

Seminar: Philosophies of Social Science

2nd Term, Academic Year 2025-2026

Mondays, 9.00-11.00 (Seminar Room 3, Badia Fiesolana)

First Seminar Session: 05.01.26

Last Seminar Session: 09.03.26

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Description

This seminar critically examines the philosophical scaffolding that stands behind all social science research. It begins – Part I - with two sessions that define and operationalize key philosophical concepts (ontology, epistemology) and introduce the broad philosophical traditions – positivism, interpretism – upon which all social scientists draw. Here, we also consider the philosophical literature on pluralism, exploring if it means more than ‘doing mixed methods.’ In Part II, we devote two sessions to surveying the work of the scholars/philosophers (David Hume, Auguste Comte, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Juergen Habermas, Charles Taylor) that stands behind and informs much contemporary philosophy of social science.

Part III is the seminar’s core and includes four sessions where we explore how social scientists are operationalizing these philosophical traditions in contemporary debates over studying and accessing the social world. We consider the work of both sociologists (Mustafa Emirbayer, Charles Tilly) and political scientists (Patrick Jackson, Peter Katzenstein, Alexander Wendt, James Der Derian, Mark Bevir, Jason Blakely) on relationalism, uncertainty, anti-naturalism, philosophical ontologies, and quantum mechanical ontologies. In very different ways, all this recent work seeks to move social science beyond the Newtonian world view that has been so dominant over the past 100 years.

In Part IV, we conclude with two sessions that make the various philosophical debates more applied, by considering that little thing upon which many of us rely: cause. We start by surveying the philosophical/conceptual history that underpins our contemporary understandings (note the plural) of cause. This allows us to then see the pluses and minuses of the differing ways we understand cause (expected outcomes; counterfactual; manipulative) and operationalize/measure it (causal effects, causal mechanisms / social practices, local causation, constitutive causation).

The seminar is worth 20 credits.

Learning Outcomes

- On philosophy, an appreciation of both the classics and more 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 social science?

- An understanding of pluralism in political and social science: What does pluralism get you? What are the trade-offs?
- An understanding of the varying links among philosophy, cause, and empirical social science.

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.

Seminar Readings

Books to be read – mostly select chapters - include the following.

- Bevir, Mark and Jason Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- Box-Steffensmeier, Janet, Henry Brady and David Collier, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Coleman, James, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- della Porta, Donatella and Michael Keating, Editors, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Dépelteau, François, Editor, *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
- Der Derian, James and Alexander Wendt, Editors, *Quantum International Relations: A Human Science for World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
- Hollis, Martin, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Humphreys, Adam R. C. and Hidemi Suganami, *Causal Inquiry in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).
- Jackson, Patrick, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- Katzenstein, Peter, Editor, *Uncertainty and its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
- Kurki, Milja, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- Lebow, Richard Ned. *Reason and Cause: Social Science and the Social World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- Voparil, Chris, *Reconstructing Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the Classical Pragmatists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- Wendt, Alexander, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, Editors, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2014).

On the readings, some of the books above (and articles below) have a part of a title or a subtitle with phrases like ‘World Politics’ or ‘International Relations.’ Don’t worry! Their philosophical arguments are relevant across sub-fields and apply to both political science and sociology / analytic sociology.

Seminar readings are accessible in a variety of ways.

- Books & Chapters in Books: Most books are available electronically from the EUI Library. In the reading list below, these are indicated by **(E-Book)**. (The direct hyperlink to the book is always provided.)

- Difficult-to-Access Materials: This includes work-in-progress and books/chapters only available in paper format. These will be uploaded to the seminar [Brightspace page](#), and are indicated by ([Brightspace](#)) on the syllabus.
- Journal Articles: These are easily obtained electronically through the EUI Library.

If you encounter any problems accessing seminar readings, please contact Pia Dittmar.

Requirements

There are two requirements.

