GOVT 749
Interpretive Social Science
(Spring 2014)

Please report nonperforming links to kingch@georgetown.edu

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Class sessions: Tuesday, 9:30-12 noon, White-Gravenor 203

Prof. King’s office hours: Please email me for an appointment, since I have found that
pre-set office hours do not work well for students with busy schedules. I will also usually
be in class a bit before and after each session and am happy to speak with you then if you
have urgent issues.

1. What Do I Need to Know About This Course?

OVERVIEW

This Ph.D.-level seminar explores the interpretive tradition in the social sciences—qualitative
political science, comparative sociology, and social-scientifically oriented history. Interpretive
research stresses historical context, qualitative evidence, an actor-based ethic of research
practice, and the narrative expression of findings. Students should come away from the course
with an appreciation for the major work of interpretive social scientists as well as an ability to
incorporate interpretivist approaches in their own research. Readings are drawn from thinkers
such as Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Charles Tilly, Clifford Geertz, James Scott, Lisa
Wedeen, Theda Skocpol, Karen Barkey, and Rogers Brubaker, among others. Requirements
include two short writing assignments and one longer research paper. Ph.D. students only.

LEARNING GOALS

The interpretive tradition in political science stretches back at least to Max Weber, but in recent
years the dominance of inference-based research design has sometimes clouded our ability to
appreciate different approaches to positivist (and non-positivist) theory-building and research
practice. Part of this tradition involves different linguistic habits: it privileges evidence and
persuasion, for example, rather than data and proof. But this language reflects some fundamental
features of interpretivist approaches. This tradition sees the goal of social science as being
broadly interpretive rather than narrowly explanatory, that is, it seeks to integrate the
perspectives of the agents of political and social action into the very theories that purportedly
account for their behavior. This actor-centered ethic of research practice involves seeing humans
as more than simply data-generators but—like quantum physicists—tries to incorporate an appreciation of the system effects of the act of research itself. Moreover, as part of the persuasive art of research communication, interpretivists privilege the task of writing. Rather than being a simple write-up of an analytically separate research project, the text itself—especially in narrative form—is integral to the research process.

These distinctions do not map differences between inductive and deductive work, between the theoretical and the empirical, or between qualitative and quantitative methods. Interpretivists can be found engaging in all these approaches. This course will explore this rich vein of social science writing. Readings are drawn from political science, historical sociology, and history. By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Appreciate the common threads within, as well as the diversity of approaches among, communities of scholars writing in the interpretive frame
- Write a book review of the type seen in major academic journals or para-scholarly periodicals
- Write an article manuscript review in a style suitable for a major academic journal
- Compose an article-length piece that incorporates elements of the interpretive tradition

TOOLS OF ASSESSMENT

1. **Attendance and informed participation** (roughly 20 percent of course grade).
2. **Two short writing assignments** (roughly 15 percent each), with rewrites if necessary.
3. **One research paper** (roughly 50 percent). The largest proportion of this grade will be based on the final product, but a substantial portion will come from the initial draft of the paper and its presentation in class.

We will go over the details of the writing assignments in class, but here are some general guidelines:

**Book review:** Choose any book on this syllabus that is not featured under the “required reading” sections and write a review of no more than 1,000 words. Consult any major political science journal that has a book review section in order to understand the format and style of short reviews. Better yet, consult the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books*, or *World Politics* for excellent examples of sophisticated “review essays” that do far more than provide a narrative account of a book’s table of contents.

**Simulated manuscript review:** Choose any article on this syllabus and write a review of it as if it were a manuscript submitted to a major political science journal. The total review should be no more than about 1,000 words.

**Research paper:** The paper should be a substantial (20-30 pages) piece of research in which you apply one or more of the theories or methods discussed in this course to a particular case or cases. The paper should be more than a “literature survey”—although that is a good place to start—and should aim at using an interpretive approach and some
form of primary sources (archives, participant observation, ethnography, or the analysis of other printed or social “texts”).

Deadlines

Review essay: Tuesday, Feb. 18
Article review: Tuesday, Mar. 25
Research paper final: Friday, May 9

Format for papers

All essays and papers should be typed, double-spaced, on plain white 8.5 x 11 paper. Pages should be numbered consecutively. The typescript should be secured with a staple or clip. Do not submit the paper in a loose-leaf binder, plastic report cover or other folder.

