Logics and Epistemology of Social Research

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The aim of this course is to learn how to do social science research. The focus is on research logics and epistemologies. The class will start with fundamentals of research – what is science and epistemology, what is reason or truth, what is the scientific method, and what is our responsibility as researchers. The course will then move to understanding the role of theory in research, and developing a vocabulary for the key parts of a research paper. This is followed by a few weeks focusing on specific methods. This list of methods is not for the purposes of learning technical how-to; rather, the aim is to explore the research logics and epistemological assumptions embedded in different methods. For example, event history is really about how processes unfold over time, while spatial analysis is about how processes can diffuse over space. Similarly, formal models are a way to think more abstractly about how we expect people to behave, and can be useful in hypothesis generation and model building. The readings will be exemplary readings to be read not for substantive content alone, but for unpacking how these papers work, and understanding their research logics. Throughout the class, students will use the readings to practically learn how to write a social science research question, craft an argument, reflect on the research process, and integrate the various elements of research (planning, data collection, linking theory and evidence).

The main learning goal is to understand the relationship between research question, methods, and academic literature. What is an effective research question? How do you find a good empirical case? How do you link question, method, and literature into a coherent research paper? These questions will be answered through lectures, class debate, practical application on class, deconstructing research papers, and work-shopping of student writing.

Assessment: Students will write a research paper, ideally linked to their masters topic, that allows them to work on all the key elements of social research – asking a question, framing hypotheses, evaluating alternative explanations, and using evidence. In week 5, students will write a one-page proposal for their final paper (10%). In week 7, students will submit a 5-7 page first draft (30%) of the 15-page final paper (50%). Class participation forms the final part of assessment (10%).

Weekly Schedule

1. Science, Ontology and Epistemology
2. Reason, Rationality, Truth and Scepticism – How and What do we Know?
3. Scientific Knowledge and Change – From Positivism to Constructivism and Relativism
4. Introduction to research papers, and what is theory
5. Qualitative Research: Interviews
6. Process tracing and counterfactuals: Mechanisms, clues, and evidence
7. Understanding Time: Event History Analysis
8. Understanding Space: Spatial thinking
9. Causation
10. Formal modelling
11. Mixed methods
12. The double problem of virtue and value

WEEK 1: Science, Ontology and Epistemology – September 5 – ML Salles-Djelic
Researchers produce a particular form of knowledge called science. We will get an overview in this session of the broad questions relative to the nature of that particular form of knowledge – with a specific focus on social sciences. This reflexivity on the nature of the knowledge we produce is never easy – but it is necessary. Our exploration of the notion of Science, of what it is and what it represents but also of the various forms it has taken through time implies that we question two fundamental notions – Ontology and epistemology. In what ways and in which sense do our scientific endeavours build upon different ontologies and epistemologies? Why should it matter for us as (future) social scientists?

Compulsory Readings:

- George Orwell. 1945. What is Science? *Tribune.* http://georgeorwellnovels.com/essays/what-is-science/
- Sheldon Gottlieb. 1997. What is Science? *The Harbinger.* http://www.theharbinger.org/articles/rel_sci/gottlieb.html

Supplementary Reading

- Kress, Paul. 1979. "Against Epistemology: Apostate Musings", *The Journal of Politics*, 41(2): 526-42
- Flax, Jane. 1981. "Why Epistemology Matters: A Reply to Kress", *The Journal of Politics*, 43(4): 1006-24.
- Philosophy Terms – Ontology: http://philosophyterms.com/ontology/

WEEK 2: Reason, Rationality, Truth and Scepticism – How and What do we Know? – September 14th (morning tbd) – ML Salles-Djelic
Reason and rationality are often associated with Science – in a way that even goes as far as to define what science is all about. In this session, we will explore and deconstruct those notions of "reason" and "rationality" – showing the complexity behind the apparent simplicity and familiarity of those words. We will question the strong dualist assumption that has framed scientific thinking ever since Descartes – and become familiar with the argument that a strict distinction between reason and emotions is in fact impossible. A parallel deconstruction exercise will be done with the notion of 'truth', allowing us to replace in a long philosophical debate current discussions about 'truth' and 'post-truth' eras.

Compulsory Readings (to be modified somewhat)

- Descartes. First Meditation. http://www.wright.edu/cola/descartes/
- Simon, Herbert (1985). Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology and Political Science. *The American Political Science Review*, 79(2): 293-304

Supplementary Readings:

- Damasio, Antonio (1994). Descartes' Error. Emotion, reason and the human brain. Avon Books, on-line at: https://bdgrdemocracy.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/descartes-error_antonio-damasio.pdf; read only: Introduction, pp. xi-xix, and chapter 11, pp. 245-252.
- Hirschman, Albert (1984). "Against Parsimony: Three Easy Ways of Complicating Some Categories of Economic Discourse". *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, 74(2)

- Prigogine, Ilya (1996). *Science, Reason and Passion*. Leonardo, 29(1).
- Skepticism – Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/?PHPSESSID=6114ef2913b3dd5ee970272cdb20dbd5

WEEK 3: Scientific Knowledge and Change – From Positivism to Constructivism and Relativism – September 19 – ML Salles-Djelic

Depending on our understanding of what science is, of what kind of endeavour we are engaged in as social scientists, of what type of knowledge we are producing, of the nature of the connection between the knowledge we produce and the world, we will have a quite different perspective on the way in which scientific knowledge changes. We will explore those debates that are still very intense today – and we will contrast two perspectives that are, epistemologically, at first sight irreconcilable: positivism and constructivism. Still, we will look into a possible "third ways".

Compulsory Readings:

- Kuhn, Thomas. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, extracts (particularly chapters 9, 10 and 11). https://projektintegracija.pravo.hr/_download/repository/Kuhn_Structure_of_Scientific_Revolutions.pdf
- Emrys Westacott, "Relativism: An Allegorical Elucidation", in *Philosophy Now*, 20, 1998
- Popper, Karl. 1959. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Chapter 1. Basic Books, pp. 27-34

Supplementary Reading:

- Dereck Phillips (1974). "Epistemology and the Sociology of Knowledge". *Theory and Society*, 1 (1974) 59-88 59
- Stedman-Jones, Susan (2012). "Forms of thought and forms of society: Durkheim and the question of the categories". *L'Année Sociologique.*

WEEK 4: THE DOUBLE PROBLEM OF VIRTUE AND VALUE – September 26 – ML Salles-Djelic

We are producing knowledge but this knowledge then goes "out there" and it is likely to have an impact. Many questions emerge from that – all of them are more or less related to the issue of "responsibility". Is there "bad" knowledge or only "bad uses" of a scientific knowledge that would be essentially neutral in axiological terms? How far are we responsible for the ways in which the knowledge we produce gets to be performed in the real world? Related questions are those that emerge from the social nature of the scientific endeavour. Science is a social activity like any other – with its hierarchies, organizations, financial needs, symbolic associations…. What is the impact of changing logics within this social realm on the knowledge we produce? Does it matter who finances science? Does it matter what kind of career structure or organizational set up frame our daily activities?

Compulsory Readings (to be modified):

- Allchin, D. 1989. "Values in Science, An Introduction."

Text based on Douglas Allchin, "Values in Science and in Science Education," in *International Handbook of Science Education*, B.J. Fraser and K.G. Tobin (eds.), 2:1083-1092, Kluwer Academic Publishers (1988).

- Paul Glenn (2004), "The Politics of Truth: Power in Nietzsche's Epistemology", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol.57(4): 575-83
- "Towards Common Principles for Social Science Research Ethics – A Discussion Document for the Academy of Social Sciences". June 2014. https://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethics-Final-Principles_16_06_2014.pdf

Supplementary Readings :

- Teller, Edward. 1998. "Science and Morality". http://www.sciencemag.org/content/280/5367/1200.full
- Harris, Sam. 2010. "Science can answer moral questions" http://www.ted.com/talks/sam_harris_science_can_show_what_s_right.html

WEEK 5: INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH PAPERS, AND WHAT IS THEORY – October 3rd – Sukriti Issae

- Holland, Alisha. The Distributive Politics of Enforcement. *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 00, No. 0, April 2014, Pp. 1–15.
- Howard S. Becker Interviewed by Harvey Molotch. 2012. *Public Culture,* 24 (2): 421-4431.
- Besbris, Max and Shamus Khan. 2017. Less theory. More description. *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 35(2) 147–153.
- Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss (1967), *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chapters 1 and 2, "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" and "Generating Theory")

WEEK 6: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: INTERVIEWS – October 10th – Sukriti Issar

- Becker, Howard. 1953. Becoming a Marijuana User. *American Journal of Sociology*, 59:3: 235-252.
- Lucas, Samuel R. 2014. Beyond the existence proof: ontological conditions, epistemological implications, and in-depth interview research. *Quality and Quantity*, 48 (1): 387-408.
- Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology*, 37(2), 153–171.
- Jerolmack, C., & Khan, S. (2014). Talk is Cheap: Ethnography and the Attitudinal Fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 43(2), 178–209.

WEEK 7: PROCESS TRACING AND COUNTERFACTUALS: MECHANISMS, CLUES, AND EVIDENCE – October 17th – Sukriti Issar

[1] http://howardsbecker.com/articles/HSB%20interview%20with%20HM.pdf

- Mahoney, James. 2012. The Logic of Process Tracing Tests in the Social Sciences. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 41(4) 570–597.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12: 2: 219-245.
- Brady, Henry E. 2010. "Data-Set Observations versus Causal-Process Observations: The 2000 U.S. Presidential Election." In *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry E. Brady and David Collier, 237–42. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

WEEK 8: EVENT HISTORY ANALYSIS – October 24th – Sukriti Issar

- Kroft, K., Lange, F., & Notowidigdo, M. J. 2013. Duration Dependence and Labor Market Conditions: Evidence from a Field Experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1123–1167.
- Christopher J. W. Zorn. 2000. Modeling Duration Dependence. *Political Analysis,* 8:3; 367-380.
- Blossfeld, H., & Hamerle, A. 1989. Unobserved heterogeneity in hazard rate models: a test and an illustration from a study of career mobility. *Quality and Quantity*, *23*, 129–141.
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., & Christopher J. W. Zorn. 2001. Duration Models and Proportional Hazards in Political Science, *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 45 (4): 972-988.
- Reher, D.S., Sandström, G., Sanz-Gimeno, A. et al. (2017). Agency in Fertility Decisions in Western Europe During the Demographic Transition: A Comparative Perspective. *Demography*, doi:10.1007/s13524-016-0536-0.

WEEK 9: SPATIAL ANALYSIS – November 7th – Sukriti Issar

- Logan, John R. 2012. Making a Place for Space: Spatial Thinking in Social Science. *Annual Review of Sociology* 38: 507-24.
- Morenoff, Jeffrey D. 2003. Neighborhood Mechanisms and the Spatial Dynamics of Birth Weight. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108 (5): 976–1017.

WEEK 10: CAUSATION – November 14th – Sukriti Issar

- Blossfeld, HP. & Rohwer, G. 1997. Causal inference, time and observation plans in the social sciences. *Quality & Quantity*, 31: 361–384
- Abbott, Andrew. 1998. The Causal Devolution. *Sociological Methods & Research*, Vol 27 (2): 148 – 181.
- Fouka, Vasiliki. 2015. Backlash: The Unintended Effects of Language Prohibition in US Schools after World War I. *Unpublished paper.*
- Posner, Daniel N. 2004. The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 98, (4): 529-545.
- Boustan, Leah Platt. 2012. School Desegregation and Urban Change: Evidence from City Boundaries. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics,* 4(1): 85–108.

WEEK 11: FORMAL MODELLING – November 21st – Sukriti Issar

- Brueckner, Jan K., and Harris Selod. 2009. A Theory of Urban Squatting and Land-Tenure Formalization in Developing Countries. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, Vol. 1:1, 28–51.
- To be added

WEEK 12: MIXED METHODS – November 28th – Sukriti Issar

- Desmond, Matthew. 2012. Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 118 (1): 88–133.
- Lieberman, Evan S. 2005. Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99 (3): 435-452.