# Geog 560A  Political-economic geographies: methodology matters

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### Assessment

- **Primer** 20%
- **Research design** 30%
- **Book project** 40%
- **Participation (including discussion lead)** 10%
Questions of methodology

This course is primarily concerned with (qualitative) research process and practice in political-economic geography. We will revisit some of the most significant moments in the recent history (and geography) of the field, broadly defined. I cannot claim that the coverage of topics and techniques is comprehensive (or for that matter authoritative), but it will engage with some of the set-piece methodological debates in the field, while also dealing with a range of issues that I have encountered (and struggled with) in my own research, in collaborations, and in exchanges. This implies rendering visible, legible, and audible a series of issues in actually existing research practice that too often remain repressed or overlooked. For various reasons, questions of method and practice tend to get short shrift in human geography (which comes at a price, both internally and externally).

The main objective of this course is to bring these discussions to the surface, in the context of their application, and to explore them as a group. These are challenging issues, no matter how many times researchers have been around the block; there is much to be gained from ventilating them, exchanging ideas about them, and learning from what we might call methodological good practice. It is important to establish a principle of mutual respect across the repertoire of methods, since all imply different but partial ways of seeing the world. This means that there is much to learn both about and from different methods, including those we choose not to use.

We will maintain a steady-to-high pace with respect to weekly readings and assignments, though will stay below the book-per-week threshold on average. What will be essential for the course (to work) is thorough preparation and positive engagement in our class discussions.

There is one required text for the course: Tickell A et al (eds) (2007) Politics and practice in economic geography (London: Sage). Copies have been placed on reserve in the GIC, but in practical terms will be more convenient for you to buy, borrow or otherwise acquire copies of your own.

Assignments and assessment

Firstly, each student (usually working in pairs) will prepare a methodological “primer” for presentation to the class, covering a series of prescribed topics (e.g. inductive vs deductive reasoning). The primer will take the form of a detailed memo for circulation to the class (2-3pp). Written in the “dictionary” style (i.e. with an emphasis on definitional clarity, classification of principal positions and lines of debate, key protagonists, illustrations and examples, etc.), these should include a short bibliography (up to half a page), including work by geographers where available. The primer reports will be deposited in the class Dropbox no later than one full day before the class. These will be resources for the group as a whole. There will be 10-minute presentations on the theme of each primer, followed by discussion. The report and presentation for the methodological primer project together will comprise 20% of the final mark for the course.

Secondly, each student will prepare an outline research design/proposal relating to their own research project for discussion in class. Each student will make a 10-minute presentation, having prepared a 2pp summary to share with the group, to be deposited in the class Dropbox no later than one full day before the presentation date. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to the question of research design, but in dialogue with Watts’ “Holy grail” paper (in the Dropbox for week 1), each report/presentation should include, in some form or
another: (a) a pithy statement of the puzzle or problem to be addressed, (b) a discussion of the linkage between theory/concepts, chosen method(s), and evidence, (c) a hunch or working hypothesis, including an answer to the question, what will we learn from this study that we do not currently know? and (d) candid reflections on challenges, dilemmas, and difficulties. The report and presentation for the research design/proposal project together will comprise 30% of the final mark for the course.

Third, each student will complete a book project, a constructive deconstruction and positive— but—critical assessment of a significant monograph (involving primary research) chosen from the field of political-economic geography. Book selections will be made and (approved) within the first three weeks of term. These should be books with real heft, written in a fashion that is “available” for methodological interrogation and deconstruction. Ideally, they will display methodological creativity, real depth, and repay the attention that you will pay them. There follows an indicative list of the kind of books that might be appropriate for such an assignment. (You may choose one of these, should you wish.)


In making your choice, the following requirements should be considered. First, this must be a book you have not already read (I am trusting you here!). It should be one that you reckon will repay the investment of a close and constructively critical read, in line with your future research trajectory. It should reflect, in other words, not just your topical interests but the kind of research that you aspire to do. Second, it follows that your relationship with the book will be different to the kind of full-throttle critique that is a feature of many graduate classes. You will, at least in part, be advocating for this book, and making the case for the author’s approach. It should be a book that the group can learn from, methodologically speaking. Third, you should approach your selected book with a view to “reverse engineering” the author’s methodology (including the research design that enabled the project; the status, use, and plasticity of theory; the research practices and methods deployed; the presentation of data, evidence, and cases). Note that not all monographs are equally available for this treatment! It will help if there is a wider body of work (and track record) within which you can situate the book, especially where these help to clarify the author’s methodological position and approach.
Each student will make a 10-minute presentation on their book project, having prepared a 2pp summary to share with the group, to be deposited in the class Dropbox no later than one full day before the presentation date. Ideally, the summary will be in key-point (rather than narrative) form, conveying: the author’s primary purpose in the book; the methodological strategy employed; examples of especially effective or compelling methodological practice; particular challenges or issues that were encountered; an overall critical assessment of the book. The book report and presentation/summary will together comprise 40% of the final mark for the course.

