

# Investigating the Social World

Dr Chao-Yo Cheng

# Masterclass (2025 version) announced

Week	Speaker Series (6-7:30pm)	Pieces-of-Craft Workshops (7:40-9pm)
1	Introduction and Welcome	AI in Social Research: From Big Data to SDS
2	Critical Discourse Analysis	AI in Social Research: Qualitative
3	Historical Research and Archives	AI in Social Research: Quant and Computational
4	Multi-sited Fieldwork	Transparency and Open Social Science
5	Research on Creative and Cultural Industries: A Qualitative Guide	Communicating Your Research
	<b>Reading Week</b>	
6	Mixed-Methods Research	Dissertations Fair 1
7	Geographic Data Science	Dissertations Fair 2
8	Surveys	Dissertations Fair 3
9	Text-as-Data	Dissertations Fair 4
10	Quali-Quant Methods for Social Media Research ( <i>followed by end-of-year happy hour</i> )	

Invitation to audit will be sent to all PG students

# Before Reading Week: Varieties of social research

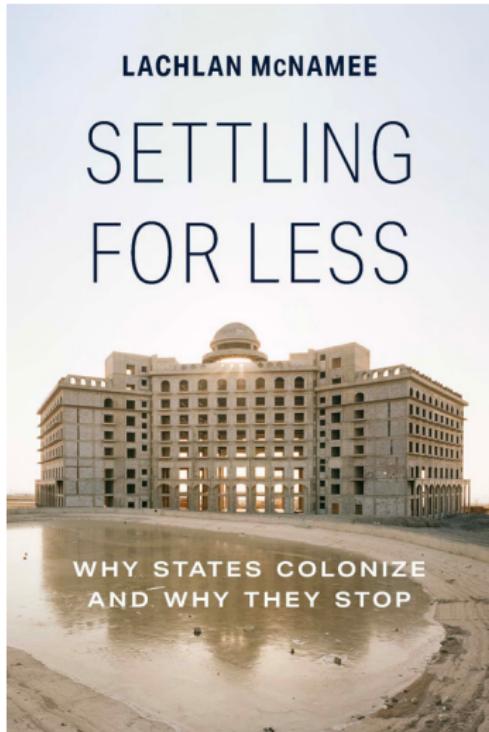
- ▶ ISW is a special module, as we aim to reflect on the production of "valid" knowledge about the social world
  - Know what you do and explain the objectives of your scholarly endeavors;
  - Know the differences between various objectives and engage other researchers' work constructively and effectively
- ▶ Social research involves a series of careful thinking about epistemology, theory-building and methodology; hence **theory-empirics alignment** is key to rigour
  - **Reveal nuances of the real world:** Constructivism; (interpretative) theory as approach; interpretation; qualitative; inductive/abductive
  - **Search for the "ultimate" truth:** Positivism; (explanatory) theory as paradigm; explanation; quantitative; deductive

Exceptions exist – norms are constantly being contested and redefined

# Exceptions exist – norms are constantly being contested and redefined

	<i>A positivist approach</i>	<i>A constructivist approach</i>
What is ‘reality’?	A definable ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ exists and is observable	There is no ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ beyond our experiences
What is the goal of academic enquiry?	Acquisition of the ‘truth’	A more informed construction of the world
How are the researcher and the ‘researched’ related?	The researcher is independent of the ‘researched’	The researcher is not independent of the ‘researched’
What should be the role for values?	None - objectivity sought	Part of ‘reality’ - subjectivity celebrated
What kind of approach?	Predominantly based on observability or measurability and with the aim of seeking ‘evidence’	Predominantly based on discourse and meaning with the aim of seeking a more informed understanding of the world
What kind of data is preferred?	Predominantly quantitative	Traditionally associated with a predominantly qualitative approach
Examples of such studies in Development Studies	Dollar and Kraay (2002) <i>Growth is Good for the Poor</i>	Narayan <i>et al.</i> , (2002) <i>Voices of the Poor</i>

# Thinking beyond your case to boost contribution



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# Weeks 6-10: Analytical (or investigative) frameworks



Professor Silvia Posocco  
(Psychosocial/Sociology)



Dr Ivana Bevilacqua  
(Geography)



Ms Joy Brooks-Gilzeane  
(Politics)



