Course Code & Title: LISS003 Philosophy of the Social Sciences

Convenor(s): Dr Caitlin Patrick, LISS DTP Manager

Institution: King’s College London  
Department: Various

Academic Year: 2018-19  
Term: Autumn

Number of Sessions: 7

Research Platform: Core Training & Methods

Length of Session(s): 1 hour lecture/seminar, with time for questions

Dates: Start : End  
Room location:

- Thursday 18 October 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Thursday 25 October 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Thursday 1 November 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Thursday 8 November 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Thursday 15 November 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Thursday 22 November 2018 15:00 – 17:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH
- Friday 30 November 2018 10:00 – 12:00  
Franklin-Wilkins Building, KCL, SE1 9NH

Enrolment Link: (You will be asked to log into SkillsForge)

Course Description: This course is part of LISS DTP’s five-part core training in social sciences, Methods in the Social Sciences programme. It is designed to introduce students to key theoretical debates about the nature, purpose and practice of the social sciences. Students will be introduced to a range of philosophical approaches to understanding social scientific knowledge, from positivism and empiricism, to hermeneutics, Marxism, critical theory and feminism, to poststructuralism. These sessions will:

- Help students to understand and evaluate a range of philosophical approaches to social science and recognise the two-way traffic between their own particular discipline and wider currents in social theory.
- Encourage students to appreciate the significance of epistemological reflection for the actual practice of research in the social sciences.

Course Outline:

18 OCTOBER 2018, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Introduction- what is Social Science? 
Dr Gerard Lum, School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London

We begin this introductory lecture by asking why philosophy of social science, by looking at the kind of questions asked by the philosophy of social science and considering how those questions – and their possible answers – ultimately can be seen to shape the activity of social science. Along the way we examine the important tension between structure and agency, the problem of causation, and ask what it is that demarcates science from non-science and social science from natural science.
Recommended readings:


Supplementary readings:


25 OCTOBER 2018, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Empiricist & Positivist Social Science
Dr Roberto Fumagalli, Department of Political Economy, King’s College London

This lecture aims to provide students with an informative overview of early empirical and positivist approaches to the scientific study of society. The leading proponents of these approaches will be introduced and the main tenets of such approaches will be critically evaluated in light of more recent empirical and methodological developments in the philosophy of the social sciences.

Recommended Readings:

- Durkheim, E. Social Facts. In *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Science*, M. Martin and L. McIntyre, Ch.27.

Supplementary Readings:


1 NOVEMBER 2018, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Hermeneutics & Interpretive Social Science- Understanding narrative and interpretation
Dr Gerard Lum, School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London

Interpretation is a ubiquitous human activity (perhaps similarly with other species too) which we engage in whenever we seek to grasp interpretanda we judge to be significant. In contrast to the positivist/empiricist worldview, here it is suggested that our grasping the meaning of a text, a human activity or an artefact necessarily involves engaging in profoundly complex forms of interpretation and understanding. Distinguishing between two levels of analysis, the epistemological and the ontological, we consider the implications of the ‘ontological turn’ for social science and look at how this can be applied in the study of social phenomena.

Recommended readings:

LISS003 Philosophy of the Social Sciences
London Interdisciplinary Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership
Core Research Methods in the Social Sciences


Supplementary readings:

- Winch, P. The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy (arguably the classic Wittgensteinian text on social science)

8 NOVEMBER 2018, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Critical Realism- Beyond Positivism & Interpretation?
Dr John Owens, School of Education, Communication & Society, King’s College London

This lecture provides an introduction to critical realism as a philosophical and methodological framework for research in the social sciences. Critical realism was originally developed by Roy Bhaskar in reaction to what he saw as the deficiencies within the positivistic and hermeneutic research traditions. Critical realism is distinctive because of the emphasis it places on understanding the ontological nature of the subject under investigation. Key points of critical realism will be outlined with a view to understanding the implications for students’ own projects.

Recommended Reading:


Supplementary Reading:


15 NOVEMBER 2017, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Marxism: Marx and the Critique of Political Economy
Prof Alex Callinicos, Department of European & International Studies, King’s College London

Karl Marx is usually seen as the author of a general theory of history and a more specific economic theory of capitalism. But his own description of his project was the critique of political economy. His more general theories can be found mainly in the context of his critique of capitalism, where he seeks to show that this is not only an exploitive and unstable system but one that systematically conceals how it works. So uncovering what Marx calls ‘the economic law of motion of modern society’ requires also a critique of ideology.

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Supplementary/Recommended Reading

- Alex Callinicos, *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (London: Bookmarks, 1983), esp. chs. 3-6

22 NOVEMBER 2018, 3-5pm, LECTURE: Poststructuralism & the Cultural Turn in Social Science
Dr Nick Michelsen, Department of War Studies, King’s College London

Poststructuralism emerges from critical and post-Marxist perspectives in social and political theory. Specifically, its primary philosophers – Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, just to name a few influential authors – sought to move beyond structural linguistics and Marxist structuralism to engage with questions of the limits of language and representation, power, knowledge, and subjectivity. This session will focus on Michel Foucault in particular to illustrate the significance of discourse, power, and categories of understanding such as identity, culture, war, and articulations of subjectivity in situated contexts. It will highlight how we use poststructuralist ‘metatheoretical’ concerns in our curiosities about the social and political world and the ‘methods’ we design to investigate this world.

Supplementary/Recommended Reading

- Michel Foucault (1997) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge). This is crucial for any researcher interested in how discourses emerge as taken for granted categories of understanding.

Important short pieces by Foucault:

30 NOVEMBER 2018, 10-12noon, LECTURE: Feminist epistemology: introducing bias as objective
Dr Jelke Boesten, Department of International Development, King’s College London

Since the 1980s, feminist theorists have critiqued the presumed objectivity of the practice of science in an academy dominated by patriarchal and ethnocentric (or colonial) assumptions. Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway were pioneers of a feminist philosophy of science grounded in the idea that our biases -as women, as marginal- might be a place from which to start the search for a knowledge that is more true to people’s lives and their needs for social justice. Black feminist theorists added an intersectional perspective, aiming to decentre feminist thinking. In this session we will unpack the feminist critique of objectivity in science and discuss Harding’s standpoint theory, Haraway’s situated knowledge, and black feminist epistemology, including decolonial feminism. We aim for an understanding of feminist epistemology as reflexive and as aiming to unsettle what we know and how we know it.

Supplementary/Recommended Reading


This anthology is useful for further reading:

Grasswick, Heidi (2011) Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science, Springerlink [online]
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