Finally, active engagement with the readings and full class participation is essential. Each student will be designated as a “discussion lead” for one of our classes. They will collate talking points and questions, derived from the readings, from each member of the class, preparing a summary for inclusion in the class Dropbox no later than lunchtime on the day before class. A mark for overall engagement will count for 10% of the final grade for the course.

September 7    Questioning method

In this opening session we will discuss the “rules of engagement” for our seminar, along with housekeeping arrangements and work assignments for the term. We will also have an introductory discussion of research methods and practice in the field of political-economic geography, broadly defined, reflecting on the required readings. There will be an opening discussion of Michael Watts’ paper on proposal writing.

Required reading:
Watts M (nd) The holy grail: in pursuit of the dissertation proposal, Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley

September 14    A sampler

The objective of this week’s class is to establish an overview of the methodological state of play and aspects of the methods debate in (actually existing) economic geography. Politics and practice sought to survey the field, but also to set the stage for various forms of methodological deepening. The readings for this week are indicative of the range of work currently found in the field, calling attention also to some of their antecedents. Which methodological norms have stabilized and which are being contested in the field? If a qualitative turn has taken place, how far has it gone? How far can it go? Reflect on these questions in preparation for the class: what do these chapters reveal (to you) about their authors, and what about their respective approaches/arguments do you find appealing/intriguing/disconcerting/challenging?

Primer: nomothetic vs idiographic approaches
Primer: inductive vs deductive reasoning
Primer: grounded theory and its limits
Required reading:

September 21  Contesting reality

Massey and Meegan’s Politics and method—still one of the few methodology books published in the field—marked a key moment for what was then known as industrial geography. Not only did the book open up questions of politics in economic geography, it was also a carrier for the critical-realist challenge to positivist regional science and orthodox (descriptive) industrial geography. It also set the stage for what would be a sustained turn towards “inventive” methods, coupled with the adoption of more critical approaches to political-economic theory.

Primer: critical realism
Primer: abstraction vs generalization
Primer: positivism vs postpositivism

Required reading:

Further reading:
The localities debate was a defining moment for economic geography, and for critical human geography more generally. An offshoot from Massey’s spatial divisions of labor project in the UK, the localities research program was a major national initiative remembered more for the methodological controversies it provoked than for its outcomes. It presaged, inter alia, the ascendancy of poststructuralist approaches, the scale debate, and the turn to feminism; it exposed some enduring (Atlantic) divisions on the left of economic geography; and it reopened some old arguments about idiosyncratic versus nomothetic research strategies, the status of (different kinds of) theory, and the ultimate purpose of empirical inquiry.

Primer: Wacquant debate
Primer: Chicago/Manchester school
Primer: Goffman debate

Required reading:
Lovering J (1989) Postmodernism, Marxism, and locality research: the contribution of critical realism to the debate. *Antipode* 21(1) 1–12

Further reading:
Gertler M S (2003) Tacit knowledge and the economic geography of context, or the undefinable tacitness of being (there). *Journal of Economic Geography* 3(1) 75–99

Feminist interventions, particularly in the decade from the mid-1980s, changed the course of economic geography, while opening up a series of far-reaching methodological questions. Feminist economic geography can be seen as a source of critique (e.g. of the privileged objects and subjects of economic-geographical research), but also an approach and an ethic. It is also a different way of seeing, and of valuing, economic activities and relations, implying different modes of engagement and different methods.

Required reading:

Further reading:

October 12 Flexible futures?

Debates around post-Fordism occupied the center stage for many economic geographers between the late 1980s and the mid 1990s, after which they receded from view (even if many of the substantive, political, and methodological issues that they raised did not). Notably, this was a time of intense dialogue between economic geographers, sociologists, and institutional economists. The flexibility debates turned on the challenges, inter alia, of separating incremental change from systemic change, of assigning explanatory priority (to technology, to labor, to institutions ...), and not least, of extrapolating from “local” developments to paradigmatic realignments.

