This course is required of all first year students in the Ph.D. program. Any 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:**

**Participation:** 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.

The point of this scheme is that 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. 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.

**Please Note:** My policy on electronic devices in class (meaning any screen connected to silicon chips) is restrictive. No cell phones, laptops or tablets in class! This will eliminate the temptation to do things other than contribute to discussion. If you have readings, notes etc on your device, download them for reference prior to class.
Three Take-Home Writing Assignments: The first two will be due in class on Weeks 8 and 12. The third is due on December 15th. 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.

Please Note: I frown upon late assignments – and hence will penalize them at a rate of one third of a letter grade per day. (That means if you would normally have made a B+, one day late makes that a B, two days a B-, and so forth.) Fair warning.

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

Academic Honesty: You should be familiar with the College Policies on Academic Honesty. If you are not, the burden is on you to familiarize yourself with those policies. You can find relevant links on line here: http://www.rochester.edu/college/honesty/. Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Over the past several years I have detected at least one student engaged in more or less egregious academic dishonesty in nearly every one of my courses. This is frustrating: such actions are unfair to other students in the class, and they demonstrate incredible disrespect for me as a teacher. Consequently, I have now a zero tolerance policy on cheating and plagiarism. If I suspect you have engaged in plagiarism or any other form of cheating I will immediately document my suspicion and report the matter to the Dean’s office. I have no interest in listening to any rationalizations (or worse) that you might offer. I will leave the matter up to the relevant deciders. The only thing worse than enduring disrespect is being asked to clean up the resulting mess. So the best way for you to avoid true unpleasantness on this score is to comply with the relevant policies and to do so scrupulously. If you have any question as to whether something is “allowed” while doing an assignment let your default rule be to ask Barbara or myself.

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.) Barbara and I will arrange to have the other readings available on Blackboard.

There is one book on the syllabus – Daniel Little’s Varieties of Social Explanation (Westview 1991) that we read part of nearly every week.

You should also have a look at Dan’s blog Understanding Society, on which he updates many of the topics discussed in the book. If you are interested in such matters, it is very, very good: http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/.
**Background Reading - Recommendations:** Most of you will have little or no background in philosophy of science. A very smart recent and brief introduction to the field is:


On philosophy of social science more specifically see:


**Week One ~ Introductions (September 1st)**

**Week Two ~ What is Scientific Explanation? (September 8th)**

  “Appendix: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science” pp. 281-329.

**Week Three ~ Understanding & Misunderstanding Causality (September 15th)**


**Week Four ~ Rational Choice I (September 22nd)**

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

**Week Five ~ Interpretation & Ethnography (September 29th)**

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

**Week Six ~ Fall Break: No Class (October 6th)**

**Week Seven Science and its Uses (October 13th)**

*First Assignment Distributed*

Week Eight ~ Functional & Structural Explanation? (October 20th)

First Assignment Due

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

Week Nine ~ Statistical ‘Explanations’ (October 27th)


Week Ten ~ Experiments (November 3rd)


Week Eleven ~ Data, Measurement, and Conceptualization (November 10th)

Second Assignment Distributed


Week Twelve ~ Rational Choice II (November 17th)

**Second Assignment Due**


Week Thirteen ~ Pathological Debates (November 24th)


**Week Fourteen ~ Theories of Institutions and How We Assess Them (December 1st)**


**Week Fifteen ~ Power (December 8th)**


**Week Sixteen (December 15th) ~ No Class**  Third Assignment Distributed – My In Box - 5:00 pm.