

Quantification and Social Thought

NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study
IDSEM-UG1760
Fall 2014

Instructor: Christopher J. Phillips
Course Meetings: Wed 15.30-18.10
Classroom Location: WAVE 429
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Office Hours: Tu 14.00-16.00 & Wed 13.00-15.00, 411 Lafayette St., rm. 308

Course Description

In an age of “big data,” “sabermetrics,” and “evidence-based medicine,” statistical concepts and mathematical models for decision-making have become ever more common in the modern world. Although proponents would argue that these new methods are increasingly powerful, their use raises complicated questions about how decisions can and should be made, in realms from drafting a baseball player to measuring the effectiveness of a federal program. This course examines the history of quantification from the Enlightenment to the present, with special attention to the ways new technologies and methodologies intersect with changing notions of rationality and causality.

Course Objectives

This course develops the skill of critically engaging with political and social theories as well as with scientific models of mind and behavior; it promotes depth of knowledge in history of science; and cultivates writing and communication skills. Ultimately, the goal is to develop thoughtful analytic methods for understanding and making claims about the world.

Required Texts

Required readings posted on NYU Classes. Please buy the following books, which are widely available, but have also been ordered at the NYU bookstore (readings from them listed with asterisk in syllabus):

- *Emile Durkheim, *On Suicide* (Penguin, 2007 [1897]) [any ed. is fine, ISBN for this one: 978-0140449679]
- *Stephen Jay Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (Norton, rev. 1996 ed.) [rev. ed. preferred, ISBN: 978-0393314250]
- *Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (FSG, 1999) [any ed. is fine, ISBN for this one: 978-0374527512]
- *Michael Lewis, *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* (Norton, 2004) [any ed. is fine, ISBN for this one: 978-0393338393]

Required Assignments and Evaluation

This course requires *active* participation each week. This means, at a minimum, coming to class on time having done and annotated the reading carefully, bringing the reading, and remaining engaged in the discussion. Everyone will be responsible for posting a couple discussion questions and 1-2 sentence analyses of each piece (good sentences!) to the course website by noon each class day.

In addition to discussion and weekly preparation/attendance (45% of final grade), the main assignment for the course will be an independent investigation on a student's choice of topic (done in consultation with the instructor). The project will involve three preliminary assignments--a short primary source

analysis on an assigned piece (3-5 pp, 10% of grade); a longer primary source analysis on a student's choice of topic (5-7 pp., 15% of grade); and a project outline (5% of grade)--in addition to a final write-up (12-15 pp., 25% of grade). Assignments should use references and citations appropriately, in consultation with the instructor. Late assignments, other than for excused medical emergencies, will be penalized one grade a day (i.e., an "A" paper handed in two days late would become a "C" paper).

Academic Integrity

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website:

<http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html>

Technology

As the digital becomes an ever-greater part of our lives, a word about technology: This is a discussion class, and one based on a close examination of texts. You will be expected to bring in all texts in hardcopy. The use of technology will be restricted, though we will take a break each week so that you'll never be too far removed from the "grid." The research on this is exceptionally clear: no one is as good a multi-tasker as s/he thinks. Keeping things simple will improve our discussions and deepen our collective engagement.

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Week-by-Week Syllabus

Wed Sept 3: Introduction

From obesity networks to scouting reports

Wed Sept 10: Games, Juries, Assemblies: Enlightened Actors and Classical Probability

--M. de Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (1814), chs 1-4, 8, 11-13, 17 (~85pp)

--G. Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance: How Probability Changes Science and Everyday Life* (1989), Part 1 (~36pp)

Wed Sept 17: Measuring Heads, Knowing People

--S. Morton, *Crania Americana* (1839), introductory material; initial essay; measurements and explanations; plates (~45pp)

--*S. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (1996), ch 1: Introduction, ch. 2: "American Polygeny and Craniometry before Darwin," & ch. 3 "Measuring Heads: Paul Broca and the Heyday of Craniology" (~90pp)

Wed Sept 24: Invention of the "Average Man"

(first source analysis due in class, of table/concept/sentence in Quetelet)

--A. Quetelet, *Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties* (1842), Preface, Introduction, Books 2-4 (~60 pages)

Wed Oct 1: Quantification and Literary Critique

--C. Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), first book (~ 100pp)

--S. Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (1897)

Wed Oct 8: From Counting People to Theorizing Society

--*E. Durkheim, *On Suicide* (1897)

Wed Oct 15: Making up People

--R. Lynd and H. Lynd, *Middletown* (1929), Introduction, Part I: "Making a Living," and Appendix/Tables (~100pp)

--G. Gallup and S.F. Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public-opinion Poll and How it Works* (1940), foreword, Chs 1-2, 21-23 (~65pp)

Wed Oct 22: Deviation from the "Norm"

--A. Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1947), Ch. 1 "Historical Introduction," Ch. 17 "Pre-Marital Intercourse," Ch. 21 "Homosexual Outlet" (~85pp)

--G. Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), pt II, ch. III: "Norm and Average" (~30pp)

--I. Hacking, "Kinds of People: Moving Targets," *British Academy Lectures* (2006) (~34pp)

Wed Oct 29: Meritocracy

--*N. Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999), Books 1-2 (~235pp)

Wed Nov 5: IQ

(second, longer source analysis due to website by Friday this week)

--R. Herrnstein, "I.Q.," *The Atlantic* (1971) (~10pp)

--R. Herrnstein and C. Murray, *The Bell Curve* (1994), chs 2-4 (~65pp)

--*S. Gould, ch. 6 from *Mismeasure of Man* (1996) (~90pp)

Wed Nov 12: Game Theory

--H. Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (1960), Foreword, Preface, and Ch. 2: "Will Survivors Envy the Dead" (~60pp)

--Review of *On Thermonuclear War* in *Scientific American* (March 1961) (~15pp)

--W. Poundstone, *Prisoner's Dilemma*, ch. 6 (~30pp)

Wed Nov 19: Law and Order

--L. Tribe, "Trial by Mathematics: Precision and Ritual in the Legal Process," *Harv. L. Rev.* 84 (1971): 1329-1393

--B. Underwood, "Law and the Crystal Ball: Predicting Behavior with Statistical Inference and Individualized Judgment," *Yale Law Journal* 88 (1979): 1408-1448

--Selection of recent newspaper articles

Wed Nov 27: **No class: Thanksgiving Break**

(outline and initial bibliography of final project, uploaded to website by classtime)

Around this time, must meet with instructor individually to discuss final project.

Wed Dec 3: Sports as Life

--*M. Lewis, *Moneyball* (2003) (~150pp)

Final paper due *in hardcopy* by scheduled final exam date.