Required reading:
Further reading:

October 19 No class

October 26 Scale wars

The scale debates were in some ways a passing moment in political-economic geography, but in other respects played out what have been recurring tensions and disagreements in the field. While in some respects unsatisfying (and characteristically incomplete), debates around scale reopened some old fault lines of difference (and misunderstanding?) between alternative approaches in political-economic geography, echoing the locality debate; they also anticipated some aspects of subsequent debates around neoliberalism and planetary urbanism.

Required reading:

Further readings:
What is the explanatory status of (local) case studies? What work do they do? What are their explanatory limits/potential? How can cases be bounded, spatially and in other (practical and conceptual) respects? We will consider garden-variety case studies and, more particularly, the case for “extended” case studies. The extended case method, which has a long history in ethnographic practice, has been reconstructed in more sociological terms by Michael Burawoy in ways that resonate strongly with methodological inclinations and concerns in economic geography. Here, the objective is to mobilize critical ethnography in service of the continuing reconstruction of social theory and in the deconstruction of global/local binaries.

**Required reading:**
Gidwani V and Maringanti A (2016) The waste-value dialectic: lumpen urbanization in contemporary India. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36(1) 112-133

**Further reading:**

**November 9  Up close**

After the “intensive turn” of the 1980s, the methodological arc of political-economic geography has bent increasingly in the direction of ethnographic methods. Increasingly, these methods underpin some of the most influential (theoretical) work in the field. Characteristically closely focused, experiential, and often intimate, ethnographic approaches entail proximate relations with sites and subjects. How do ethnographers define the “boundaries” of their (case) studies? How do they combine thick description with explicit theorization? How do they encounter, and handle, the macro, the distant, and the structural?

**Required reading:**


*Further reading:*


**November 16  Just askin’**

Something of a rarity in the field as recently as the mid-1980s, qualitative interviewing has since been installed as something approaching the default method in economic geography, although increasingly it is complemented with, or embedded within, more ethnographic approaches. Quite weakly codified, interview methods are sometimes understood as a commonsense practice, “conversations with a purpose.” And they may be reduced to a (staged) encounter, or event, when in fact they should be understood programmatically. Sometimes looked down upon, as a poor relation of ethnography, interviews nevertheless have a distinctive role and contribution. The discussion in class will include two examples of my own work that drew on interview material, not as “models”, needless to say, but because I can talk to the issue of how these particular sausages were made.

**Required reading:***


Further reading
Herod A (1993) Gender issues in the use of interviewing as a research method. *Professional Geographer* 45(3) 305–317

November 23 Following stuff

The rise of multi-site ethnographies, science studies and actor network theory, and various forms of relational theorizing have been accompanied by the embrace of various methods for “following” actors, practices, and processes, from the shadowing of laboratory scientists to the pursuit of mobile policies. But what methodologies are being mobilized in this way, what is lost, occluded, or left behind? What are the implications for those methods that more conventionally privilege dwelling (like some ethnographies) or institutionalized formations (like some approaches to urban political economy)?

Required reading:
Gidwani V K (2007) “I offer you this, commodity.” In Tickell *et al* (eds) *Politics and practice in economic geography*

Further reading:
Since the 1990s, political-economic geography has tended to adopt a characteristically meso-analytical gaze, attuned to the local and even bodily scales, adopting nodes-and-networks optics, favoring local case studies, and so forth. But where is the macro in contemporary political-economic geography? Whatever happened to uneven development? Neoliberalism debates have become a proxy for a host of questions concerning the status of the local and the role of the “structural.” Neoliberalism is something of a rascal concept in the critical social sciences. In some accounts it is an omnipresent (and omnibus) “first cause,” elsewhere it hovers in the background as a barely problematized, quasi-atmospheric presence, while there are also those that dismiss it as a figment of the left imagination or as a source of political consolation. What does it mean to invoke (or deny) “neoliberalism” as an explanatory factor? How might a hegemonic, ideological or chimerical phenomenon like “neoliberalism” be rendered methodologically tractable? Can it be reduced to certain actors or institutions? Where does its power reside? How is this power realized, resisted?

Required reading:
Collier S J (2012) Neoliberalism as big Leviathan, or ...? A response to Wacquant and Hilgers. Social Anthropology 20(2) 186-195
Peck J (2013) Explaining (with) neoliberalism. Territory, Politics, Governance 1(2) 132-157
Le Galès P (2016) Neoliberalism and urban change: stretching a good idea too far? Territory, Politics, Governance 4(2) 154–172

Further reading: