Researching International Politics: Qualitative Methods

Metatheoretical Introduction: Ontology and epistemology

Jakub Tesař
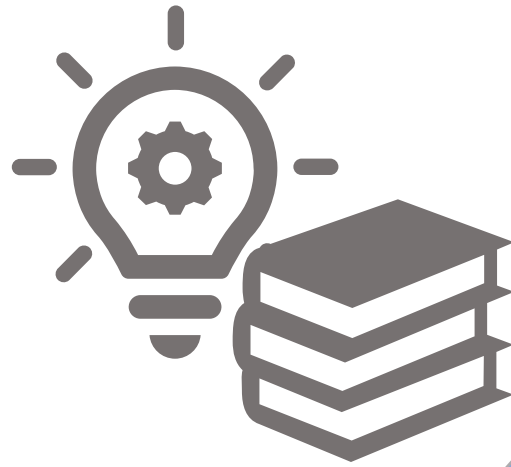
Class structure

Class aim

- Brutally simple (and simplistic) introduction to philosophy of science and metatheory of IR

Class outline

- What is ontology and epistemology
- Why it matters
- Two basic approaches and their comparison
- Connection between meta-theory, theory, methodology and methods

Philosophical wagers
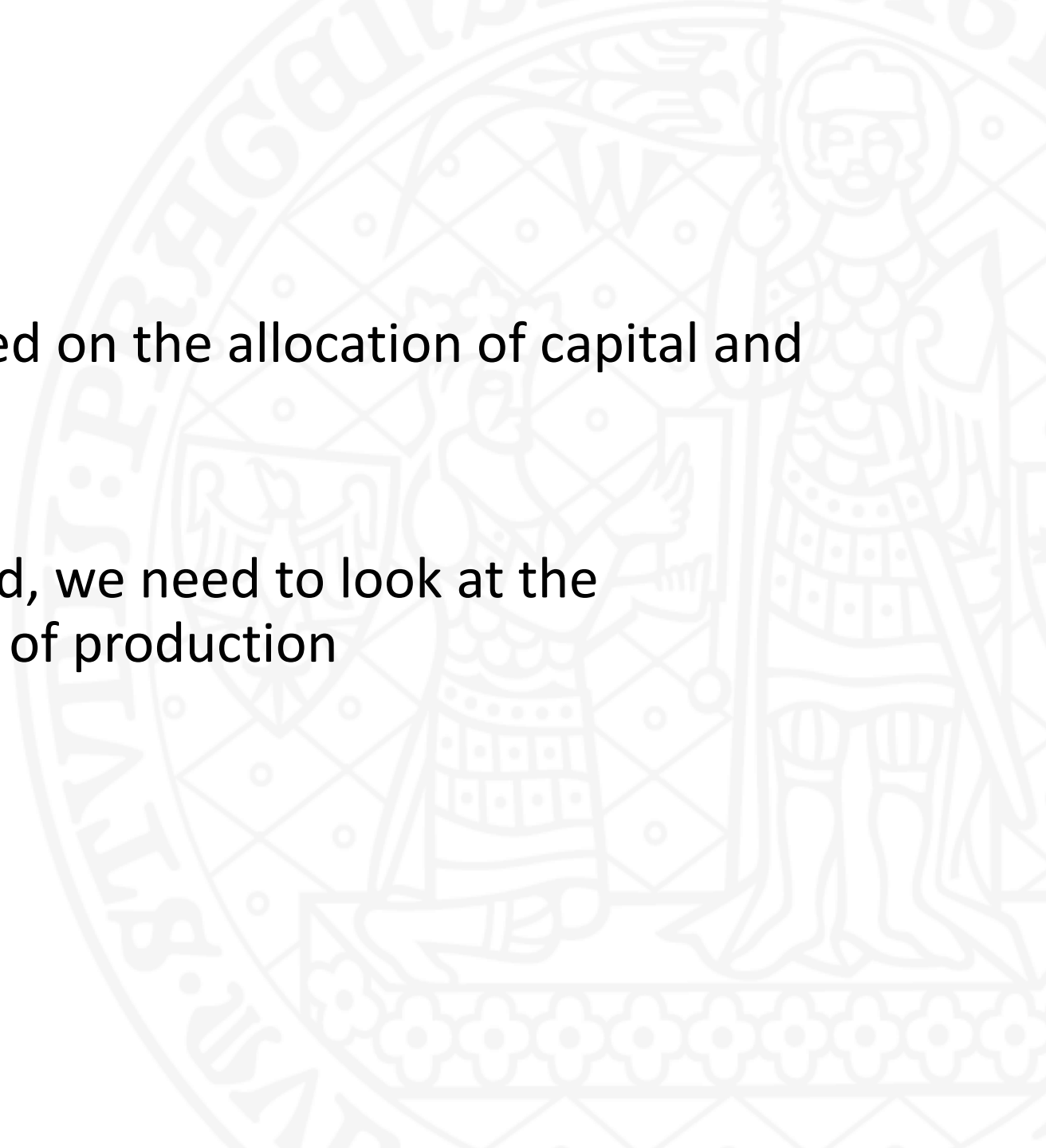
Metatheory: Ontology and epistemology

