

Approaches to the Study of Politics
POLS 620, Spring 2016
Th, 6:00-8:50pm Clark C349

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I. Course Introduction

The study of politics involves both the definition of a specific domain of study (“politics,” or “the political”) and a specification of the appropriate methods of inquiry that tell us what and how we can know anything about this domain (“science,” or “theory,” for instance). The process of defining this domain and specifying these methods, however, is both historical and contestable. In other words, it has changed over time and will (we must assume) change in the future, and it is subject to disagreement and contestation over what should count as appropriate methodology. This contestation is often hostile (or at least as hostile as academics can get), and it has high stakes (such as whether the National Science Foundation should fund political science research). In the background of this ongoing debate, moreover, is the crucial question of the proper relationship between political analysis and its “objects” of study, which in the case of political science also happen to be “subjects.” For instance consider the relationship between political science and democracy: are political scientists obligated to be partisans for democracy? Or are they motivated by values of objectivity and dispassionate analysis that have little to do with democracy? And what kind of democracy are we talking about anyway—liberal, radical, deliberative?

In this course we will explore some of these questions through exposure to the recent history of debates surrounding social science methodology and epistemology. We begin by examining broad questions within the philosophy of social science, such as “What constitutes a social fact?” “What counts as a good social theory?” and “How can progress be made in social science research (if at all)?” We will then narrow our focus to recent controversies within the discipline of political science and how these debates relate to the unsettled questions about social science epistemology.

Starting in the middle of the semester, we will shift direction once again, to explore a variety of intellectual approaches that have become influential for political analysis within the 20th and 21st centuries. These approaches include critical theory, feminist theory, posthumanism, new materialism, actor-network theory (ANT) and object oriented ontology (OOO). Each of these approaches should cause us to question certain assumptions within traditional social science epistemology, and to better see the historical and contested nature of our modes of investigation, analysis, and understanding.

II. Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:

Through this course, we should aim to:

- Become more conversant with the controversies and conversations about epistemology and methodology within social science and within political science in particular.
- Familiarize ourselves with a variety of critical perspectives on both the domain of politics and the methods of inquiry at our disposal as advanced students of political life.
- Gain a clearer sense of the current state of political science as a discipline, along with its recent historical development and the possibilities for its future evolution
- Achieve a deeper awareness of the unanswered (and quite possibly unanswerable) questions behind our collective search for political understanding.
- Refine our own research questions and methodologies through comparison with a wide variety of approaches to the study of politics.

III. Required Books

Mark Risjord, *Philosophy of Social Science: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge)
John Gunnell, *Social Inquiry After Wittgenstein and Kuhn* (Columbia)
Keith Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry* (Harvard)
Brian Epstein, *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences* (Oxford)
Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke)
Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* (Minnesota)
Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge)
Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford)

Note: Additional readings will be made available on electronic reserve through the CSU library; they will be indicated on the schedule by the notation **(ER)**. A few extra readings will be provided as pdfs to the class; these are marked by the notation ***

IV. Requirements and Grading:

1. **One 10-12 page paper** due Sunday, February 21st on Risjord, *Philosophy of Social Science*. The purpose of this paper will be to see how you can critically evaluate the general parameters of the philosophy of social science and begin to evaluate how these broad epistemological questions relate to your own research interests (20% of your grade)
2. **One 25-30 page paper** due Thursday, May 12th. In this paper you will select one of the approaches we will be discussing this semester and critically interrogate it. Your analysis can be theoretical, comparative, or it can be related to how this approach illuminates (or not!) an empirical issue or case that you find interesting. Beginning March 3rd, I will schedule conferences so we can discuss your paper topic. (40% of your grade)
3. **Participation.**
 - a. Each student is responsible for keeping up with the required reading for each week's seminar discussion. As a graduate seminar, the course will only succeed if everyone comes to class having completed the readings and prepared to discuss and critically interrogate the material.
 - b. In addition each student will be responsible for introducing the readings for three (3) class sessions (working in groups of 2-4 students). These presentations will entail a brief summary of the main points of the readings and their relation to previous readings and ideas discussed in class. Students responsible for introducing that week's discussion should review not only the required reading for each week but also the recommended reading listed in the course outline. Each presentation should include guiding questions for our discussion. Students should circulate in advance of the next seminar a handout that synthesizes the main arguments of the assigned texts and identifies key points for discussion. Details to follow. (40% of your grade)

V. Expectations for Outside Work

Students should expect to do at least 3 hours of outside work (reading, studying, etc) for each class hour.

VI. Academic Integrity:

This course adheres to the Academic Integrity Policy of the Colorado State University General Catalog and the Student Conduct Code. Colorado State University has long upheld values of academic and scholastic integrity. The General Catalog's "Policies and Guiding Principles" asserts that CSU "expects students to maintain standards of personal integrity that are in harmony with the educational goals of the institution" – citing "principles of academic honesty" as the first example. (1.6 Page 1).

VII. Course Outline:

January 21st - Introduction: What does it mean to be a political scientist?

Reading: Robert Keohane, "Political Science as a Vocation" (ER); Katy Harriger, "Political Science and the Work of Democracy," (ER); Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation" (ER);

January 28th - Overview of the Philosophy of Social Science

Required: Risjord, *Philosophy of Social Science* (all)

February 4th - Important Debates in Social Science: Popper and Kuhn

Reading: Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (selections) & "Normal Science and Its Dangers" (ER)
Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolution* & "Logic of Discovery or Psychology of Research" (***)

February 11th - Philosophy and Social Inquiry

Reading: Gunnell, *Social Inquiry After Wittgenstein and Kuhn* (all)

February 18th – The Objects of Social Inquiry

Reading: Epstein, *The Ant Trap* (all)

February 25th - Disciplinary Controversies I: Political Science as a Vocation

Reading: Topper, *The Disorder of Political Inquiry* (all)

March 3rd - Disciplinary Controversies II: Political Science That Matters

Reading: Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (all)
Flyvbjerg and Laitin debate in Schram, *Making Political Science Matter* (ER)

March 10th – Rethinking the Study of Politics I: Critical Theory

Reading: Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory****
Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" (ER)
Axel Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason: The Legacy of Critical Theory" (ER)

March 24th – No Class due to WPSA Conference

March 31st - Rethinking the Study of Politics II: Feminist Epistemologies

Reading: Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge*, chapters 1, 5 & 6 (ER)
Alcoff and Potter (editors), *Feminist Epistemologies*, chapters 1-5 (ER)

April 7th - Rethinking the Study of Politics III: Oppositional Consciousness/ Methodologies

Reading: Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed****

April 14th - Rethinking the Study of Politics IV: Posthumanism

Reading: Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, selected chapters (ER)
Haraway, *When Species Meet*, chapter 1 (ER)

April 21st - Rethinking the Study of Politics: V: New Materialism

Required: Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (all)

April 28th - Rethinking the Study of Politics VI: Actor-Network-Theory

Reading: Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (all)

May 5th – Rethinking the Study of Politics VII: Object Oriented Ontology

Reading: Morton, *Hyperobjects* (all)

May 12th - Research paper due at 6pm