

**Rationalizing the World:
The hopes and disappointments of American social science from 1900 to the present**

New course, offered jointly by Political Science and American Studies

POLS 4280, Spring, 2026

The class will meet twice a week and have a discussion format centered on weekly readings on twentieth-century social science.

Primary audience: Undergraduates and graduate students who are interested in social science

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Course description

This course, offered jointly in Political Science and American Studies, will cover the development of modern social science and its relation to American history and culture. The different strands of the course are indicated by its title, where “rationalizing” refers both to attempts to understand society through rational means and to the role of social science in providing a justification or rationale for existing social structures.

Quantitative thinking and social science have become increasingly prominent in our society. But modern discussions of the political relevance of social science do not always account for the ups and downs of particular ideas. For example, Freudianism was huge in mid-century, both within psychology and in the culture at large, but has faded for both intellectual and economic reasons. The Keynesian revolution dominated economics from the 1930s through the 1960s but then was contested by later paradigms in response to the stagflation of the following decade. Trends in criminal justice policy have followed ideas from anthropology, psychology, and economics, and political theories of international relations have affected and been informed by developments in foreign policy. This course provides students with an opportunity to learn about these and other examples of the development and influence of theories in social science, and to form a larger connection between intellectual, social, and political history.

It is common for students to learn about just one or maybe two social sciences and not to see the way that different social sciences fit together intellectually and how they compete for influence. There’s a tendency to think of any field of study as being a static set of truths as laid out in textbooks or else a steady march of progress. In contrast, this course presents a series of booms and crashes: unsustainable enthusiasms for new ideas followed by disillusionment and controversies that are often never fully resolved. Through readings, class discussion and activities, and final projects, students should learn to see social science as a process that proceeds both internally and with reference to society.

The class will meet twice a week and have a discussion format, with each week’s readings being a mix of writings by social scientists and related public intellectuals or popular writers, along with later commentary. We will go through the period since 1900 at the rate of one decade per

week, proceeding on two tracks: the immediate history of the decade and a longer history of a particular subfield of social science that is associated with that decade. The plan is for each week's classes to roughly go as follows:

- (a) Brief lecture on the political and social history of the decade in question
Brief lecture on the week's social-science topic and its development, influence, and public reception from 1900 to the present
Continuation of classroom discussion from the previous week
Discussion of the week's reading
- (b) Discussion of the week's reading
Classroom activities
Mini-lecture introducing the readings for the next week

For example, the topic for the 1930s will be public opinion, and readings from that decade will come from pollster George Gallup as well as later materials from political scientists Philip Converse (*The American Voter*), John Zaller (*The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*), and Robert Shapiro (*Politicians Don't Pander*), and historian Sarah Igo (*The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*), among others. For the first decade of the 1900s, we will discuss of social scientists' coming to terms with the modern industrial society, starting with W. E. B. Du Bois's pioneering sociological study of Philadelphia and Horace Drury's critique of scientific management along with influential writers from later in the century such as William H. Whyte and Jane Jacobs. We will similarly cover intellectual developments within and around anthropology, psychology, economics, international relations, and other fields of applied social science, each of which has its rise and fall, its moment in the sun and its recontextualization in the larger endeavors of rationalizing the world.

In addition to doing the readings and brief homework assignments, students will be expected to participate in discussions, structured debates, and other classroom activities each week and to do final projects, which can take on many forms, depending on students' subject-matter and methodological interests.

Goals for student learning

By the end of the course, students should gain a broad understanding of the development of modern social science and its connection to American politics and society. They will read different sides of academic disputes involving figures from Margaret Mead to Milton Friedman and will gain a historically informed sense of how social science has been influenced by and has influenced culture and policy. The course should thus have value both for its methodological and historical content.

From the student perspective, goals include the following learning outcomes: obtaining a broad perspective on the social sciences, understanding how social science responds to and influences developments in society, and connecting intellectual history to American social and political history. The goal is for students to learn these concepts in the context of a series of developments in twentieth-century American society, including urbanization, ethnic conflict,

wars, and economic booms and busts. More specifically, the aim is for students to develop skills in critical reading, debate, and the integration of different arguments in the history of ideas. With their final projects, the goal is for students to develop their qualitative or quantitative research skills as well as learn how to work in pairs and give effective presentations.

We also have a goal for students that goes beyond learning, which is for them to interact academically with students in other departments and at other levels. The course is designed to attract a wide audience: it has no prerequisites but it offers the opportunity to go deep with research for those with sufficient preparation that area. Social science students often seem stuck within their own fields, and this course is intended to offer them an opportunity to meet, argue, and collaborate across disciplines—something that is central to social research but which is often lacking, even in a university such as Columbia with its core curriculum and other connections across the departments.