Ontology

- "a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

- study of being: What is the world made of? What is its nature?

Epistemology

- "the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

- study of knowing: How can we know anything about the world?

Example I: Marxism

- The social and political life is based on the allocation of capital and forms of economic production

- In order to comprehend the world, we need to look at the distribution of capital and means of production

Example II: Post-colonialism

- The current conditions are product of the relationship between the metropolis and the colony/the West and the Rest

- We need to investigate history of colonial dominance, its practices, how they operated, what are their lasting/ongoing effects

Exercise – ontology and epistemology

Which of the following statements are ontological/epistemological claims?

1. International law is irrelevant because there are no means to enforce it in world politics.

2. Scientists should aim to discover universal laws that drive world politics.

3. World politics is driven by the current distribution of material capabilities among countries.

4. Words we use to describe world politics are never value-neutral. They reflect (and reify) the prevailing social structure.

5. Democracy is a preferred type of regime for countries.

6. There are various cultures of anarchy which are linked to how states perceive each other.

7. The Cold war was partially driven by the conviction of the scientists that states ought to balance the power of possible competitor to survive in international anarchy.
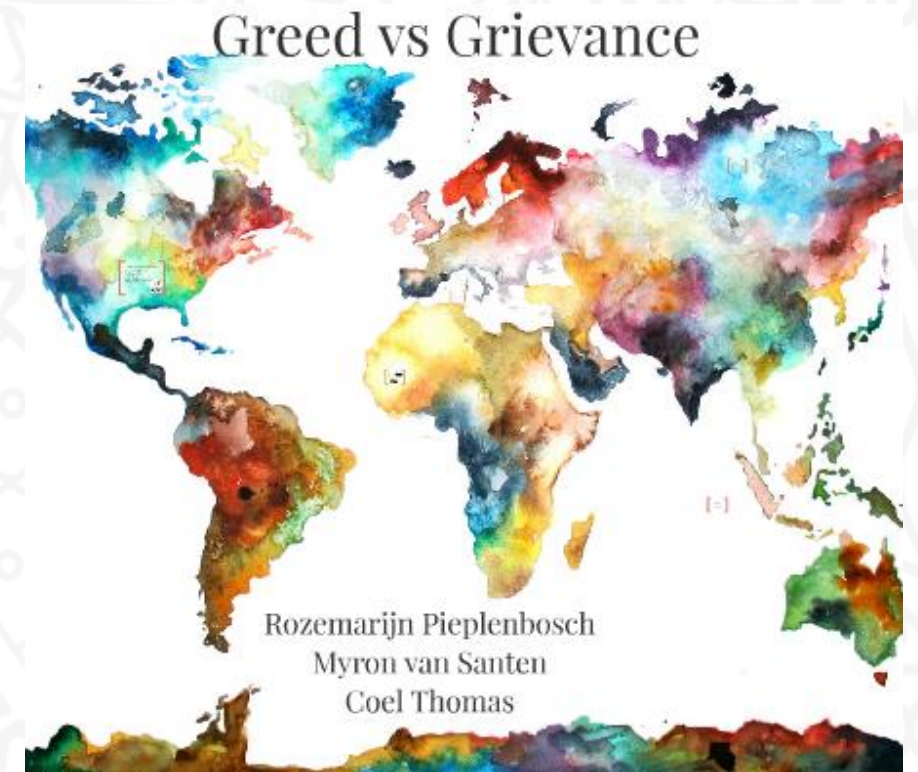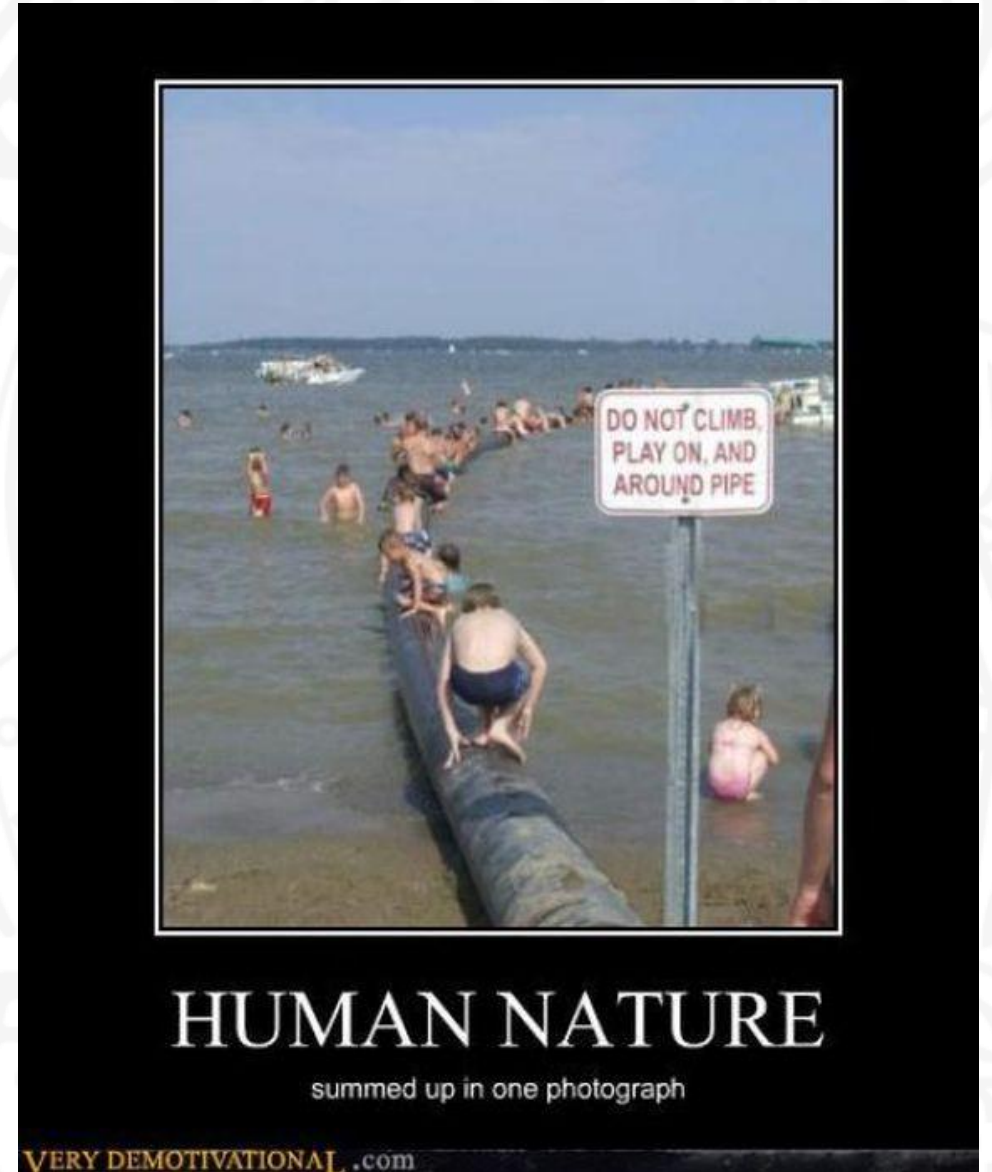
Why should I care?

Internal validity as a demarcation criterium

- IR and Security Studies seek to better understand international politics and security – we need to have a grasp of how society and politics operate in general
  - how to distinguish valid claims from alternatives?

