Political Science 480/380: Scope of Political Science
Spring Semester 2014 * Monday 3:30-6:00 * Instructor: James Johnson

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This course is required of all first year students in the Ph.D. program. Any other students must have my permission to register. The course aims to provide a general road map of the discipline of political science and an interpretation of its aims. Since there is no hope of being comprehensive I make no pretension to being so. This course is decidedly not neutral - it aims to establish the central role of causal explanation in political science and it offers a specific interpretation of that enterprise. In particular I hope to persuade you that substantive research - whether it involves experiments, empirical observation, ethnographic inquiry, quantitative analysis, or mathematical modeling - remains incomplete unless it is conceptually well founded and theoretically informed. Toward this end we will examine a range of prominent examples of different “varieties” of social explanation from the perspective of the philosophy of science. And we will see that this is an area of enduring and intense controversy. I hope the course will provide some of the background that you need to reach defensible views on matters of explanation, methods, and theory in political science.

**Grading:**

**Participation:** The course will be run primarily as a seminar. Given the nature of the undertaking it is imperative that students be active participants in class. That means that I expect students not only to keep up with the reading, but also to read with care and to demonstrate this in class discussions. I encourage this effort in the following way. Each week, at the start of class, I ask one student (selected at random) to initiate and help direct the discussion for that day. This will require that she or he be able to summarize and raise critical questions about the major points of the assigned readings. Each student should anticipate being asked to do this more than once during the course of the semester but, as should be clear, you will receive no forewarning of when that will be.

The point of this scheme is that I expect all students to be active participants. I expect students to come to class prepared. That means that you should not only have done the assigned reading, you also should have thought about it, and have comments, criticisms, and so forth. Participation is important! The regularity of your participation and especially your willingness to stick your neck out in seminar discussion will constitute 10% of your grade for the course.

**Three Take-Home Writing Assignments:** The first two will be due in class on Weeks 6 and 12. The third is due on May 4th. Each will require that you write roughly ten to fifteen typed pages in response to one or more questions that I will distribute at the end of class on the preceding Monday. I will provide more specific instructions when I distribute the questions. Each of these...
assignments will account for 30% of your grade. I frown upon – and hence will penalize - late assignments. Fair warning.

NOTE: I actively discourage your using LaTeX for these assignments – your time is better spent learning how to think analytically and figuring out how to write coherently than wrestling with fancy typesetting. Among the things you don’t want to have said of you: “All fur coat, no knickers.”

**Academic Honesty**

You should be familiar with the College Policies on Academic Honesty. If you are not, the burden is on you to familiarize yourself with those policies. You can find relevant links on line here: [http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/](http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/). Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Over the past several years I have detected at least one student engaged in more or less egregious academic dishonesty in nearly every one of my courses. This is frustrating: such actions are unfair to other students in the class, and they demonstrate incredible disrespect for me as a teacher. Consequently, I have now a zero tolerance policy on cheating and plagiarism. If I suspect you have engaged in plagiarism or and other form of cheating I will immediately document my suspicion and report the matter to the Dean’s office. I have no interest in listening to any rationalizations, or worse, that you might offer. I will leave the matter up to the relevant deciders. The only thing worse than enduring disrespect is being asked to clean up the resulting mess. So the best way for you to avoid true unpleasantness on this score is to comply with the relevant policies and to do so scrupulously.

**Required Reading**

A list of assigned readings follows on subsequent pages. You will note that the reading load is quite (probably unreasonably) heavy. With one exception it does not take the form of pre-digested textbook presentations. I have *not* ordered books (marked *) through the University Bookstore since most students prefer to buy from one or another e-purveyor. (You ought to be able to find used copies of nearly all of these books on line.) Note: the vast majority of the journal articles are available online from the library (via e.g., JSTOR, etc). Jonathan & I will arrange to have those that you cannot readily access via the library available on Blackboard.

There is one book on the syllabus – Daniel Little’s *Varieties of Social Explanation* (Westview 1991) that we read part of nearly every week. You should also have a look at Dan’s blog *Understanding Society*, on which he updates many of the topics discussed in the book. If you are interested in such matters, it is very, very good: [http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/](http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/).

Most of you will have little or no background in philosophy of science. A very smart recent and brief introduction to the field is:

Week One ~ (January 19th) ~ No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

Because this reprieve tends to be a totally superficial gesture - a way for Americans to congratulate themselves on how far we’ve progressed toward racial justice by celebrating a sanitized version of Dr. King – I am assigning two texts that might complicate your view of what he advocated. His remarks offer an indication of how scant our political progress actually has been.

(1) “A Time to Break Silence” (1967)  
(2) “Address at Mass meeting at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple – Memphis” (1968)  
http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/primarydocuments/680318-000.pdf

These speeches are not “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “I Have a Dream,” or “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” – each a stirring statement of personal commitment and solidarity. These two speeches are less familiar and call not just for the extension of civil and political rights, but for fundamental political and economic transformation. In other words, they demand peace and social justice, accomplished by radical means. One could argue that demanding civil rights got Dr. King beaten and jailed, but demanding peace and economic justice got him killed.

Week Two ~ What is Scientific Explanation? (January 26th)

“Appendix: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science” pp. 281-329.  

Week Three ~ Understanding & Misunderstanding Causality (February 2nd)

Week Four ~ Rational Choice I (February 19th)

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*. Chapter 3.

Week Five ~ Interpretation & Ethnography (February 16th)

First Assignment Distributed

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*. Chapter 4.

Week Six ~ Science and its Uses (February 23rd)

First Assignment Due


**Week Seven ~ Functional & Structural Explanation? (March 2nd)**

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, Ch. 5,9


* Theda Skocpol. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge. [Selections]


**Week Eight ~ Spring Break – No Class (March 9th)**

**Week Nine ~ Statistical ‘Explanations’ (March 16th)**


**Week Ten ~ Experiments (March 23rd)**


Week Eleven ~ Data, Measurement and Conceptualization (March 30th)

Second Assignment Distributed


Week Twelve ~ Rational Choice II (April 6th)

Second Assignment Due


Week Thirteen ~ Pathological Debates (April 13th)


**Week Fourteen ~ Theories of Institutions and How We Assess Them (April 20th)**


**Week Fifteen ~ Power (April 27th)**


**Week Sixteen (May 4th) ~ No Class**

* Third Assignment Distributed

During the last decade a rising tide of expansion in the power and scope of the European Union despite public disengagement from critical policy choices. The growth of critical citizens is open to many explanations, explored.