COURSE TITLE:  Philosophy of Social Science

Course Co-ordinator:  Rebekah Sterling
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Location:   Department of Urban Studies, 27 Bute Gardens

Note: Contact details from 2003  Now out of date

Course Delivery

Term:      Term 2 (13 Jan – 21 March 2003)
Time and Location of Lectures:  Tuesday evenings, 5.30 pm - 6.30 pm; Lecture Theatre C 507, Boyd Orr Building
Time and Location of Tutorials:  Tuesday evenings, 6.30 pm - 7.30 pm; T206 (Group A), T217 (Group C) Adam Smith Building

NB: Tutorial group B has moved from room 208C has moved to Boyd Orr Room 506

Course Aims:
This course aims to introduce students to the main debates in the philosophy of social science. It will examine the philosophical foundations of the social sciences, explore the nature of scientific knowledge and the differences between the social and natural sciences and encourage students to consider how philosophical assumptions shape research practice.

Learning Outcomes
By the end of the course, students should be able to:
1. critically examine the debates regarding the scientific nature of social research
2. compare the ‘naturalist’ and interpretive perspectives, and assess whether they present conflicting goals for social research
3. explain the concepts of epistemology and ontology, and understand how particular epistemological and ontological perspectives influence methodology
4. reflect on the nature of the ‘social world’, as the object of study for the social sciences, and compare it to the ‘natural world’
5. discuss whether social scientists can achieve objective knowledge, and whether the natural sciences provide a model for objectivity in social research
6. construct a critical argument around one of the key areas of debate in the epistemology and/or ontology of the social sciences

Assessment
100% of the assessment will be in the form of a 3,500 – 5,000 word essay to be submitted by the 22nd April 2003. Essay topics and guidelines will be distributed at the beginning of term.

Teaching Staff
The course will be co-ordinated and lectured by Rebekah Sterling. Tutorial assistance will be drawn from the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences.
Course Summary
This course aims to introduce students to the main debates in the philosophy of social science. First, it will examine perspectives on the scientific character of the social sciences and debates around the nature of knowledge in the social sciences, focusing particularly on naturalist and interpretive accounts of social science. Then, it will explore in detail several problems around the nature of the social world, including the status of individualist vs. holistic accounts, the nature of human action and the assumption of rationality in human action. The challenges which these questions pose for explaining and understanding social phenomena will be explored, with particular reference to the role of laws, causes, reasons and meanings in the interpretation and explanation of human action. Finally, the course will return to two important epistemological questions: first, on what basis can social scientists have knowledge of other people and other cultures, and second, whether social science can claim to be an objective and value-free enterprise. The course will encourage students to critically examine the different philosophical perspectives which underlie various approaches to social science research, and to reflect particularly on how different philosophical assumptions may shape the methodology of their own research.

Reading
Key books for consultation:

There are many introductory texts on philosophy of social science available in the library, and the list below is not exhaustive. More extensive readings are suggested for each lecture in the course outline. The books in this list include overviews of the subject, addressing a number of the topics we will cover, along with anthologies (we will draw particularly from the Martin and McIntyre (1994) anthology). No single text exactly covers all the topics in the lectures, but those highlighted are recommended as core texts.

Books Recommended for Purchase:

Students are not required to purchase any specific book for this course. There is no single book which exactly covers all the topics in the lectures, and students are encouraged to read widely from the many books on philosophy of social science available in the library. However, if students wish to purchase a text, I would recommend that you compare the various introductory texts available in the library and choose one that you find accessible and interesting. Among the most readable are Fay (1996), Hollis (1994) and Williams and May (1996).

Other resources:


Useful Web Sites:

These links are for internet resources on philosophy in general, and not specifically philosophy of social science. They may be useful for those less familiar with philosophy or those who wish to explore the field in more depth. The usual caveats about internet resources apply: in particular, quality and depth of material published on the internet is variable, and so internet resources should in no way substitute for course readings.

Dictionaries and guides:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/

General philosophy: on-line guides

- Blackwell Publishers' Philosophy Resource Center http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/philos/
- Sean's One-Stop Philosophy Shop: http://www.cearley.com/philosophy/phil.html
Course Outline:

Lecture 1: 14 January  
Philosophical problems in the social sciences
Williams & May (1996), ch. 1  
Hollis (1994), ch. 1 **  
Martin & McIntyre (1994)
- Introduction, pp. xv-xxii **  
- Part I, particularly:
Rosenberg (1995), ch. 1  
Hughes & Sharrock (1997), ch. 1

Lecture 2: 21 January  
Naturalism & empiricism
Hollis (1994), ch. 3 & 4 (through p. 83), ch. 2 (optional)**  
Williams & May (1996), ch. 2 (through p.32) and 3 (through p. 59)**  
Hughes & Sharrock (1997), ch. 2-3**  
Benton, & Craib (2001), ch. 2-3  

