"

<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~jwalsh/sokal/articles/fish-oped.html>

Alan Sokal's response to Fish is at:

<http://weber.u.washington.edu/~jwalsh/sokal/articles/sk12fish.html>

Steve Woolgar, *Science: The Very Idea*. London: Tavistock, 1988, pp. 53-69

Barbara Epstein, "Postmodernism and the Left", by Barbara Epstein (New Politics, Winter 1997)

at: <http://www.wilpaterson.edu/~newpol/issue22/epstei22.htm>

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton University Press, 1980), ch. VII, pp. 315-56.

B. Rational Choice Models

Although there is disagreement about how large a part explanation or prediction of individual behavior should play in the social sciences, almost everyone agrees that it should play some part. In everyday life, when we explain a person's actions, we cite the constraints, the agent's wants or goals, and the agent's beliefs. For example, in explaining why Clinton refused a particular request by Kenneth Starr, we would consider what alternatives were open to Clinton and offer hypotheses about what Clinton believed and wanted. Rational choice theory is an extension of this strategy. The influence of wants, goals, aversions and so forth is summarized in the notion of a preference ranking, which is assumed to satisfy certain rationality or consistency conditions. Choice is then rational if it is determined by preferences and beliefs. Phenomena apart from individual choices are explained as the consequences of individual choices. This is the explanatory strategy of economists, and in recent years it has made some headway in other disciplines, such as sociology and political science.

Rational choice theory is controversial in a number of regards: 1. Is its construal of rationality acceptable? 2. Are rational choice explanations too individualistic or not individualistic enough? 3. Do rational choice models depict individuals as selfish? 4. Are rational choice explanations empty or deceptive? Do they emphasize the wrong things and hide the influence of social factors?

Required readings:

*Dan Hausman and Michael McPherson, *Economic Analysis and Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 3 "Rationality" (pp. 27-37).

*James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 1-23.

George Homans, "Bringing Men Back In" in Alan Ryan's *Philosophy of Social Explanation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 50-64.

Jeffrey Friedman, "Economic Approaches to Politics," *Critical Review* 9(1-2) (1995): pp. 1-24.

Optional Readings:

Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, "Pathologies Revisited: Reflections on our Critics," *Critical Review* 9(1-2) (1995): pp. 235-76.

Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

Debra Satz and John Ferejohn, "Unification, Universalism, and Rational Choice Theory," *Critical Review* 9(1-2) (1995): pp. 71-84.

Debra Satz and John Ferejohn, "Rational Choice and Social Theory," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 71-87.

Dan Hausman, "Rational Choice and Social Theory: A Comment," *Journal of Philosophy* 92(1995): 473-90.

Martin Hollis and Robert Sugden, "Rationality in Action," *Mind* 102(1993): 1-35.

C. Structure and Agency

Discussions concerning methodological individualism and concerning rational choice models concern the relationship between structure and agency. Those who see individual innovation and choice as relatively unimportant to the reproduction and dynamics of societies will not be methodological individualists and will find that rational choice theories hide what really matters. But the general issue of the importance, nature, and role of agency and of the character and weight of social structure extends more widely. This is also a arena of meta-theory in which there is an almost constant "reinventing the wheel". Every few years someone introduces some new rhetoric to try to grapple with the problem of understanding how to conceptualize the fact that human beings, as social actors exist within social constraints/relations not of their choosing and yet they act and make choices which in one way or another affect those constraints/relations. It sometimes seems that these discussions never really go anywhere, and yet the problems persist because they are somehow central to the very idea of social science and social theory.

Core readings

*Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103:4, January 1998, pp.962-1023.

*William H Sewell, Jr. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation", *American Journal of Sociology*, 89:1 (July 1992): 1-29

Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (University of California Press, 1984), chapter 1, "Elements of the Theory of Structuration", pp. 1-34, especially pp.5-38

Margaret Archer, "Human Agency and Social Structure: A Critique of Giddens", in Jon Clark, Celia Modgil and Sohan Modgil (eds) *Anthony Giddens: Consensus and Controversy* (London: The Falmer Press, 1990).

*Marx: Preface to a Critique of Political Economy, Theses on Feuerbach

*excerpts from J.S. Mill, On Liberty

Optional readings:

Perry Anderson, "Agency", chapter 2, in *Arguments within English Marxism* (Verso, 1980), esp pp.16-25

Hans Joas, *On the Creativity of Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), Introduction and Chapter 3, "Situation, Corporeality, Sociality: The fundamentals of a theory of the creativity of action", pp. 1-6, 145-195.

D. Formal models

Social scientific theories often seem remote from the reality of every-day life. Complexities are ignored, oversimplified falsehoods are affirmed, and theories seem to live in worlds of their own, whose relevance to the real world seems questionable. One of the most frequently heard objections to a specific explanations in social science is "but things are much more complicated than that!" Many sociologists become especially skeptical when theoretical arguments are formalized in mathematical terms. The question, then, is how can such gross "simplifications" be justified? Is there a distinction between justified and unjustified simplifications? Is the central issue here simply one of pragmatics — the limitations of the human mind to grasp the full complexity of things, or is there a real principle at work that guides the simplifications inherent in abstractions?

Core readings:

*Steven Rappaport, *Models and Reality in Economics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998, pp. 102-110.

*Max Weber, "Objectivity and Understanding in Economics," in D. Hausman, ed. *The Philosophy of Economics: An Anthology*. Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 69-82.

*Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," pp. 3-43 of *Essays in Positive Economics* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953; rpt. in D. Hausman, ed. *The Philosophy of Economics: An Anthology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 180-213.