Course policies

Attendance is required at all classes. If students cannot make a class, they should arrange with others to catch up on missing materials.

For all assignments, any material not written by the student must be placed in quotation marks with the source clearly identified.

We will follow the university plan on disability accommodations:
<https://www.college.columbia.edu/rightsandresponsibilities>

The required text will be a course reader including book chapters, journal articles, and other readings from a variety of primary and secondary sources.

Course requirements

Grades will be 40% class participation (including regular contribution to a group document at <https://tinyurl.com/4280talk/> where students share questions and thoughts on the readings), 20% homework, 20% final project, and 20% final exam.

Assignments

In preparation for each week's classes, students have a series of readings that trace through some ideas and controversies of social science and social thought. We will set up the readings so that some are required and some are optional, with students needing to choose which weeks they are responsible for the optional readings.

We will also have short homework assignments to keep students involved with the readings. For example, "If you bring X to the modern day and ask them about Y, what would they say?", where X is some set of authors whose work was assigned that week and Y is some current topic of interest. Also some simple quizzes, such as supplying three quotations from the week's reading,

and students are required to identify who wrote each quotation, why are these quotations characteristic of these authors' ideas, and what theoretical frameworks are being expressed.

In class we will organize discussions and debates. Students will be asked to prepare for in-class debates by coming up with half-page arguments in both directions.

Students will also learn some basic research methods, for example choosing a topic, finding a relevant research article, using Google scholar to trace forward and backward influences, and then writing a one-sentence summary of each article and a short essay tracing the development of the idea. In their first tries it is likely that students will cite low-quality material, but after some practice they should be able to make better use of online tools to track references.

In addition to weekly readings and homework assignments, students will perform a final project in pairs. Here are some possible project ideas:

- Tracing the modern development of social sciences in a country other than the United States
- In-depth study of the development of a single field or subfield in social science
- Quantitative analysis of citations and influences over time
- Deep dive into the genesis and reception of a single work or series of works of historical importance
- Study of ebbs and flows of government funding for a particular area of social science
- Study of trends in social science education
- In-depth report of some episode involving academic politics within some field
- Overview of the relation of twentieth-century social science to sports, music, religion, literature, visual arts, or some other area of culture
- Geographic and network study of connections among social scientists of the twentieth century
- Study of the social role of a parascience such as extra-sensory perception
- Analysis of news reporting of some area of social science.

The important thing for your final project is to demonstrate that you have learned something and extended your skills as a student and researcher. Recall the principles ...

Semester schedule

Each week will cover a decade of American social and political history and also track a subfield of social science over the century. The social science readings are not tied to the particular decade; rather, this is just a decade in which that particular subfield was of public interest. *For the readings listed below that are entire books, students will be supplied a short excerpt to read for the course.*

Week 1: The legacy of the 19th century

We begin the course by situating social science in the context of American politics and society at the turn of the twentieth century. The central social and political issue at that time was inequality

of people, social classes, races, and nations. This was a topic of study of social science and also a direction for justification or reforms.

Week 2, 1900-1910: The industrial society

In the first decade of the twentieth century, many people in the comfortable classes were concerned about the transition to an urban society, mixed with traditional concerns about the political power of urban mobs with a high concentration of dangerous young men and unmarried pregnant young women. A related worry involved the power of organized labor and the potential for revolution: a combination of the revolutionary spirit of mining strikes with the population density of the city could be devastating. At the turn of the century, immigration and industrialization led to new forms of urban life, which motivated reporting, sociological studies, efforts to improve living conditions of the poor, and analogies between industrial production and society. We read some classic writing on urban problems from the beginning of the century along with studies many decades later of suburbs and white-collar life.

Week 3, 1910-1920: International relations

The big challenge of the second decade of the twentieth century was war and revolution. Everyone saw it coming, and it happened despite all efforts to avoid it. The involvement of the United States in the first world war and the Russian revolution motivated historical and theoretical explorations of the outbreak of war and ways of maintaining peace in a turbulent era, a topic which gained new relevance with the second world war, the Cold War, and later international conflicts. We consider some influential works and controversies.

Week 4, 1920-1930: Anthropology

Between 1924 and 1965, immigration to the United States was drastically curtailed; at the same time there was an interest in the systematic differences among cultures and societies around the world. Some of the most well-known work in anthropology has been controversial, and the cultural influence has also been studied within the United States and other industrialized countries. We also consider the related topics of self-help movements and experimental studies of social effects.