Evaluation of papers

Grades on research papers will be based on the following criteria:

Overall argument: Is there a strong and clear argument running throughout the paper? Is the argument stated clearly at the beginning and then developed throughout the text? Does the paper address a clear and important question?

Writing style: Do you write in an interesting yet formal style? Have you eliminated clichés? Have you reined in your metaphors?

Thoroughness of research: Does the paper demonstrate a good knowledge of the literature on the topic at hand? Does the paper distill the major issues in a key debate? Have you made creative use of primary sources?

Originality of ideas: Is the paper more than a literature review? Have you engaged critically with the literature and arrived at your own interpretation of an important issue?

Based on these criteria, papers will be assigned grades according to the standard university grading scale.

2. What’s the Fine Print?

The following texts have been ordered for this course and may be purchased at the Georgetown University Bookstore in the Leavey Center:

These texts will be supplemented by readings from journals, books, and other sources. Two additional sources that you may wish to purchase and refer to on your own are:


Both these works are important “how to” guides to interpretive work and will make useful supplements to the more applied readings in this course.

**BLACKBOARD**

A Blackboard site has been established for each section of this course.

**POLICY ON OTHER TECHNOLOGY**

Please do not use laptops, cell phones, or other mobile/electronic devices during class. For the short time we are together each week, I want you to engage with the discussions, rather than multitasking or attempting to create a written transcript of the class. I will of course accommodate diagnosed conditions that require use of electronic devices and have been registered with the Academic Resource Center.

**POLICY ON MAKE-UPS, EXTENSIONS, INCOMPLETES, AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

In principle, deadlines cannot be changed. However, allowance will be made for cases in which genuine emergencies prevent students from completing work on time. Such emergencies might include medical treatment or bereavement. Having a heavy work load, impending deadlines for other courses, job interviews, extra-curricular commitments, or family holidays cannot normally be considered emergencies. Each instance will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Students should let the instructor know as far in advance as possible about any potential problems. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be handled according to university policy.

**POLICY ON GRADE COMPLAINTS**

If you feel your work was graded unfairly, please arrange to speak directly with me. Note that if you request that I review your work for re-grading, I may either raise or lower your grade, depending on my reassessment of your work. That grade will be final.
3. What Will We Be Doing in This Course?

The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the readings during the course of the semester.

Jan. 14  Introduction to the course

Part I. Theory, Method, and Communication

Jan. 21  Classic texts and contemporary debates


Recommended:

8. Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed., Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science
9. Check in periodically for new titles in the Routledge Series in Interpretive Methods and Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning

Jan. 28  History as a variable


Recommended:


Feb. 4  Method and evidence

2. Dvora Yanow, “Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods,” APSA Qualitative Methods Section Newsletter (Fall 2003). BLACKBOARD

Recommended:

5. James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, “A Tale of Two Cultures: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Research,” Political Analysis 14, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 227-249.

Feb. 11 Ethnography and actor-based ethics


Recommended:

6. Special issue of *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 3 (Sept. 2006) on political ethnography

Feb. 18  
**Narrative and the art of scholarly communication**

1. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*

   *Recommended:*


Feb. 25  
**Research practice and autobiography**


*Part II. Interpretive Approaches to Core Problems in Political Science*
Mar. 4  Social groups and mobilization


Recommended:


5. Frédéric Volpi, *Political Islam Observed: Disciplinary Perspectives*

Mar. 18  Political order

1. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*

Recommended:


Mar. 25  The state

1. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*

Recommended:


3. Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*


5. Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*
6. Georgi Derluguian, *Bourdieu’s Secret Admirer in the Caucasus*
7. Samer Shehata, *Shop Floor Culture and Politics in Egypt*

**Apr. 1**  
**Formal institutions**

1. Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*

**Recommended:**

2. Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*

**Apr. 8**  
**Informal institutions**

1. Gambetta and Hamill, *Streetwise*

**Recommended:**

3. Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia*

**Apr. 15**  
**Violence**

1. Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*

**Recommended:**

2. Bill Buford, *Among the Thugs*
3. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*
4. Jan Gross, *Neighbors*
5. Jan Gross, *Fear*
6. Diego Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*
8. Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol*

**Apr. 22**  
**Swing day (readings TBA)**