- intellectual rigor and consistency as demarcation criterium
  - do our conclusion follow rigorously from the **evidence** and **logical argumentation** that we provide?

Greed vs Grievance

Rozemarijn Pieplenbosch
Myron van Santen
Coel Thomas

Assumptions

- We all have some assumptions about how the world works

- it is useful (personally, politically and academically) to be explicit about it and reflect on our positions
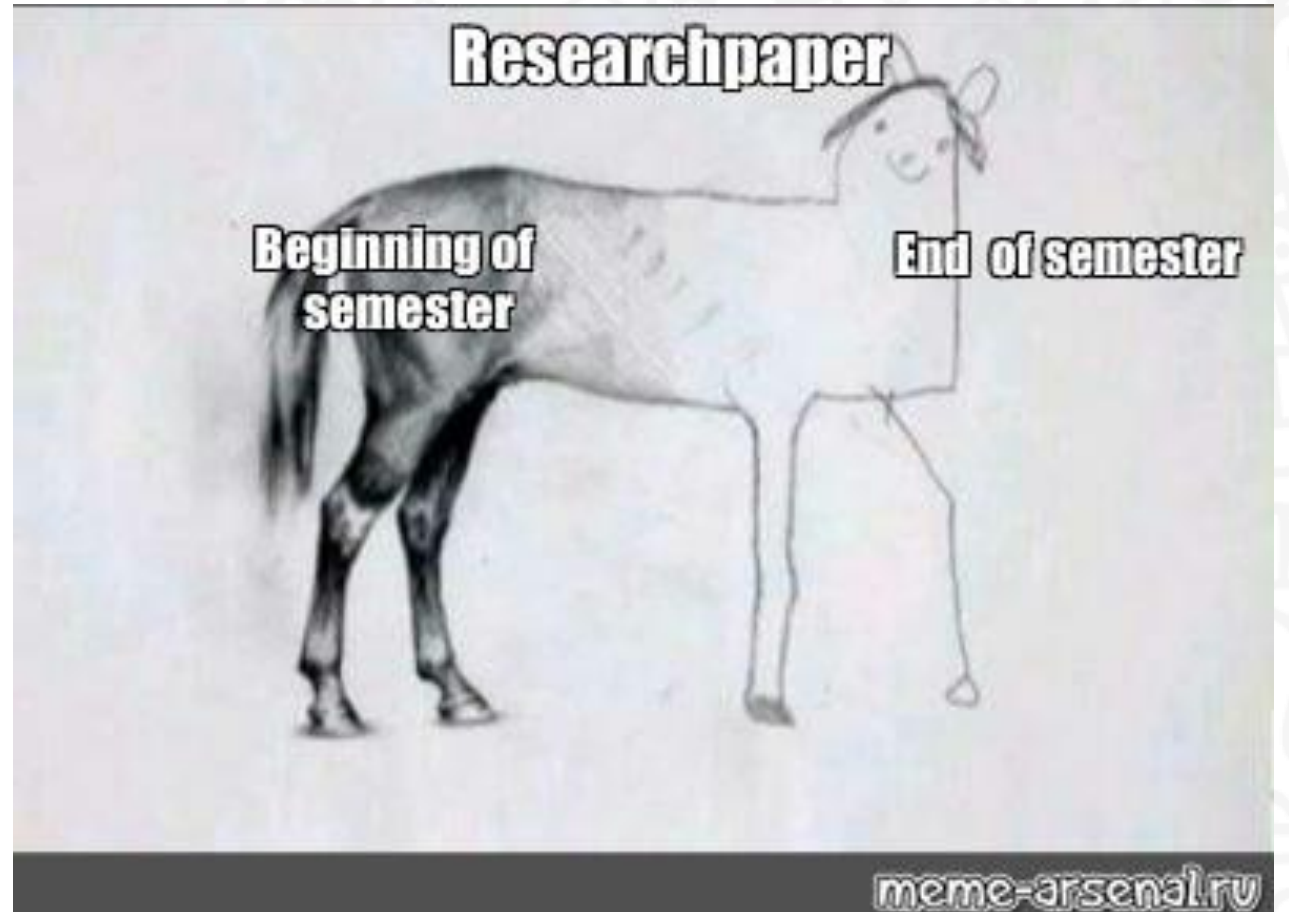
Policy impacts

- these assumptions have impact on policy-making

Last but not least: Your research projects

- internal validity of the research project is a good way how to successfully conclude your studies

What options are available?