Week 5, 1930-1940: Public opinion

The major social and political challenges of the 1930s were economic depression and the rise of fascism. This period also saw the development of opinion polling as a new way to study mass society, during a time when urban political machines were being overthrown and organized labor was gaining new political and economic power. We read some classic works of the study of public opinion along with popular writing on communication in an atomized society and follow up with research in political science on the measurement of opinion and its connection to politics.

Week 6, 1940-1950: Democracy and totalitarianism

The new challenge of the 1940s was the cold war: fascism was defeated, but communism remained and was stronger than ever. The ideological struggles of the twentieth century led scholars to study different forms of modern government and how they have developed in the United States and elsewhere. We consider the connections between various forms of democratic and authoritarian government and their connections to domestic politics and colonialism.

Week 7, 1950-1960: Operations research and game theory

The new challenge of the 1950s was the prospect of nuclear annihilation and the need to share a planet with an ideological enemy for an indefinite period of time. Much of the mathematical study of decision making was developed in response to challenges of military production and tactics in the second world war, followed by the strategic dilemmas of the Cold War. We consider the inherent contradictions between the promise of technocratic optimization and the fear of atomic war, along with the efforts of social scientists to come up with a theoretical foundation for international cooperation.

Week 8, 1960-1970: Psychology

The 1960s was a turbulent decade, with assassinations, the civil rights movement, and the escalation of the Vietnam war. The country seemed to be falling apart, and people searched for psychological explanations. From the 1930s through the 1960s, various modes of psychology, from Freudianism to behaviorism, were presented as keys to understanding society, and there was an attempt to diagnose social problems through a combination of psychological and sociological ideas. Psychological ideas were also used in business to promote efficient operation and motivate employees and customers. We discuss all of this, along with work in later decades reporting disillusionment with traditional ideas of psychology.

Week 9, 1970-1980: Keynesianism and monetarism

The new challenge of the 1970s was the energy crisis, which called into question the suburban car-centered lifestyle, the international order (with the rise of OPEC), social stability (with the battles of the 1960s over civil rights, war, and crime never fully resolved), and postwar economic prosperity. Stepping back a few decades, the faith of economists in the free market was shaken by the Great Depression, followed by the success of planned economic production in the United States and the Soviet Union in defeating the Axis powers. Following the second world war, there were efforts by social scientists on the center and left to build upon and explain the successes of economic planning, along with countervailing efforts on the right to argue for its limitations.

Week 10, 1980-1990: Policy analysis

The challenge of the 1980s was the definitive shift from the postwar boom to a state of perpetual economic uncertainty. Throughout the twentieth century, policymakers had considered how to apply scientific principles to solve social problems, and since the 1960s there have been efforts in different fields to study the effects of interventions using controlled experiments. We discuss the ideas motivating such studies, difficulties in their implementation, and the prospects for quantitative policy analysis in the future.

Week 11, 1990-2000: Political polarization of social science

The challenge of the 1990s was political polarization, with government shutdowns, impeachment, and a disconnection from reality that has gotten only worse during the decades since. The study of society has also become politically contentious in a way different from during the Cold War consensus. We read some popular works expressing polarized takes on American culture, along with qualitative and quantitative studies on partisan polarization in politics, science, and other institutions.

Week 12, 2000-2010: Rational choice and human nature

The central challenges of the first decade of the 2000s were global warming and the breakdown of the international order. In the absence of global governing structures or even a consensus on what to do within any country, how could humanity head off an oncoming catastrophe? How could individual behaviors be aggregated to produce collectively rational decisions? Decision theory and game theory, which have been central to economics since the 1940s and 1950s, colonized other social sciences at the end of the century. We discuss the rational-choice paradigm, its critics, and the often awkward connections between cognitive psychology, behavioral economics, and the application of these ideas in political science and elsewhere. We also consider the development of rational choice and economics exceptionalism as an example of how social science frames itself within society.

Week 13, 2010-2020: Replication crisis

The challenge of the 2010s was the decline of trust in institutions. The Iraq war, the financial crisis, the collapse of the news media, and the rise of nativist populist politics in the U.S. and Europe. Even science lost some of its sheen, with a widespread recognition that some of the most widely promoted findings in the social and behavioral sciences were unreplicable and were based on shaky theoretical and methodological foundations. We discuss some early work by psychology researchers exploring how these problems could arise, along with reading on some episodes from the replication crisis and discussion of the political and social implications of the unreplicable work.

Week 14, 1900-present: Looking back and looking forward

Social science is a way of rationalizing the world, both in the sense of making social relations understandable and in providing a rationale for existing social structures. In this course we have considered case studies of many different research programs in social science in their boom-and-bust phases, how various social-science ideas are reflected in policy, politics, and culture. We conclude by revisiting these themes more generally, considering the social and political roles of social science from 1900 to the present and beyond.