

# Western Philosophy of Social Science

## Lecture 1. The philosophy of social science

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# Foundational questions about social science

- Is there a “science of society”?
- What is involved in “scientific study of social phenomena”?
- What is a good social science explanation?
- Are there scientific methods for the study of social phenomena?

# I. What is analytic philosophy?

- Rigorous analysis of the logic and structure of knowledge
- Careful analysis of the most general conceptual issues raised by knowledge and science
- The most general questions:
  - what is the nature of the relationship between the mind and the world?
  - What is the nature of rational thought?
  - Are there objective reasons that help to decide value issues?

# A simple example

- When we refer to the “history of China”, what are we referring to?
  - A comprehensive series of events as they occurred
  - A set of narratives and interpretations offered by historians
  - Note that these are fundamentally different answers!
- This is an example of conceptual analysis
- Another example: what is the relationship between thought, brain, and behavior?

# The main fields of analytic philosophy

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- Philosophy of science—physics, biology, economics
- Philosophy of language
- Philosophy of mathematics and logic
- Philosophy of mind

# Analytic philosophy and values

- Ethics and moral theory
  - What is the meaning of moral language?
  - What are “obligations,” “rights,” and the good?
  - Are there principles that give a rational basis for deciding ethical issues?
- Social and political philosophy
  - What is freedom?
  - What is justice?
  - What are the appropriate role and limits of the state?
  - Example: John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*
- Philosophy of religion

# Philosophy of social science

- How should we approach questions about the nature of social science knowledge?
- Not through apriori formulations and reasoning.
- Rather, through careful engagement with strong examples of social inquiry.
- Formulate methodological and philosophical maxims through study of good practice.
- Make use of concrete examples to help think through the hard questions in social science.

# Topics

- **Inquiry:** How should social science inquiry be conducted?
- **Ontology:** What is the nature of the social world?
- **Theory and hypothesis:** What is the role of theories and hypotheses in the social sciences?
- **Explanation:** What are the varieties of social explanation?
- **Justification:** What is involved in providing rational warrant for the social science theories and explanations that we offer?



## II. Explanation

- An explanation of an event is a demonstration of why the event was necessary or probable in the circumstances. The details of the explanation identify prior factors that jointly establish the necessity or probability of the event.
- An explanation is an answer to “why necessary?” and “how possible” with regard to an event that appears anomalous.
- We can offer explanations of single events and patterns or regularities among events.

# Logical structure of explanation

- An explanation is a deductive or inductive (probabilistic) argument in which the premises entail the explanans.
- The “covering law” theory of explanation asserts that the premises of an explanation must include at least one general law.
- A “mechanism” explanation describes a series of events or conditions, each of which brings about the next. A causal chain.

# Logical structure of explanation

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- Thesis: the core theory of explanation of social phenomena is causal explanation
- Thesis: causal realism is the best interpretation of causal explanation

# Anti-functionalism

- Functionalist explanations purport to explain a feature in terms of the benefits it confers upon a larger system.
- Functional explanation is common in biology but suspect in social science. What is the causal feedback system that would control the feature in order to bring about the good effects on the system?

# Anti-functionalism (cont)

- To say that “The state exists in order to enhance corporate profitability” is mysterious until we have an account of what the causal mechanism is that leads to this result.
- Natural selection is not available as a mechanism.

# Social regularities

- Social regularities exist, but they are weak and exception-laden.
- Social regularities are not analogous to “laws of nature”
- Social regularities are “phenomenal” rather than “governing”.
- The goal of social inquiry should be to arrive at hypotheses about underlying social mechanisms that produce outcomes and regularities.

# Predictions

- Predictions are weak and unreliable in social science.
- Countervailing tendencies; *ceteris paribus* conditions; complexity of social causation; effects of agency.
- Limited usefulness of the covering law model and the thesis of falsifiability.

# III. Theories and hypotheses

- What is a theory? Specification of the characteristics of an unobservable factor that plays an explanatory role within a domain of phenomena.
- Hypotheses about causal powers and mechanisms
- Hypotheses about unobservable forces and structures
- Examples: rational choice theory, Marx's theory of class, Weber's theory of bureaucracy, Durkheim's theory of *anomie*



# Be eclectic: multiple theories

- ethnic violence
  - political entrepreneurs
  - identity politics
  - Material conflicts over resources
- need several theories to explain various aspects of these complex phenomena.
- Multiple theories correspond to distinct mechanisms and processes.
- A tool box rather than a unified theory of everything

# IV. Ontology

- What exists in the social world?
- Criteria of existence: persistence, causal involvement, continuity
- Do states, markets, global trading systems exist?
- How are “higher-level” things composed out of “lower-level” things?

# A simple social ontology

- individuals, relations, institutions exist
- individuals have agency within constraints
- institutions evolve to satisfy individual and collective purposes
- institutions and organizations have powers
- institutions have properties of organization and functioning
- Institutions can be “nested” to create higher-level social organizations