DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

1st and 2nd Term Academic Year 2026-2027

Reading Course on Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons

Time and Place: Thursday 15:00-17:00, Seminar Room 2 (*biweekly*), Seminar Room 4 (only sessions on 29/10 and 12/11), Seminar Room Mansarda, Villa Schifanoia (on 16/10 at 11:00-13:00)

Given by: Professor Waltraud Schelkle
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The title of this reading course is taken from a slim book of the same title, written by Charles Tilly (1984). It clearly formulated what researchers in the beginning of the social sciences were interested in. Today, this comes across as a provocation of trying the impossible. This course encourages researchers to think big without abandoning their rigorous contemporary training. Participants may take it because they are interested in general education as social scientists. It contains classic readings, underestimated classics and future classics. It is actually of direct interest for those whose research touches on the evolution of modern polities, from the nation-state to the democratic welfare state and the EU as a transnational political system. Whatever the motivation, the course tries to demonstrate that engaging with grand debates, empirical research on well-specified research questions becomes more interesting and relevant.

The seminars offer participants to read important books thoroughly. This means to reconstruct the original research problem that made the author take on such a Herculean task and how they solved or transformed it into a more researchable question. We study the research design with which they tackled it and whether we can learn anything from it still. And we learn how one could make such a classic relevant for research today by drawing the lineage to one's own research, in support of it or as a challenge. By taking this course, researchers will not only get to know some of the important books in this field of research on state-formation but also learn how to situate their own research in the debate of fundamental questions in political science.

Learning Outcomes: Learn to identify research designs and methodologies that can be applied to solve wide-ranging research problems. Learn from key examples how to parse the literature and develop a rationale and justification for a dissertation puzzle. Understand different explanations for state building and polity formation in history and how they can inform contemporary research on sovereignty, state authority and solidarity.

Requirements:
Regular requirement: For weeks 3-8, seminar participants must upload a response paper to the reading (1-2 pages): what struck you most about the book and what would you like to discuss? This is due 48 hours before the seminar (by 11:00 on every second Tuesday).
Project: Write a literature review on a book of your choice (it can be one we read in this course), with particular attention to how it uses comparative historical analysis to enrich a contemporary debate, ideally one that is related to your research. It should have between 1,500-2,000 words and be publishable in a political science journal.

1 October, 2026
The power of historical comparison: situating your research in grand debates
Tilly, Charles (1984), *Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation).

16 October, 2026 – Seminar Room Mansarda, Villa Schifanoia at 11:00-13:00
Advances in comparative-historical analysis
Grzymała-Busse, Anna (2011), 'Time Will Tell? Temporality and the Analysis of Causal Mechanisms and Processes', *Comparative Political Studies,* 44 (9), 1267 –97.
Thelen, Kathleen and Mahoney, James (2015), 'Comparative-historical analysis in contemporary political science', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis* (Strategies for Social Inquiry; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 3-36.

29 October, 2026
Big Structures (1): **The bellicist theory of European state formation**
Tilly, Charles (1992), *Coercion, capital, and European states, AD 990-1992* (Studies in social discontinuity; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell). [6 hard copies available]

12 November, 2026
Big Structures (2): **The transnational power of the church and European state formation**
Grzymała-Busse, Anna Maria (2023), *Sacred foundations: the religious and medieval roots of the European state* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

26 November, 2026
Large Processes (1): **Transnational polity-building to end war in Europe**
Milward, Alan S. (2000), *The European rescue of the nation-state* (2nd ed.; London, New York: Routledge).

Winter break: Please consider a book of your choice and submit a proposal by 8 January 2027 with a short nomination pitch (150-200 words); we decide in the first seminar of 2027, if necessary by secret vote. The book is due to be read for the seminar on 18 February.

7 January, 2027
Large Processes (2): **Governing common pool resources**
Ostrom, Elinor (2015; 1990), *Governing the commons: the evolution of institutions for collective action* (Canto classics ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

21 January, 2027
Huge Comparisons (1): **Three revolutions that defined secular modernity**
Skocpol, Theda (1979), *States and social revolutions: a comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press).

4 February, 2027
Huge Comparisons (2): **Political processes that made European welfare states**
Baldwin, Peter (1990), *The politics of social solidarity: class bases of the European welfare state, 1875-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

18 February, 2027
A book of your collective choice
As chosen in the first seminar of 2027.

4 March, 2027
Literature review presentations and final discussion: how can you situate your specific research in the grand debates of political science?