

PhD in Political and Social Science

Short course

Current Approaches in the Epistemology of Social Science

Instructor

Daniela Giannetti

Aim of the course

The course aims to give a basic orientation in the epistemology of social science. The lectures will focus on epistemological issues and problems fundamental to social scientific explanation. We will address traditional questions of the scientific method about the kind of knowledge that social science should, or can, strive for. Then we will focus on the relationship between individual actors and larger social structures and the epistemological foundations of the rational choice approach that shaped social science research in recent decades.

Requirements and Assessment

Students are required to read and present book chapters or articles from the weekly reading list. Each week, a set of questions will be assigned based on the readings. Participants are expected to come to class after reading the material and preparing short answers to the questions. Students' presentations should highlight the main points of the assigned readings.

Grading

The final grade will be based on active participation in class activities.

Calendar

Week 1

28/4/2025

h. 2-5 pm

1 hour lecture + 2 hour presentations and discussion

What is epistemology, and why is the philosophy of social science important to study?

Required (General overview)

Rosenberg A. (2008) *What is the Philosophy of Social Science?* chapter 1 of *Philosophy of Social Science*, Westview Press.

Cartwright N. and Montuschi E. 2014 *Philosophy of Social Science. A New Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Introduction and Chapter 7.

Excerpts for students' presentations:

Popper K. (1959), *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* London Routledge pp. 1-34.

Popper, K. 1963. "Science: conjectures and refutations." In *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 33-39.

Kuhn, T. S. (1962; 1970 2nd edition) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edition). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp.1-23.

Lakatos, I. (1977) (edited with A. Musgrave) *Problems in the Philosophy of Science*, Amsterdam: North-Holland, pp. 20-27

Feyerabend P. (1975; 2010 4th edition) *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* N.Y. Verso Books pp. 9-39

week 2

5/5/2025

h. 2-6 p.m.

1 hour lecture + 3 hours presentations and discussion

Methodological individualism and the logic of scientific explanation

Articles for students' presentations

Hempel, C.G. (1942) "The Function of General Laws in History", *Journal of Philosophy* 39: 35-48, Reprinted in *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*.

Hedström, P. and P. Ylikoski. 2010. "Causal mechanisms in the social sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36: 49-64.

Douglas H. E. 2009. "Reintroducing Prediction to Explanation", *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 76, No. 4 pp. 444-463

Elster, Jon, 1982. "The Case for Methodological Individualism," *Theory and Society*, 11: 453-482.

Hodgson, Geoffrey M. 2007 "Meanings of Methodological Individualism", *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 14(2):211-226

List, C. and Spiekermann K., 2013. "Methodological Individualism and Holism in Political Science: A Reconciliation," *American Political Science Review*, 107: 629-642

Bates, Robert H., Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast 1999. *Analytic Narratives*, Princeton UP, Introduction, pp. 3-22.

week 3

12/5/2025

h. 2-5 p.m.

1 hour lecture + 2 hours presentation and discussion

The rational choice revolution in the social sciences

Required

Fiorina, M. "Rational Choice in Politics" *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2001, Pages 12760-12763

Hechter M. and S. Kazanawa 1997. "Sociological Rational Choice Theory", *Annual Review of Sociology* 7 23:191-214

Excerpts for students' presentations

Green Donald P. and Ian Shapiro J. 1994, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*, Yale UP. , Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Ferejohn John and Debra Satz Unification, Universalism, and Rational Choice Theory in Friedman J. E. 1996 *The rational choice controversy*, Yale UP, pp. 59-70.

Fiorina Morris P. Rational Choice, Empirical Contributions, and the Scientific Enterprise in Friedman J. E. 1996 *The rational choice controversy*, Yale UP, pp. 71-84.

Lohmann Susanne The Poverty of Green and Shapiro in Friedman J. E. 1996 *The rational choice controversy*, Yale UP, pp. 127-154.

Green Donald P. and Ian Shapiro Pathologies Revisited: Reflections on Our Critics in Friedman J. E. 1996 *The rational choice controversy*, Yale UP, pp. 127-154.
pp 235-276

Bibliography

All the material will be made available to the students on Dropbox. Other material will be suggested at the beginning of the course. Useful compendia include: Paul Humphreys (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Science*, Oxford UP 2014; Harold Kincaid (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Social Science* 2012; Daniel Steel and Francesco Guala (eds.), *The Philosophy of Social Science Reader* 2011.