- Seminar Participation: This is a PhD seminar, and your active participation on a regular, weekly basis is mandatory. I cannot stress enough the (pedagogic) importance of this requirement.
- Response Memos: Each researcher must prepare two response memos, choosing from the topics and readings covered in two of the nine available sessions (2 – 10). Each memo should be three pages (double-spaced); it should assess, critique and raise questions on one or more of the readings for a given week.

The memos should be circulated by 12.00/noon on the Friday before our Monday meeting. These memos will then guide and structure our discussions.

To pass the seminar, you must participate actively and prepare two response memos.

Schedule

Part I – Philosophies of Social Science: Concepts and Traditions

- **Session 1** (5 January) – Philosophies of Social Science: Thinking Philosophically
- **Session 2** (12 January) – Philosophical Starting Points / Traditions

Part II – Philosophies of Social Science: Classical Writings

- **Session 3** (19 January) – Interpretism, Hermeneutics, Frankfurt School
- **Session 4** (26 January) – Pragmatism, Positivism

Part III – Philosophies of Social Science: Contemporary Applications

- **Session 5** (2 February) – Interpretism, Humanism, Pluralism
- **Session 6** (9 February) – Philosophical Ontologies
- **Session 7** (16 February) – Relational Ontologies I: Moving Beyond Newtonianism
- **Session 8** (23 February) – Relational Ontologies II: The Social World as Quantum Mechanical

Part IV – Philosophy and Cause: History, Conceptualizations, Debates

- **Session 9** (2 March) – Causation I: Philosophical/Conceptual History and Controversies
- **Session 10** (9 March) - Causation II: Contemporary Understandings and Debates

Seminar Topics & Readings

Part I – Philosophies of Social Science: Concepts and Traditions

Session 1: Philosophies of Social Science – Thinking Philosophically

della Porta, Donatella and Michael Keating, Editors, *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) – Chapter 2. ([E-Book](#))

Bevir, Mark, “Meta-Methodology: Clearing the Underbrush,” in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady and David Collier, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) – Chapter 3. ([E-Book](#))

Hollis, Martin, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Jackson, Patrick, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2016) – Chapters 1, 2. ([E-Book](#))

Ludwig, David and Stéphanie Ruphy, "[Scientific Pluralism](#)", in Edward N. Zalta, Editor, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Department of Philosophy, Stanford University, Winter 2021) (Accessed 21.11.25).

Session 2: Philosophical Starting Points / Traditions

Positivism/Neo-Positivism

Hollis, Martin, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) – Chapter 3. ([E-Book](#))

Howell, Kerry, “Empiricism, Positivism and Post-Positivism,” in Howell, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Methodology* (London: Sage Publications, 2013) – Chapter 3. ([E-Book](#))

Interpretism

Yanow, Dvora, “Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences,” in Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, Editors, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2014) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Yanow, Dvora and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, “Doing Social Science in a Humanistic Manner,” in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, Editors, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2014) – Chapter 25. ([E-Book](#))

Part II – Philosophies of Social Science: Classical Writings

Session 3: Interpretism, Hermeneutics, Frankfurt School

Taylor, Charles. “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” in Taylor, *Philosophical Papers, Volume 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Sherratt, Yvonne, *Continental Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) – Introduction, Chapter 5 (“Continental Philosophical Hermeneutics Post War”), Chapter 11 (“Innovations in Critical Theory: Adorno and Habermas”). ([E-Book](#))

Session 4: Pragmatism, Positivism

Voparil, Chris, *Reconstructing Pragmatism: Richard Rorty and the Classical Pragmatists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) – Chapter 1 (“Rorty and Peirce: Pragmatism, Realism, and the

Practice of Inquiry”), Chapter 3 (“Rorty and Dewey: Pragmatist Philosophy as Cultural Criticism”). ([E-Book](#))

Coleman, James, “Metatheory: Explanation in Social Science,” in Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Jackson, Patrick, “Neopositivism,” in Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2016) – Chapter 3. ([E-Book](#))

Part III – Philosophies of Social Science: Contemporary Applications

Session 5: Interpretism, Humanism, Pluralism

Bevir, Mark and Jason Blakely, *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) – Chapters 1-5. ([E-Book](#))

Kurki, Milja, “Relationality, Post-Newtonian International Relations, and Worldviews,” in Peter J. Katzenstein, Editor, *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) – Chapter 3. ([E-Book](#))

Simmons, Erica and Nicholas Rush Smith, Editors, *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Simmons, Erica and Nicholas Rush Smith, “How Cases Speak to One Another: Using Translation to Rethink Generalization in Political Science Research,” *American Political Science Review* First View (2 April 2025). doi: 10.1017/S0003055425000140.¹

Session 6: Philosophical Ontologies

Jackson, Patrick, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics, Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2016) – Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7. ([E-Book](#))

Session 7: Relational Ontologies I - Moving Beyond Newtonianism

Papilloud, Christian, “Bruno Latour and Relational Sociology,” in François Dépelteau, Editor, *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) – pp.183-97. ([E-Book](#))

Emirbayer, Mustafa, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 103/2 (1997): 281-317.

Demetriou, Chares, “Charles Tilly and Relational Sociology,” in François Dépelteau, Editor, *The Palgrave Handbook of Relational Sociology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) - pp.307–324. ([E-Book](#))

Jackson, Patrick and Daniel Nexon, “Relations Before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 5/3 (1999): 291-332.

Katzenstein, Peter J., Editor, *Uncertainty and its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

¹ The Simmons and Rush Smith article comes from a larger project, *Rethinking Generalization*, which will be published by Cambridge University Press in the summer/fall of 2026. Rush Smith will be at SPS for a few days in mid-April 2026, helping teach the Söderberg/Checkel third-term workshop, ‘Putting Social Science in Motion: Tracing, Following and Beyond.’

Session 8: Relational Ontologies II - The Social World as Quantum Mechanical

Wendt, Alexander, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) – Chapters 1, 3, 13, 14. ([E-Book](#))

Erskine, Toni, Stefano Guzzini and David Welch, Editors, “Book Symposium: Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology*,” *International Theory* 14/1 (2022): 115-209.

Der Derian, James and Alexander Wendt, Editors, *Quantum International Relations: A Human Science for World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) – Chapter 1. ([E-Book](#))

Murphy, Michael, “On Quantum Social Theory and Critical International Relations,” in James Der Derian and Alexander Wendt, Editors, *Quantum International Relations: A Human Science for World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) – Chapter 12. ([E-Book](#))

Part IV – Philosophy and Cause: History, Conceptualizations, Debates

Session 9: Causation I – Philosophical/Conceptual History and Controversies

Lebow, Richard Ned, *Reason and Cause: Social Science and the Social World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) – Chapter 1 (“Reason and Cause”) and Chapter 4 (“David Hume”). ([E-Book](#))

Kurki, Milja, *Causation in International Relations: Reclaiming Causal Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) – Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6. ([E-Book](#))

Humphreys, Adam R. C. and Hidemi Suganami, *Causal Inquiry in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024) – Chapters 1, 2, 3. ([E-Book](#))

Session 10: Causation II – Contemporary Understandings and Debates

Brady, Henry, “Causation and Explanation in Social Science,” in Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady and David Collier, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) – Chapter 10. ([E-Book](#))

Hedström, Peter and Petri Ylikoski, “Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 49–67.

Hedström, Peter, “Studying Mechanisms to Strengthen Causal Inferences in Quantitative Research,” in Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Henry Brady, and David Collier, Editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) – Chapter 13. ([E-Book](#))

Norman, Ludvig and Derek Beach, “Rethinking the Fundamental Problem of Causal inference in Political Science: Why It is Not a Fundamental Problem but a Methodological Choice,” Working Paper: University of Stockholm and Aarhus University (7 February 2024). ([Brightspace](#))

Jenkins, Jeffery, Nolan McCarty and Charles Stewart III, “Learning from Each Other: Causal Inference and American Political Development,” *Public Choice* 185/3-4 (2020): 245-251.

Quantum Information Lab, “[Quantum Causality](#),” Department of Physics, University of Rome (Accessed 21.11.25).