Lecture 3: 28 January  
Interpretation and hermeneutics
Martin & McIntyre (1994), Part III, particularly:
Fay (1996), ch. 6-7  
Hollis (1994), ch. 7 & 9  
Rosenberg (1995), ch. 4  
Rabinow & Sullivan (1987, particularly pp. 1-30; 1979)  

Lecture 4: 4 February  
Challenges to scientific epistemology
Fay (1996), pp. 1-8, ch. 11
Weeks 5-10: special topics in the philosophy of social science (revised 10 February 2003)

Weeks 5-9 cover a number of special problems in the philosophy of social sciences. These lectures discuss special ontological questions (e.g., weeks 5 and 7), epistemological problems (e.g., weeks 8 and 9) as well as problems which are primarily about methodology (e.g., week 7) – about how we should best approach understanding and explanation – but which also involve some ontological or epistemological questions. Ontology, epistemology and methodology are not wholly separate, and so discussion of primarily ontological issues, for example, will also raise epistemological and methodological problems. Week 10 will be a review session to reiterate key themes of the course and to allow students to raise questions about specific topics or about assessment.

Lecture 5: 11 February  Individualism vs. holism
Social scientists study the human social environment. Should this social world be conceived in terms of individuals as its basic units, or rather should we try to understand behaviour by reference to ‘social facts’ — such as structures or social norms? To what extent are individuals conditioned and defined by their social environment and the scope for individual action and freedom? Can explanations of ‘social wholes’ be reduced to explanations of individual actions, or vice versa?

Fay (1996), ch. 2-3
Hollis (1994), ch. 1 (again), ch. 4-5
Martin & McIntyre (1994), Part VI, particularly:
Elster (1989), ch. 2, 12, 15

Additional suggested reading:

Lecture 6: 18 February  Explanation and understanding revisited? Laws, causes, reasons and meanings in human action
Explanation might be seen as the goal of naturalist social science, where as interpretivism poses a different goal of understanding. In what terms should explanation and understanding be conducted? What role should laws and causes play for explaining human action? Can reasons be causes? How do we make use of meanings to interpret social phenomena?

Hollis (1994), ch. 9
Martin & McIntyre (1994):
Lecture 7: 25 February  Rationality
Humans are often assumed to be rational beings, and many approaches to explaining and understanding human action rely on this assumption. How much can we rely on the assumption of rationality? What are the problems with this concept? If we explain by recourse to rationality, how do we account for the obvious irrationality of much human behaviour? How much does the process of (scientific?) research itself presuppose a certain conception of rationality?

Fay (1996), ch. 5
Martin & McIntyre (1994), part IV
Elster (1989), ch. 2-4
Hollis (1994), ch 6-7, 11

Lecture 8: 4 March  Understanding others
Fundamentally, social science is about trying to understand other people – their actions, beliefs, practices, etc. To what extent is knowing ‘other minds’ problematic? How can we have knowledge of what others think, of their reasons, meanings, values? Also, in diverse societies, to what extent can we understand people who are ‘other’, particularly where the researcher is an outsider in an unfamiliar set of meanings and institutions?

Fay (1996), ch. 1 & 4

Week 9: 11 March  Objectivity, values & relativism
Objectivity is said to be a hallmark of science – the concept implies value-neutrality as well as depicting the world as it actually is. Can the social sciences attain objective knowledge? What role do concepts, perceptions and values play in shaping our accounts of the world? If objectivity is inherently problematic, does this necessarily lead us to relativism? We will examine the positions...
of relativism and perspectivism, as well as possible alternative concepts to ‘objectivity’ such as reflectivity, intersubjectivity and accountability.

Fay (1996), ch. 10 & 4
Hollis (1994), ch 10-11
Martin & McIntyre (1994), part VII, particularly:
Williams & May (1996), ch. 5

Lecture 10: 18 March Review
This session will review the main topics and concepts covered in the course and will also provide an opportunity for students to pose questions about those topics or about the assignment.

DISCLAIMER: The outline and suggested readings may be subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class.

Problems
If you have any problems or queries about the course or the assignment, please speak to:

Rebekah Sterling
Office location: 27 Bute Gardens (Department of Urban Studies)
Consultation time: by appointment
Tel. for appointment: 0141 330 3150
E-mail: r.sterling@socsci.gla.ac.uk

Please contact me in advance by phone or email to arrange meetings, or via the Teaching Office at 27 Bute Gardens during office hours (9.30 am to 4.30pm). Special arrangements can be made for meetings outwith normal office hours.

Additional Contacts:
Dr Gwilym Pryce, Research Training Organiser
- General questions / problems about research training programme
- Queries regarding extensions
- 27 Bute Gardens, for appointment: 0141 330 4399 or 5493

Aileen Lindsay, Graduate School Secretary
- Submission of all assignments
- Notification of absences
- Social Sciences Faculty Office, Adam Smith Building, 0141 330 4725