Two basic paradigms

Ontological positions	Epistemological positions
↓ ↓	↓ ↓
Objectivism **Constructivism**	**Positivism** **Interpretivism**

Objectivism and positivism

- World is composed of **objective reality which exist independently of our beliefs and thoughts** and which can be found using proper methods
- There is a clear **distinction** between the way **the world is and our beliefs and understandings**

- Social and the natural worlds are essentially the same – inspiration from **natural science**
- Mostly **the material and the physical** is considered significant
- Crucial role of **senses** – we can **observe**, **measure and classify** phenomena
- Events have clear causes – these causes have **law-like nature and regularity**
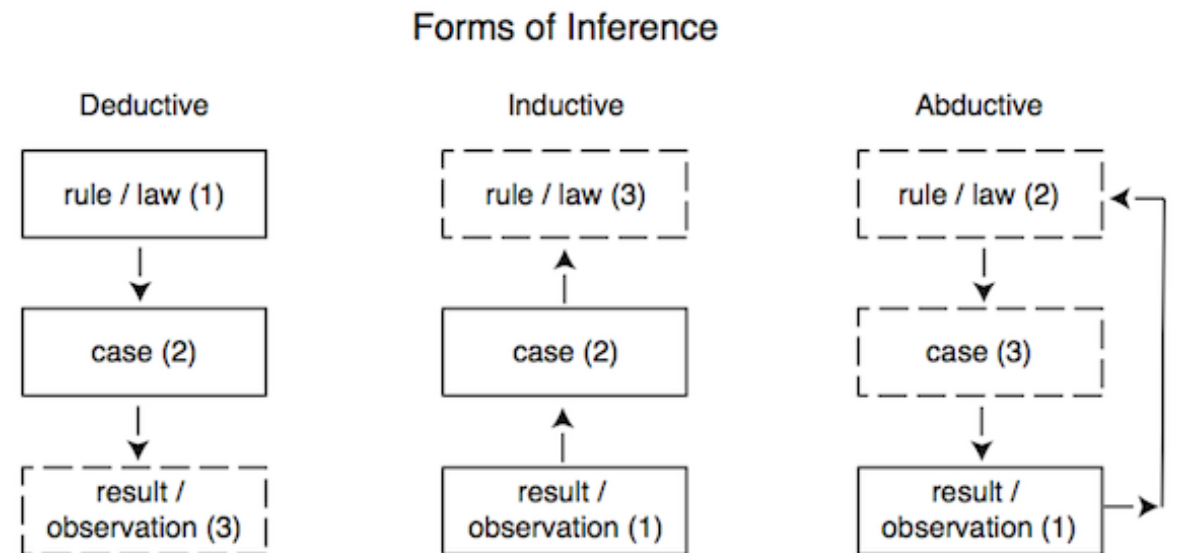
Objectivism and positivism

- **Value-free and neutral inquiry** is possible and desirable
- Discerning **causality** is the key task of science (independent – dependent variables)

- Ask **"why"** questions
- Seeks to **explain** processes

Objectivism and positivism – implications

- Both qualitative and quantitative studies
- Usually, linear research process with clear research design
- Development and testing of theories and hypotheses
- Deductive/abductive

Forms of Inference

Deductive

- rule / law (1)
  - ↓
- case (2)
  - ↓
- result / observation (3)

Inductive

- rule / law (3)
  - ↑
- case (2)
  - ↑
- result / observation (1)

Abductive

- rule / law (2)
  - ↓
- case (3)
  - ↓
- result / observation (1)

Adapted from: Fischer, H. R. 2001. Abductive Reasoning as a Way of Worldmaking. Foundations of Science 4:361-383.

Exercise – critique of objectivism and positivism

What are the possible arguments against the objectivist and positivist approach to social research?
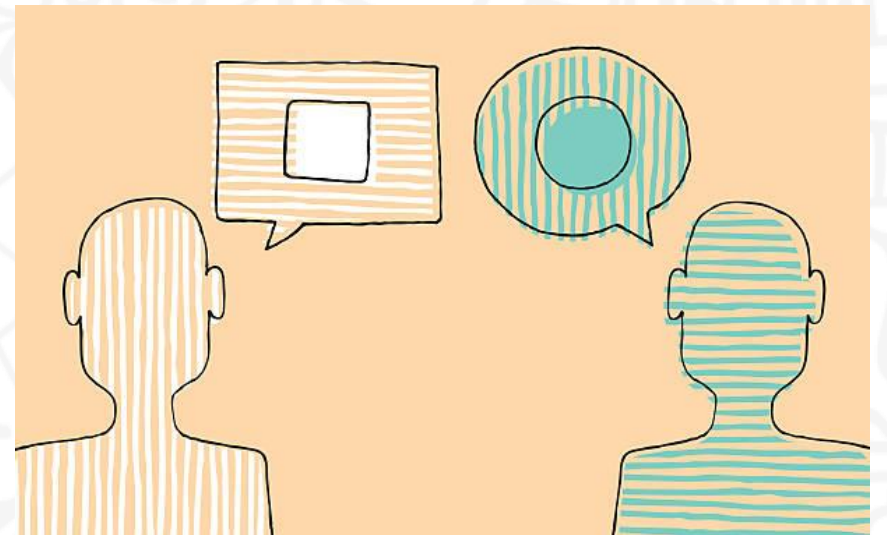
A. There is not enough/reliable data to base our knowledge on

B. Measuring and classifying is always somewhat arbitrary

C. We cannot be objective and detach our opinions from the subject of study

D. Causality, as we know it from the natural sciences (apple always falls when dropped), does not apply to the social world where general tendencies (if something) are rather observed

Constructivism and interpretivism

- There is external reality, but it is known through human mind, its understanding is **socially constructed**
- **Researchers are not separated from the world** they seek to understand

- We need approaches different from those adopted from natural sciences, attuned to the **human experience**
- The "objective reality" is comprehended differently by different people, although there are some **shared, societal (inter-subjective) frames**
- **Human agency and meaning-making practices** mediate between the "world out there" and the social/political sphere – knowledge is produced by understanding how other people understand the world
- Phenomena have causes but these are not transcendent and non-changeable – the notion of "**emergent causality**"
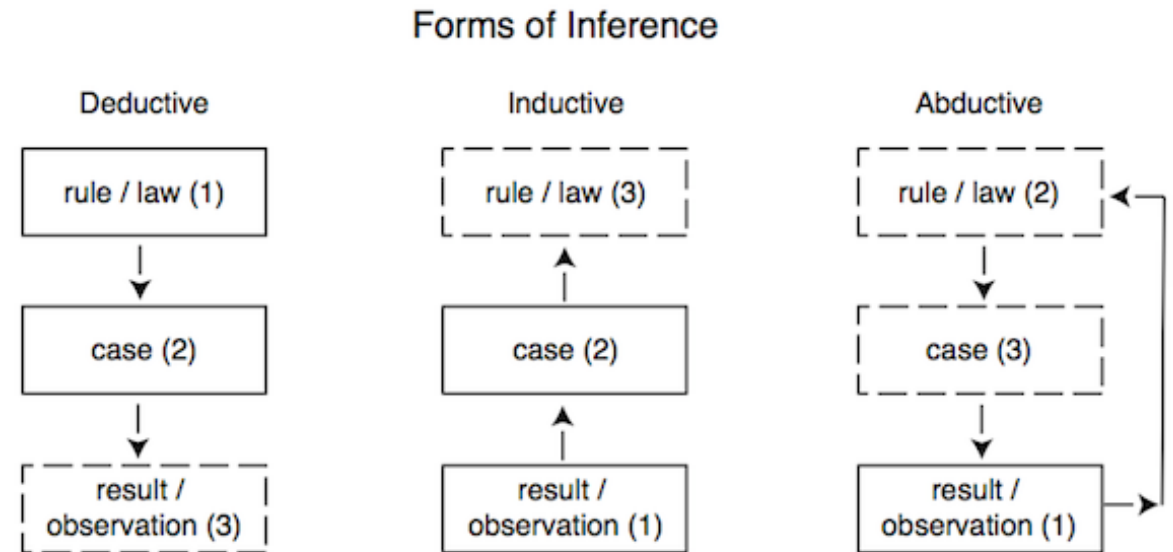
Constructivism and interpretivism

