Political Science 380/480: Scope of Political Science
Spring Semester 2013 * Monday 4:50-7:30 * Instructor: James Johnson

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This course is required of all first year students in the Ph.D. program. All other students
must have my permission to register. The course aims to provide a general road map of the
discipline of political science and an interpretation of its aims. Since there is no hope of being
comprehensive I make no pretension to being so. This course is decidedly not neutral - it aims to
establish the central role of causal explanation in political science and it offers a specific
interpretation of that enterprise. In particular I hope to persuade you that substantive research -
whether it involves experiments, empirical observation, ethnographic inquiry, quantitative
analysis, or mathematical modeling - remains incomplete unless it is conceptually well founded
and theoretically informed. Toward this end we will examine a range of prominent examples of
different “varieties” of social explanation from the perspective of the philosophy of science. And
we will see that this is an area of enduring and intense controversy. I hope the course will
provide some of the background that you need to reach defensible views on matters of
explanation, methods, and theory in political science.

Grading: The course combines some lecture with seminar discussion. I prefer to lecture less and
argue more. I expect all students to be active participants. I expect students to come to class
prepared. That means that you should not only have done the assigned reading, you also should
have thought about it, and have comments, criticisms, and so forth. I will describe my plan for
inducing something like equilibrium levels of preparation in class on the first day. Participation
is important! The regularity of your participation and especially your willingness to stick your
neck out in seminar discussion will constitute 10% of your grade for the course.

The remainder of your grade will reflect your performance on a series of written assignments.
These will be of two sorts:

Regular Short Papers: Over the course of the term each student must submit 5 short papers that
address in a critical way some aspect of or problem with the assigned reading. These papers are
due in class on the day that the relevant reading has been assigned and I will not accept them at
any other time. They may be no more than three typed pages long. Your performance on these
papers will account for 30% of your grade for the course. You can write on whichever topics you
like (or that interfere least with your other commitments) but should scatter these papers over the
course of the term. To insure that you do not wait until the final weeks of the term I expect each
of you to submit at least two of these assignments prior to week six.

Two Longer Assignments: These will be due in class on Weeks 7 and 15. Each will require that
you write roughly ten to fifteen typed pages in response to one or more questions that I will
distribute at the end of class on the preceding Tuesday. I will provide more specific instructions
when I distribute the questions. Each of these assignments will account for 30% of your grade. I frown upon late assignments. Fair warning.

NOTE: I actively discourage your using LaTeX for course assignments – your time is better spent learning how to think analytically and figuring out how to write coherently than messing around with fancy typesetting. Among the things you don’t want to have said of you: “All fur coat, no knickers.”

Class Format: The course will be run primarily as a seminar. Given the nature of the undertaking it is imperative that students be active participants in class. That means that I expect students not only to keep up with the reading, but also to read with care and to demonstrate this in class discussions. I encourage this effort in the following way. Each week, at the start of class, I ask one student (selected at random) to initiate and help direct the discussion for that day. This will require that she or he be able to summarize and raise critical questions about the major points of the assigned readings. Each student should anticipate being asked to do this more than once during the course of the semester but, as should be clear, you will receive no forewarning of when that will be.

Required Reading

A list of assigned readings follows on subsequent pages. You will note that the reading load is quite (probably unreasonably) heavy. With one exception it does not take the form of pre-digested textbook presentations. I have not ordered books (marked *) through the University Bookstore since most students prefer to buy from one or another e-purveyor. (You ought to be able to find used copies of nearly all of these books on line.) Note: the vast majority of the journal articles are available online from the library (via e.g., JSTOR, etc). Svanhildur & I will arrange to have those that you cannot readily access via the library not available on Blackboard.

Week One ~ (January 21st)

No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday

Week Two ~ Scientific Explanation (January 28th)

“Appendix: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science” pp. 281-329.
Week Three ~ Understanding & Misunderstanding Causality (February 4th)


Week Four ~ Experiments (February 11th)


Week Five ~ Rational Choice I (February 18th)

Little, Varieties of Social Explanation. Chapter 3.

Week Six ~ Interpretation & Ethnography (February 25th)

Little, Varieties of Social Explanation. Chapter 4.

**Week Seven ~ Functional & Structural Explanation? (March 4th)**

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, Ch. 5,9
* Theda Skocpol. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge. [Selections]

**Week Eight ~ Spring Break – No Class (March 11th)**

**Week Nine ~ Statistical ‘Explanations’ (March 18th)**
First Assignment Distributed


**Week Ten ~ No Class (March 25th)**
First Assignment Due

**Week Eleven ~ Data, Measurement and Conceptualization (April 1st)**


Week Twelve ~ Rational Choice II (April 8th)


Week Thirteen ~ Pathological Debates (April 15th)


Week Fourteen ~ Theories of Institutions and How We Assess Them (April 22nd)


**Week Fifteen ~ Power (April 29th)**

**Second Assignment Distributed**

Andrew Hindmoor & Josh McGeechan. 2012. “Luck, Systematic Luck and Business Power: Lucky All the Way Down or Trying Hard to get What it Wants without Trying?” *Political Studies.* (Forthcoming)

**Week Sixteen (May 6th) ~ No Class**

**Second Assignment Due** — My Office, 5:00 pm.