

Division of Humanities
Course Syllabus

Course Code: HUMA5901
Course Title: Philosophy of Social Science
Course Offered in: Fall 2025
Course Instructor: Yafeng Shan
Office Hours: 10 am – 12 pm on Tuesdays (Room 3356)

Course Description:

This is an advanced module in the philosophy of social science. The students will be provided with an overview of important issues in the philosophy of social science. In particular, the module will examine some of the central debates in the philosophy of the social sciences, such as the paradigm wars and the methodological holism/individualism debate, and discuss some key concepts in the social sciences including ‘social mechanism’, ‘explanation’, and ‘causation’.

Course Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs):

	Course ILOs
1	Demonstrate an advanced understanding of the philosophical assumptions behind the methodologies of the social sciences
2	Demonstrate an advanced understanding of key concepts in the social sciences
3	Demonstrate comprehensive familiarity of central debates in the philosophy of the social sciences
4	Demonstrate intellectual originality in their writing
5	Consider the views of others, whether spoken or written, and develop a critique that furthers investigation
6	Demonstrate their capacity to conduct extensive research and original, independent study
7	Construct and evaluate methodologies and arguments as well as propose new hypotheses

Course Outline:

Wee k	
1	An Introduction to the Origins of the Social Sciences

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2	Positivism
3	Interpretivism
4	Critical Realism
5	The Paradigm Wars
6	Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research
7	Methodological Individualism and Holism
8	Explanation in the Social Sciences (1): Functionalism
9	Explanation in the Social Sciences (2): Structuralism
10	Causation in the Social Sciences
11	Understanding in the Social Sciences
12	Social Mechanism
13	Social Ontology and Social Epistemology

Planned Assessment Tasks:

1st midterm: N/A 0 %

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2nd midterm:	N/A	0 %
Final:	A 3,500-word essay	100 %
Participation in class and worksheets: do one presentation.)	Presentation (each student is required to do one presentation.)	0 %

Readings:

Week 1

Topic: An Introduction to the Origins of the Social Sciences

Required Reading

Porter, Theodore M. 2003. "Genres and Objects of Social Inquiry, From the Enlightenment to 1890." In *The Cambridge History of Science*, 7:11–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521594424.003>.

Further Reading

Taylor, Lloyd A. 1981. "A Brief History of Sociology." *International Review of Modern Sociology* 11 (1/2): 1–23.

Heilbron, Johan. 2003. "Social Thought and Natural Science." In *The Cambridge History of Science*, 40–56. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521594424.004>.

Wagner, Peter. 2001. "As a Philosophical Science Unjustifiable, as an Empirical Science Anything Else but New." In *A History and Theory of the Social Sciences*, 7–24. London: Sage.

Week 2

Topic: Positivism

Required Reading

Benton, Ted, and Ian Craib. 2011. *Philosophy of Social Science*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (pp.13-49.)

Further Reading

Acton, H B. 1951. "Comte's Positivism and the Science of Society." *Philosophy* 26 (99): 291–310.

Comte, Auguste. 2009. *A General View of Positivism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp.1-62.)

Phillips, Denis C. 1990. "Postpositivist Science: Myths and Realities." In *The Paradigm Dialog*, edited by Egon G. Guba, 31–45. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Week 3

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Topic: Interpretivism

Required Reading

Rosenberg, Alexander. 2018. "The Methodological Divide: Naturalism versus Interpretation." In *Philosophy of Social Science*, 5th ed., 11–34. New York: Routledge.

Further Reading

Benton, Ted, and Ian Craib. 2011. *Philosophy of Social Science*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (pp.76-93.)

Taylor, Charles. 1971. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." *The Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1): 3–51.

Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press. (pp.87-157.)

Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Week 4

Topic: Critical Realism

Required Reading

Bhaskar, Roy. 1998. "Transcendental Realism and the Problem of Naturalism." In *The Possibility of Naturalism*, 3rd ed., 1–23. London and New York: Routledge.

Further Reading

Benton, Ted, and Ian Craib. 2011. *Philosophy of Social Science*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (pp.120-141.)

Bhaskar, Roy. 1975. *A Realist Theory of Science*. London: Verso. (pp.1-9)

Collier, Andrew. 1994. "Why Critical? How Naturalist?" In *Critical Realism*, 237–61. London and New York: Verso.

Singh, Savita, Roy Bhaskar, and Mervyn Hartwig. 2020. "Transcendental Realism and Critical Naturalism." In *Reality and Its Depths*, edited by Mervyn Hartwig, 23–52. Singapore: Springer.

Week 5

Topic: The Paradigm Wars

Required Reading

Guba, Egon G., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2005. "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 191–215. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Further Reading

Bryman, Alan. 2008. "The End of the Paradigm Wars." In *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*, edited by Pertti Alasuutari, Leonard Bickmar, and Julia

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Brannen, 13–25. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Guba, Egon G., ed. 1990. *The Paradigm Dialog*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Week 6

Topic: Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research

Required Reading

Shan, Yafeng. 2022. “Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research.”

Philosophy Compass 17 (1): e12804. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12804>.

Further Reading

Johnson, R. Burke. 2017. “Dialectical Pluralism: A Metaparadigm Whose Time Has Come.” *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 11 (2): 156–73.