- Since researchers are humans, they **cannot separate** their beliefs and positions from what they study

- Looks into **conditions of possibility** for human actions

- Ask **"how"** questions

- Seeks to **understand** processes

Constructivism and interpretivism – implications

- Qualitative studies
- "Messier" research project with evolving research design
- Theories and concepts used to make sense of and organize the data
- Back-and-forth relationship between data and theory
- Inductive/abductive

Forms of Inference

Deductive | Inductive | Abductive

Deductive: rule / law (1) → case (2) → result / observation (3)

Inductive: rule / law (3) ← case (2) ← result / observation (1)

Abductive: rule / law (2) → case (3) → result / observation (1)

Adapted from: Fischer, H. R. 2001. Abductive Reasoning as a Way of Worldmaking. Foundations of Science 4:361-383.

Exercise – critique of constructivism and interpretivism

What are the possible arguments against the constructivist and interpretivist approach to social research?

A. Conclusions are too subjective – line between science and advocacy is blurred

B. Researcher is not receptive enough to the specific context of the agent/overall situation

C. Single account cannot tell us much about general rules

D. There are no clear guidelines how to interpret socially constructed world

* There are other options ...

- P. T. Jackson (2011): *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations. Philosophy of science and its implications for the study of world politics* (p 37)

		Relationship between knowledge and observation	
		phenomenalism	transfactualism
Relationship between the knower and the known	mind-world dualism	neopositivism	critical realism
	mind-world monism	analyticism	reflexivity

- this classification is not without critics, there are (many) other options

Example: The US Invasion of Iraq

Positivist approach(es)

- "It is about oil" theory: foreign policy is driven by economic interests
- Causal link between oil reserves in Iraq and the US invasion

- **Qualitative study: process-tracing**
  - Oil companies want to exploit Iraqi fields -> lobbying in the Congress and the White House -> decision to invade Iraq

- **Quantitative study**
  - Dataset of Western invasions
  - How many invasions were aimed against countries with large natural resources base?