Optional readings:

D. Hausman, *The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics*. Cambridge University Press, 1992, ch. 12.

E. McMullin, "Galilean Idealization," *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 16 (1985).

Leszek Nowak, *The Structure of Idealization: Towards a Systematic Interpretation of the Maxian Idea of Science*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1980.

Nancy Cartwright, *Nature's Capacities and their Measurement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, ch. 5.

E. Functional Explanation

There are different strategies of explanation in social science, and it is important to be able to recognize their differences and characteristic strengths and weaknesses. One type of explanation that is quite controversial within social theory is "functional explanation." This used to be a quite standard way of explaining things in sociology, but has come into considerable disrepute, especially because of its association with Parsonsian structural-functionalism.

In the 1980s there was a renewed and quite lively discussion of functional explanation which attempted to give this form of explanation greater precision and legitimacy. The discussion revolved around an elaboration of the distinction between *intentional* and *functional* explanations. The former explain human behavior by reference to the intended consequences of actions, the latter by reference to actual consequences, or, put otherwise, by arguing from consequence to cause. In the readings for this session we will examine precisely what is entailed by a functional explanation and the potential relevance of such explanations for social science questions.

Required readings:

Arthur Stinchcombe, "Functional Causal Imagery," in *Constructing Social Theories*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp.80-101.

Jon Elster, "Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory: the case for methodological individualism", *Theory and Society*, 11:4, July 1982, pp. 453-482.

G.A. Cohen, "Reply to Elster on `Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory'", *Theory & Society*, 11:4, pp.483-496.

Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, "Explanation and Dialectics", pp.3-36

Optional readings:

Philippe van Parijs, "Functionalist Marxism Rehabilitated: a comment on Elster", *Theory and Society*, 11:4, pp.497-512

Johannes Berger and Claus Offe, "Functionalism vs. Rational Choice?: some questions concerning the rationality of choosing one or the other," *Theory & Society*, 11:4, pp.521-526

Jon Elster, "Cohen on Marx's Theory of History," *Political Studies*, XXVIII:1,(March, 1980), pp.121-128.

G.A. Cohen, "Functional Explanation: a reply to Elster," *Political Studies*, XXVIII:1 (March 1980), pp. 129-135.

G.A. Cohen, *KMTH*, chapter IX. "Functional Explanations: in general"

Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), chapter 1. "Perfect Rationality", pp.1-35.

Philippe Van Parijs, "Marxism's Central Puzzle" in Terrance Ball and James Farr (eds) *After Marx* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 88-104

James Noble, "Marxian Functionalism", in Ball and Farr, *ibid.*, pp. 105-120

F. Testing theories, adjudicating theories, reconstructing theories

While not minimizing the difficulties of testing or the resources for clinging to theories regardless of the findings of experiment and observation, we believe that the results of testing should be the final arbiter concerning what we should believe. Within such a perspective, testing is obviously one of the central topics in the methodology of the social sciences. It is also an immense topic ranging from complicated details concerning statistical and experimental techniques to general epistemological queries concerning the very notion of evidence. So we cannot go very deeply into the subject in a single class.

Core readings:

*D. Hausman, *The Inexact and Separate Science of Economics*, pp. 302-314.

*Ray Pawson “Against Variable Analysis,” and chapter 9, “Choosing class concepts: from indicator selection to adjudicating theories,” In *A Measure for Measures*, pp. 35-73 and 255-286.

Arthur Stinchcombe, “The Logic of Scientific Inference” in *Constructing Social Theories*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 15-27

Carl Hempel, *Philosophy of the Natural Sciences*, ch. 4, pp. 33-46.

Karl Popper, “Conjectures and Refutations”

G. Logics of theory construction in ethnography: grounded theory versus the extended case method

It is perhaps not surprising that ethnographic research (broadly understood) has become the site for especially vigorous debate over the problem of the relationship between theory and method, especially on the ways in which ethnographic data can contribute to the advancement of sociological theory. While these issues are equally relevant for other types of qualitative research as well as quantitative research, they have a particularly pressing character in ethnographic research because of a range of issues that make “positivist” sociologists sometimes skeptical of the “scientific” aspirations of ethnographic methods. In particular, large-N quantitative sociologists are often skeptical about the reliability and validity of the observations of ethnographers, since it is often nearly impossible to “check up” on many of their observations, and they are skeptical of the possibility of data from ethnography to be used to “test” hypotheses and advance theoretical understandings in significant ways. For these and other reasons, supporters of ethnographic methods have often been particularly concerned with defending the methods they use and elaborating the logic of the relationship between theoretical knowledge and the practical activities of observation.

Two different approaches on these issues seem especially interesting: grounded theory associated with the work of Glaser and Strauss, and the extended case method, associated especially with Burawoy. While there is no reason why a given researcher cannot mix these two together in the practical work of research, they have tended to be seen as alternatives. As a first approximation, the grounded theory approach stresses the way in which theory is constructed *inductively* through fine-grained observation in ethnographic field sites, whereas the extended case method stresses the ways in which field work is a continual process of testing and reconstructing theories which are brought to the site.

Required Reading:

*Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case method", *Sociological Theory* 16:1 March 1998

Jack Katz, "A Theory of Qualitative Methodology: the social system of analytic fieldwork," in Robert Emerson (ed), *Contemporary Field Research* (Little, Brown and Company, 1983)

Barney Glaser and Anselm Straus, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* (Aldine, 1967), excerpts TBA

Optional reading

Michael Burawoy, et. al. *Ethnography Unbound* (University of California Press, 1991), pp. 1-27, 271-287

Michael Burawoy, *Global Ethnography* (University of California Press, 2000), pp.1-40