Example of PLS 200 Class Note Book Assignment

Class #1: Explanation, Theory, And Scientific Method

1. Summary of most significant point of the lecture (approximately 25-50 words)

   *Today’s lecture focused on an introduction to the course. Topics covered included the tragedy of the commons, history of political science, the scientific method, and the goals of the behavioral approach. The lecture concluded by providing an overview of the rest of the first section of the course.*

2. Identify one key idea from each of the following readings:

   Wright, Nonzero, pp. 1-18 – the reading covered the introduction and first chapter of Nonzero. Wright presents an overview of his basic argument that there is direction in human history toward increased cooperation and complexity. He also suggests that game theory is a way to understand the overall historical dynamic.

3. Sketch short answers to each of the day’s study questions

   A. What is the tragedy of the commons? Give an example. How is the tragedy of the commons related to politics?

      *Tragedy of the Commons -- Hardin’s parable involves a pasture "open to all."*
      a) Imagine the grazing of animals on a common ground.
      b) Individuals are motivated to add to their flocks to increase personal wealth.
      c) Every animal added to the total degrades the commons a small amount. Although the degradation for each additional animal is small relative to the gain in wealth for the owner, if all owners follow this pattern the commons will ultimately be destroyed. And, being rational actors, each owner adds to their flock:
      d) Therein is the tragedy -- Each individual is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit - in a world that is limited.
      e) Ruin is the destination as each individual pursues their own interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.

      *Example – global warming

      Related to Politics – politics is focused on understanding dilemmas (e.g., Tragedy of the Commons) in order that we can avoid or extricate ourselves from them.

   B. Identify the four main goals of a behavioral approach (scientific) to politics

      1. Understand, Explain, Predict
      2. Theory-oriented, Theory-directed
      3. Use the Scientific Method
      4. Nature tells us whether our theory is in accordance with the actual state of affairs

   C. Identify the five steps of the conventional scientific method
1. Observation
2. Hypothesis
3. Empirical testing
4. Law
5. Theory

D. What does it mean to say that there is causality? What assumptions underlie causality? Why does science need a cause and effect assumption?

What is causality? Causality means that there is something that brings about or necessitates an effect or a result
Assumptions concerning causality
1. Nature is orderly
2. All natural phenomena have natural causes
3. We are able to discern the causes
Cause and effect is necessary because explanation, prediction, and understanding are predicated on the premise that nature is orderly and hence “same cause, same effect”.

E. What does it mean to say that the world is complex? How is complexity related to simplicity? What role does Ockham’s Razor play in the scientific approach to politics?

Complexity means that the world is made up of a large number of parts related in non-simple ways
Complexity is woven out of simplicity
Ockham’s Razor says that if there are two competing theories that do approximately well, focus on the simpler one.

4. Connect the day’s topic to some aspect of politics

Each of us go about our business of living our lives. To add comfort we use cars, air conditioning, etc. Emissions from these machines increase the amount of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere. Increases in these gasses increase the greenhouse effect and lead to increased temperatures on earth. As industrialization spreads to all regions of the world, these effects could greatly increase leading to a global catastrophe. In this way, each person pursuing their own gain can lead to a disaster for the group.