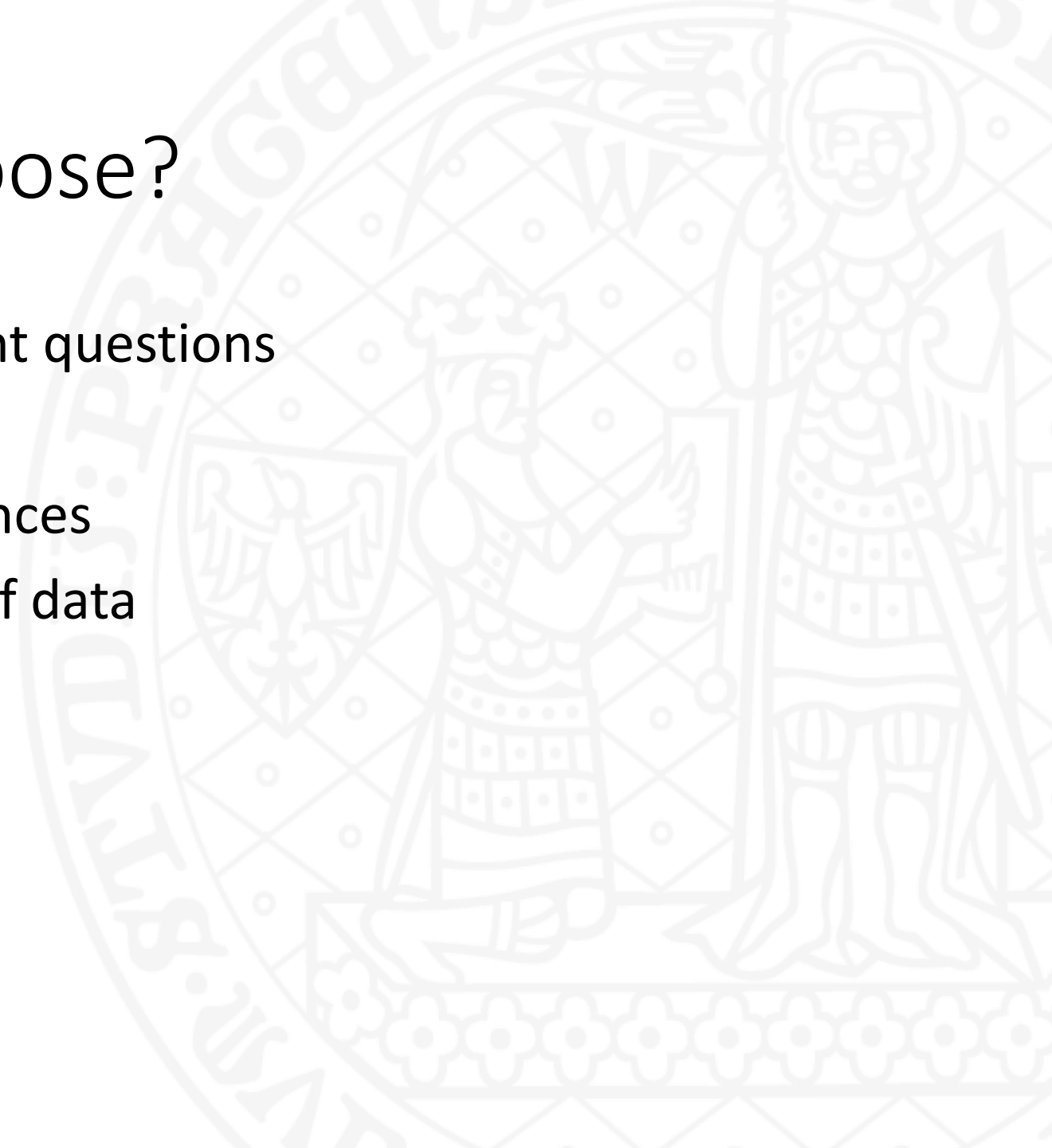# Example: The US Invasion of Iraq

Interpretivist approach(es)

- How to understand (interpret) the situation from the perspective of people involved in the case?

Qualitative study

- How come so many people were convinced that Iraq had WMD?

- How was the invasion justified?

- How did the leading figures think about their decisions?

- How were these things related to larger social and political conditions and meaning-making practices (Orientalist imaginary)?
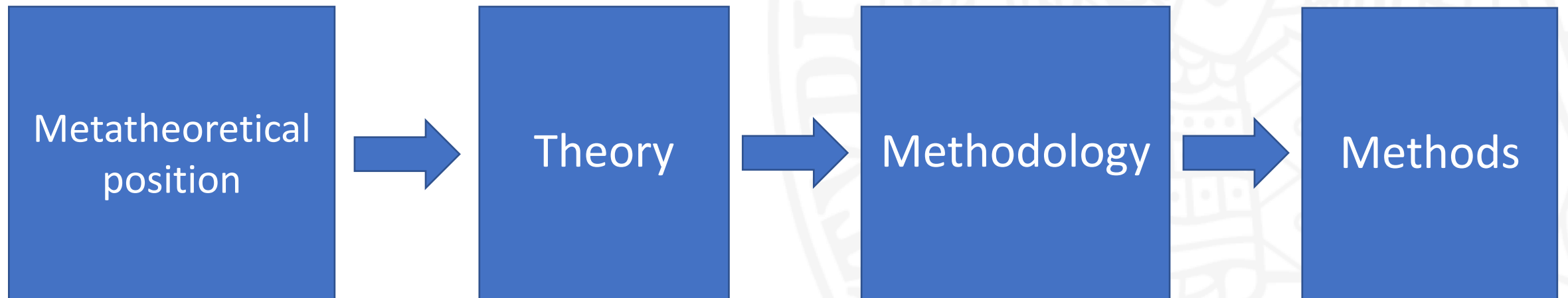
So… what should I choose?

- Different approaches ask different questions
- It depends on what you are after
- Personal proclivities and preferences
- Practical concerns – availability of data

Correspondence between metatheory and methods

- One cannot arbitrarily combine conflicting approaches

Comments, questions, …