Dr Sarah Marks  
(History)

- ▶ Rational choice theory (Dr Chao-Yo Cheng)
- ▶ Psychosocial framing (Professor Silvia Posocco)
- ▶ Decolonizing social research (Dr Ivana Bevilacqua)
- ▶ Intersectional sensibilities (Ms Joy Brooks-Gilzeane)
- ▶ Situating lived experience (Dr Sarah Marks)

## Assessment II: Analytical essay (60%)

- ▶ You will write an essay of 2,500 words in length
- ▶ The idea is to choose **TWO** frameworks introduced after Reading Week to analyze an issue or problem of your choice
- ▶ You are free to carry out any necessary outside/additional research; cite references properly (e.g., APA or MLA)
- ▶ You can come to my office hours to discuss your preliminary responses with me; the goal is not to give you a mark before the deadline but to clear any confusion
- ▶ Instructions and sample submissions available on Moodle now

## Lecture: Rational choice



## Lecture: Rational choice

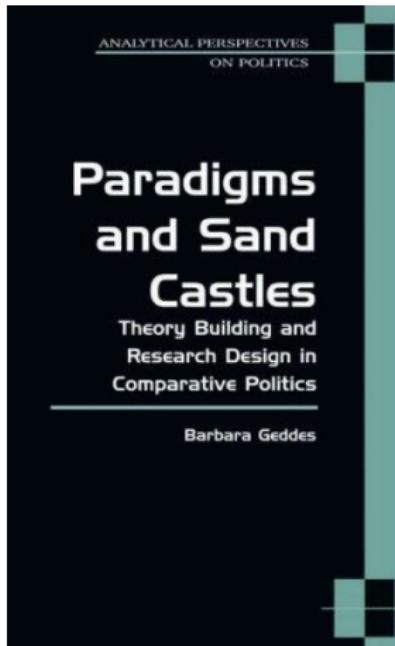


"Anyone fancies an end-of-term happy hour?"

# Plan for today

- ▶ Rational choice and beyond
- ▶ Workshop: "Analytical narratives"
  - Principles
  - Critiques and responses
  - Examples
  - Exercise

# Barbara's "verdict:" Breaking mis-perceptions



- ▶ Rational choice does not assume people are "selfish"
- ▶ Rational choice does not assume people are driven by material interests
- ▶ Rational choice does not assume preferences are stable or fixed
- ▶ Rational choice does not ignore/discard ideology and/or history

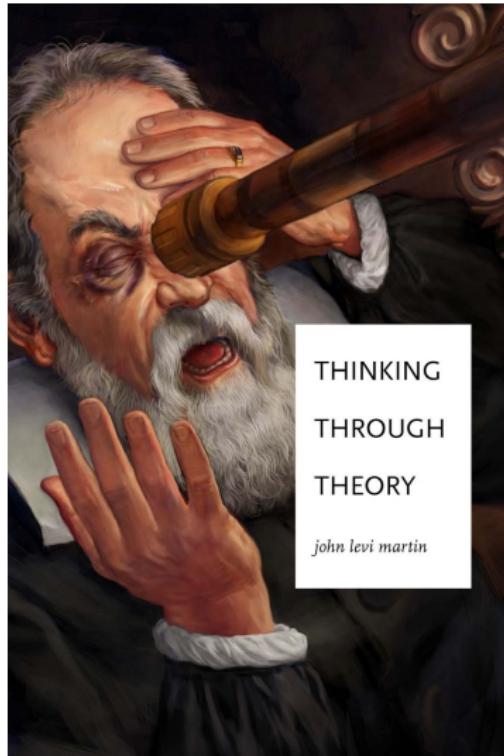
Rational choice is an “approach,” not much of a “theory” per se

“Hear Our Voices: The Poor on Poverty” (World Bank 2000)



- ▶ Rational choice highlights the importance of "rationality" and yet how rationality should be treated as a construct, not a given constant
- ▶ Rational choice does not dictate a single or universal explanation/prediction
- ▶ Rational choice provides a **micro-foundation** to research the social world

# John Levi Martin's take on rational choice (theory)



- ▶ A useful "modelling exercise" for deductive reasoning
- ▶ Cautioning against using it as a "total" theory of society (which can grow into a form of intellectual imperialism)
- ▶ **Caveats abound**, alas – Do we have a "choice?" How about structures? In favor of parsimony at the sacrifice of complexities and nuances? Ad hoc? How do we handle unintended or unexpected outcomes?
- ▶ **Question for all:** To what extend would he align with Geddes?

