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 20% 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 25% of your grade. I frown upon late assignments. Fair warning.
Class Organization: In Monty Python & the Holy Grail there is a famous scene where King Arthur engages in heated debate over the notion of sovereignty with a handful of very contentious, muddy peasants. The peasants announce that they belong to an “autonomous collective,” a “self-governing anarcho-syndicalist commune” and so have little regard for the pretenses of centralized monarchical authority. I find their arguments persuasive. (See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Xd_zkMEgkI if you are unfamiliar with this canonical argument.) This course will operate in much the same way as that scene. Think of me as King Arthur; think of yourselves as the contentious peasants. That means you will need to act as a self-governing collective. Each week you students will “take it in turns” (by some method of your own devising) to insure the availability for the following week of any of the relevant reading materials not available via e-journals from the library. This will require that the chosen ones ascertain which readings are not easily available on the web, obtain those readings from me, copy them (at my expense), and make sure that they are placed on electronic reserve at Rush Rhees Library.

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 this and 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). Those that are not will be made available via the process I described above.

Week One - Scientific Explanation (January 23rd )

 Appendex: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science” pp. 281-329.
Week Two - Understanding & Misunderstanding Causality (January 30th)


Week Three - Experiments (February 6th)


Week Four - Rational Choice I (February 13th)

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*. Chapter 3.

Week Five – Interpretation & Ethnography (February 20th)

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*. Chapter 4.

**Week Six - Functionalism (February 27th)**

**First Assignment Distributed**

Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, Ch. 5.

**Week Seven - Structural Explanation (March 5th)**

**First Assignment Due**

* Theda Skocpol. 1979. *States and Social Revolutions*. Cambridge.

**Week Eight - Spring Break – No Class (March 12th)**

**Week Nine – Statistical ‘Explanations’ (March 19th)**

**Week Ten – Data, Measurement and Conceptualization (March 26th)**

Gretchen Helmke. “Interbranch Conflict in Latin America” (unpublished manuscript).

**Week Eleven – Rational Choice II (April 2nd)**


**Week Twelve - Pathological Debates (April 9th)**


**Week Thirteen - Theories of Institutions and How We Assess Them (April 16th)**


**Week Fourteen - Power (April 23rd)**


**Week Fifteen - Social Constructionism (April 30th)**

Second Assignment Distributed.


**Week Sixteen (May 3rd) – No Class**

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