

Seminar: Foundations of Political and Social Science – Philosophy and Theory

2nd Term, Academic Year 2024-2025

Mondays, 9.00-11.00 (Seminar Rooms 2 & 3, Badia Fiesolana)

First Seminar Session: 06.01.25

Last Seminar Session: 17.03.25

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Description

This seminar critically examines the conceptual scaffolding that stands behind all social science research: philosophy and theory. It begins – Part I - with six sessions on how we understand the social world we seek to study. As positivists? Critical realists? Interpretivists? Post-structuralists? In these first weeks, we will also explore the extensive philosophical literature behind that little thing upon which almost all of us rely: cause (☺). This broad philosophical focus allows us to see both the strengths and limitations of our preferred way of doing social science, as well as the pluses and minuses of the differing ways we understand cause (expected outcomes; counterfactual; manipulative) and operationalize/measure it (causal effects, causal mechanisms, local causation, constitutive causation).

Part II consists of four sessions on how we use theory to explain, understand, critique or normatively assess the world around us. But how do we develop theory? Deductively? Inductively? Abductively? Do we advance a new theory, starting from first principles? Or do we begin with existing theory, seeking to modify it? What role is there for normative theorizing in our empirical studies? Does sociology's grounded theory offer a toolkit for what many of us do in practice – going back and forth between deductive hunches and inductive discovery? Should your thesis be an exercise in theory testing or theory building? Which approach is better? How do you decide?

The seminar is worth 20 credits.

Learning Outcomes

- An understanding of the varying links among philosophy, cause, theory and empirical social science.
- On philosophy, an appreciation of recent developments, in particular, the stress on capturing the role of uncertainty and the move to relational ontologies: What do these portend for everything we 'do' in empirical social science?

- An understanding of science and pluralism in political and social science: What is the science in social science? What does pluralism get you? What are the trade-offs?
- Regarding theory, an appreciation of the differing ways in which it can be built, and the connection(s) between positive/problem-solving and normative theory.

Format

The class will be run as a seminar, where debate and discussion are the norm. For Sessions 2 - 10, response memos – prepared by 1-2 researchers for each session – will inform and guide our debates. At the beginning of each session, we will use these memos, as well as input from other seminar participants to craft a ‘bottom up’ agenda for that day’s topic and readings.

Syllabus

A full syllabus will be posted by 1 December 2024.