# ENVY

in politics

Gwyneth H. McClendon



## Examples: “Envy in Politics” (McClendon 2018)

- ▶ **Paradox:** Why rich people support redistribution? Why do governments fail to provide and act responsively?
- ▶ **Argument:** *Status sentiment* matters – envy, spite and pursuit of admiration will influence political behaviors
- ▶ **Literature:** Drawing on anthropology, social psychology, behavior economics and so on
- ▶ **Empirics:** Case studies and quantitative analysis, especially surveys and election/admin data (see "Applications")
- ▶ **Implications:** Inequality is the key driving force of various political issues we are observing, but may not manifest in a way we expect

**TABLE 2.8** Relationship between Changes in Black Income Inequality and Municipal Budget Spending

	Avg % budget spent 2003–2006	Consistent underspending
Percent change in black inequality	−0.03** (0.01)	0.14** (0.06)
% of pop in informal (2001)	−0.42 (0.52)	0.13* (0.07)
Log staff (2003)	−2.04 (4.02)	0.03 (0.07)
Years of MM experience (2003)	−0.23 (0.38)	−0.01 (0.05)
% HH black (2001)	−0.36 (0.32)	0.01 (0.13)
Log HH (2001)	7.36* (4.29)	−0.01 (0.05)
ANC vote % (2000)	0.42* (0.25)	−0.00 (0.09)
	N = 147	N = 147

*Notes:* \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05. Standard errors in parentheses. Province fixed effects included. OLS in first column, logistic regression in the second. The dependent variable in first column is the percentage of the budget spent, averaged over 2003–2006. The dependent variable in the last column is a binary variable indicating whether the municipality underspent in each of those years. That column presents changes in the predicted probabilities of being a consistent underspender associated with a one-standard-deviation change in the independent variables, holding others at their means. Municipalities missing values dropped.

# Using rational choice to research the social world

- ▶ Identify "paradox" to challenge the "conventional" wisdom (e.g., things taken for granted or so but turn out to be quite counterintuitive)
- ▶ Define "actors" involved, laying down their different outcomes and actions
- ▶ Set "utilities" to help the search for their "optimal" strategies; whether one action will be taken or not, can be an "interactive" and "repeated" process
- ▶ Note that "utilities" do not come out of nowhere, and actors may be constrained by their "information" environment

## Example: Prisoner's dilemma

		Actor B	
		Confess	Don't Confess
Actor A	Confess	-10	-20
	Don't Confess	0	-5

- ▶ Suppose A and B are arrested; the police puts them in two different interrogation rooms
- ▶ If both confess, both get 10 years in prison
- ▶ If none of them confesses, both get 5 years in prison
- ▶ For both A and B, they can get away if only the other side confesses, and the other side will get 20 years in prison

## Example: Prisoner's dilemma

		Actor B	
		Confess	Don't Confess
		Confess	-10
Actor A	Confess	-10	0
	Don't Confess	0	-5

- ▶ A would not know what B will do (unless they make a deal beforehand)
- ▶ If B confesses, A should confess as well
- ▶ If B does not confess, A should confess, too
- ▶ So regardless what B will do, **A should confess anyway**

## Example: Prisoner's dilemma

		Actor B	
		Confess	Don't Confess
		Confess	-10
Actor A	Confess	-10	0
	Don't Confess	0	-5

- ▶ Likewise, B would not know what A will do
- ▶ If A confesses, B should confess as well
- ▶ If A does not confess, B should confess, too
- ▶ So regardless what A will do, **B should confess anyway**

## Example: Prisoner's dilemma

		Actor B	
		Confess	Don't Confess
		Confess	-10
Actor A	Confess	-10	0
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- ▶ As a result, both actors are stuck in the situation such that both will confess
- ▶ This is counterintuitive, as ideally none of them should
- ▶ What can we do to get away from this conundrum – of course, we would not want to set suspects on loose, but let's put that aside
- ▶ Any other comments or questions?

## The Analytic Narrative Project

ROBERT H. BATES *Harvard University*

AVNER GREIF *Stanford University*

MARGARET LEVI *University of Washington*

JEAN-LAURENT ROSENTHAL *University of California, Los Angeles*

BARRY R. WEINGAST *Stanford University*



Robert Bates  
(Harvard)



Avner Grief  
(Stanford)



Margaret Levi  
(Stanford)



Jean-Laurent Rosenthal  
(Caltech)



Barry Weingast  
(Stanford)

## Rationale and principle

- ▶ Using game theoretical models to explain particular political economy cases that may generate broad theoretical implications, such as
  - Political order as equilibria
  - How domestic politics and intl relations shape each other
  - Institutions matter for political economy of development
- ▶ The process is deductive, developing "thick" narratives as "guided" by rational-choice like argument (as some sort of empirical tests)
- ▶ Inspires the EITM (empirical implications of theoretical models) school in the United States
- ▶ Check out examples in the book for demonstration

## Critiques: A case of “excessive” ambition (Elster 2000)

- ▶ Too ambitious – is rational choice theory a "universal" theory?  
Theory- or problem-driven (Green and Shapiro 1994)?
- ▶ The assumption for "rational" actors is too much, while rational choice is able to accommodate non-material or non-selfish interests
- ▶ While the model is based on "individuals," aggregation of preferences may not be that straightforward (e.g., Arrow's impossibility theorem)
- ▶ How about "beliefs" or "intentions?" And uncertainty, after all? The provided explanation is often ad hoc and unrealistic



## Featured Research



### EITM Evaluation

This document offers an evaluation of the EITM Summer Institutes and associated projects from a series of grants to Harvard University, Duke University, and the University of Michigan from 2002 to 2016. This evaluation provides new information and analysis that complements the information provided in yearly reports submitted since 2002.

[Read More...](#)

## Announcements

### EITM Alumni Directory

Please complete the form to provide your most recent professional information. We will use this information to keep the new alumni directory up-to-date.

[Read More...](#)

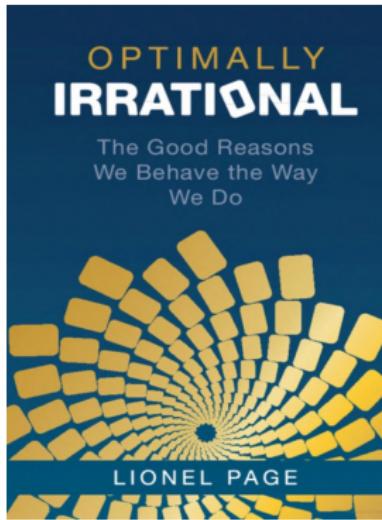
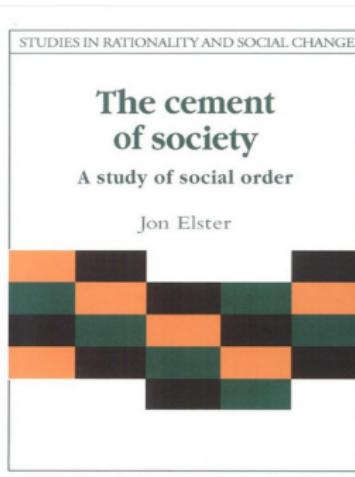
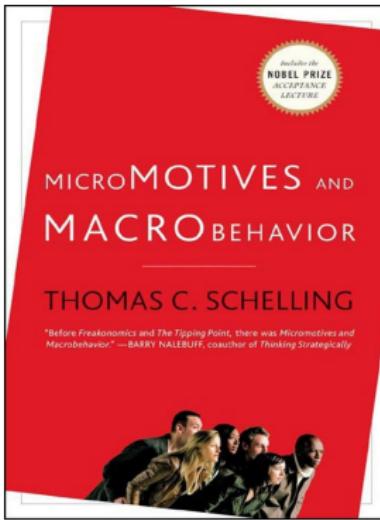
[All Announcements](#)

<https://eitminstitute.org/>



## Exercise

What is the issue you'd like to deal with in your analytical essay? Share with your group members – do you find the approach of “analytical narratives” useful, even with all the caveats associated with the rational choice framework?



Thank you!



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