Shan, Y. (Ed.). (2023). *Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Dialogues between Researchers and Philosophers*. Routledge.

Tebes, Jacob Kraemer. 2012. “Philosophical Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Implications for Research Practice.” In *Methodological Approaches to Community-Based Research*, edited by Leonard A. Jason and David S. Glenwick, 13–31. American Psychological Association.

Week 7

Topic: Methodological Individualism and Holism

Required Reading

Kincaid, Harold. 2014. “Dead Ends and Live Issues in the Individualism-Holism Debate.” In *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*, edited by Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, 139–54. Cham: Springer.

Further Reading

Menger, Carl. 1963. “The Charge of ‘Atomism’ in Theoretical Economics.” In *Problems of Economics and Sociology*, edited by Louis Schneider, translated by Francis J. Nock, 90–94. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Mandelbaum, Maurice. 1955. “Societal Facts.” *The British Journal of Sociology* 6 (4): 305–17.

Zahle, Julie. 2003. “The Individualism-Holism Debate on Intertheoretic Reduction and the Argument from Multiple Realization.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 33 (1): 77–99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393102250306>.

Week 8

Topic: Explanation in the Social Sciences (1): Functionalism

Required Reading

Kincaid, Harold. 1990. “Assessing Functional Explanations in the Social Sciences.” *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 1990 (March): 341–54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/192715>.

Further Reading

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- Elster, Jon. 1983. *Explaining Technical Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp.55-68.)
- Hallpike, Christopher R. 1986. *The Principles of Social Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (pp.86-93.)
- Hempel, Carl Gustav. 1965. "The Logic of Functional Analysis." In *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, 297–330. New York: The Free Press.
- Kincaid, Harold. 2007. "Functional Explanation and Evolutionary Social Science." In *Philosophy of Anthropology and Sociology*, edited by Stephen P. Turner and Mark W. Risjord, 213–47. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred R. 1952. "On the Concept of Function in Social Science." In *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, 178–87. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Rosenberg, Alexander. 2018. "Functionalism as a Research Program." In *Philosophy of Social Science*, 5th ed., 195–210. New York: Routledge.

Week 9

Topic: Explanation in the Social Sciences (2): Structuralism

Required Reading

- Haslanger, Sally. 2016. "What Is a (Social) Structural Explanation?" *Philosophical Studies* 173 (1): 113–30. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-014-0434-5>.

Further Reading

- Jackson, Frank, and Philip Pettit. 1992. "Structural Explanation in Social Theory." In *Reduction, Explanation and Realism*, edited by David Charles and Kathleen Lennon, 97–131. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Skow, Bradford. 2018. "Structural Explanation: Garfinkelian Themes." In *Causation, Explanation, and the Metaphysics of Aspect*, 113–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Soon, Valerie. 2021. "Social Structural Explanation." *Philosophy Compass* 16 (10): e12782.

Week 10

Topic: Causation in the Social Sciences

Required Reading

- Shan, Yafeng, and Jon Williamson. 2021. "Applying Evidential Pluralism to the Social Sciences." *European Journal for Philosophy of Science* 11 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-021-00415-z>.

Further Reading

- Crasnow, Sharon. 2011. "Evidence for Use: Causal Pluralism and the Role of Case Studies in Political Science Research." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 41 (1): 26–49.
- Goertz, Gary, and James Mahoney. 2012. *A Tale of Two Cultures*. Princeton and

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Oxford: Princeton University Press. (pp.75-86.)

Reiss, Julian. 2009. "Causation in the Social Sciences: Evidence, Inference, and Purposes." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 39 (1): 20–40.

Shan, Yafeng, and Jon Williamson. 2023. *Evidential Pluralism in the Social Sciences*. London and New York: Routledge.

Week 11

Topic: Understanding in the Social Sciences

Required Reading

Khalifa, K. (2019). Is Verstehen Scientific Understanding? *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 49(4), 282–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0048393119847104>

Further Reading

Claveau, François. 2012. "The Russo-Williamson Theses in the Social Sciences: Causal Inference Drawing on Two Types of Evidence." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 43: 806–13.

Week 12

Topic: Social Mechanism

Required Reading

Hedström, Peter, and Petri Ylikoski. 2010. "Causal Mechanisms in the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (1): 49–67. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102632>.

Further Reading

Hedström, Peter, and Richard Swedberg. 1998. "Social Mechanism: An Introductory Essay." In *Social Mechanisms: An Analytic Approach to Social Theory*, edited by Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, 1–31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steel, Daniel. 2004. "Social Mechanisms and Causal Inference." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 34 (1): 55–78.

Reiss, Julian. 2007. "Do We Need Mechanisms in the Social Sciences?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 37 (2): 163–84.

Week 13

Topic: Social Ontology and Social Epistemology

Required Reading

Epstein, Robert. 2014. "What Is Individualism in Social Ontology? Ontological Individualism vs. Anchor Individualism." In *Rethinking the Individualism-Holism Debate*, edited by Julie Zahle and Finn Collin, 17–38. Cham: Springer.

Further Reading

Durkheim, Emile. 1982. "What Is a Social Fact?" In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, edited by Steven Lukes, translated by W. D. Halls, 50–59. New York: The Free Press.

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Little, Daniel. 2016. "A Better Social Ontology." In *New Directions in the Philosophy of Social Science*, 1–36. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield.