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From the inception of the American Political Science Association in 1903 until the present, there have been repeated attempts within the association to "transform the study of politics into an independent science" (Ross 1991: 288). Despite important variations among positivists and significant disagreements between positivists and non-positivists (including disputes about what "positivism" means), efforts to make political science a science have generally entailed separating facts from values, identifying law-like principles governing political action, formulating hypotheses, and subjecting these hypotheses to empirical tests.

Although standards of rigor are, to a certain extent a technical matter, subject to debate in any context (from poetry to physics), in political science contestation over scholarly rigor has generally accompanied efforts to unify the discipline across sub-disciplinary boundaries. A case in point is the exceptionally influential book by Gary King, Robert Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994). I think it is fair to say that no book in recent years has been as powerful as this one in authorizing experts and disciplining the discipline. By 2001, over twenty thousand copies had been sold; the book had already been reprinted six times; and five hundred eighteen libraries had purchased it.¹ Insisting that differences in traditions within the discipline were simply *stylistic* the authors sought to produce a unified epistemological and methodological community, one in which the scientific methods familiar to quantitative researchers would also become the norm in qualitative studies. The unity sought by King, Keohane, and Verba was not therefore based on the argument that qualitative work is potentially both non-scientific and legitimate. The claim, rather, was that there is simply no political science worthy of the name that does not conform to the putatively generalizable scientific strictures they defined.

According to KKV, the "best qualitative research" operates with "the same underlying logic of inference" as the one on which quantitative research is based. This logic of inference, whether causal or merely "descriptive," can be made "systematic and scientific," and is "relevant to all research where the goal is to learn facts about the real world" (6). Yet there is little discussion about what constitutes the real world, and the authors concede that not all questions of abiding concern for politics can be covered by the rules of inference. Thus the "real world" seems very much to become, in this treatment, simply that which is constituted by the "rules of inference." The effect is for some topics to be foreclosed for the sake of methodological practices that cohere with the author's quite specific understanding of science. This belief that the approach is ontologically, rather than merely provisionally, adequate may signal an unacknowledged metaphysical commitment underlying the book. Certainly it seems to limit the range of

¹ Keisha Lindsay supplied this information through a Word CAT Internet database search (June 2001) and through a telephone interview with Eric Rohmann, Sales Director, Princeton University Press, June 11, 2001.

possibilities open for rigorous work in political science. For KKV, "the distinctive characteristic that sets social science apart from casual observation is that social science seeks to arrive at valid inferences by the systematic use of well-established procedures of inquiry." (6) "Good research," for which the authors used "the word 'scientific'" as the "descriptor" is work that adheres to the dictates of explicitly scientific research (7). "Valid inferences" are those established by scientific work. Scientific work assures objectivity.

King, Keohane, and Verba's methodological treatise thereby rested on familiar understandings in the discipline: they assumed not only the intrinsic worth of scientific studies, but they also posited a specific and by no means self-evident understanding of science as a practice based on a clear divide between empirical facts and philosophical values. Like their predecessors, KKV drew a sharp distinction between "what is" and "what ought to be."² Questions about issues such as "agency, obligation, legitimacy, citizenship, sovereignty, and the proper relationship between national societies and international politics" were understood to be "philosophical rather than empirical" (KKV 1994: 6). The KKV approach thus not only reproduces the meaningful divide between political science and political theory, locating abstract conceptual concerns outside the domain of proper science, but it would also seem to read the manifestly political concerns of theory out of the discipline of political science. Science, following Popper and the behavioralists, required testable, falsifiable hypotheses, an acknowledgement of the tentative nature of findings, and (therefore) an emphasis on methods over results. Worried that the absence of consensus about what science is necessarily entailed disagreement about what constituted good work, the authors attempted, not to resolve the underlying philosophical problems raised by the work of Popper et al., but to impose a specific form of scientific rigor on the discipline at the expense of other rigorous forms of engagement with politics. In this sense, the book fitted well with a number of books in the 1980s and 1990s, many of which lamented the divisions within political science and sought to insist on the methodological assumptions of the natural sciences.³ Although *Designing Social Inquiry* has yet to create the desired consensus, the book was arguably more successful than any other in specifying the terms under which scholarly work would be taken seriously in the field.

Interpretive social science, the area of social science with which I am most familiar, received little recognition in *Designing Social Inquiry*, and indeed its methods are rarely taught in qualitative methods seminars in political science more generally. Admittedly, "interpretive social science" is a rubric that can refer to a variety of different epistemological, methodological, and political commitments. The "interpretive turn" is

² For a sophisticated discussion of the distinction between is and ought, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin's *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993 [1972]).

³ The most obvious text is Gabriel Almond's *The Discipline Divided: Schools and Sects in Political Science* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990). See also Gary King, *Unifying Political Methodology: The Likelihood Theory of Statistical Inference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989). One of the most oft-cited critiques of *Designing Social Inquiry* is Brady and Collier (eds.) *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

sometimes used as a synonym for the “cultural turn” (Hunt and Bonnell 1999) and at others for “hermeneutics” (Rabinow and Sullivan 1978; 1987; Geertz 1973; 1981). It sometimes means a commitment among practitioners “to violate the positivist taboo against joining evaluative concerns with descriptions of fact” (Rabinow and Sullivan 1978; 1987), and it sometimes connotes a belief that such a divide is impossible to sustain in practice, so that normative claims and factual statements necessarily infuse one another. Geertz is a practitioner of hermeneutics whose ideas pose an alternative to structuralism; Foucault is often considered to be “beyond structuralism and hermeneutics” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). Both scholars may be reasonably termed interpretivists.

The label may be so elastic as to refer to everything and nothing at the same time. Nevertheless, I think that there are at least four characteristics that unite interpretivists, despite their differences. **First, interpretivist social scientists tend to view knowledge, including scientific knowledge, as historically situated and enmeshed in relationships of power.** Borrowing from Foucault, interpretivists question the “power that is presumed to accompany...science” (Foucault 1972: 84). They are therefore committed to thinking through the epistemological commitments undergirding the production of law-like principles governing human behavior, which is to say, to deal with the philosophical questions the scientific approach tends to suppress. **Second, interpretivists are also “constructivists” in the sense that they see the world as socially made,** so that the categories, presuppositions, and classifications that refer to particular phenomena are manufactured rather than natural. There is no such thing as ethnicity or race, for example, outside of the social conditions that make such classifications meaningful. The task of an interpretivist may be, then, to see the sort of work these categories do, while accounting for how they come to seem natural when they do. **Third and relatedly, interpretivists tend to eschew the individualist orientation that characterizes rational choice and behaviorist literatures.** Although some interpretivists stress the importance of agentive individuals, they do not assume a maximizing, cost-benefit calculator who is unproblematically divorced from actual historical processes (e.g., Bourdieu 1978). Ideas, beliefs, values, and “preferences” are always embedded in a social world, which is constituted through humans’ linguistic, institutional, and practical relations with others (Wedeen 2002). **Fourth, interpretivists are particularly interested in language and other symbolic systems, in what is sometimes termed “culture” in the literature.**

Thus, it might be argued that the interpretivist inclination, rather than seeking to overcome the divergences and disagreements among political scientists, would be to encourage attention to the underlying philosophical issues that make sense of the differences, even while insisting on some shared standards of rigor. Interpretive work, like most work in political science, might be fairly judged on the basis of the following three criteria: 1) the logical coherence of the argument; 2) the cogency of supporting evidence; and 3) the anticipation of objections --the ability to take into account alternative explanations and arguments. Of course, interpretivists might also insist that social science work should be innovative and creative, should operate to unsettle existing

assumptions in ways that may be surprising and counterintuitive –inviting us to think in fresh and new ways about issues of perennial concern to political life.

In this light, an interpretivist's appreciation of ambiguity or "complications" need not be confused with what some social scientists might call the "unfalsifiability" of interpretivists' arguments. As I write in my first book, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (1999), my interpretivist account there can be falsified by demonstrating the existence of a regime in which “tired slogans and empty gestures foster allegiance and actually generate people's emotional commitments to the regime" (pp. 152-153). But not all interpretivist work is falsifiable. An analysis of the work qat chews –the leafy stimulant drug Yemenis chew in the afternoons -- do in contemporary Yemen, for example, is intended to clarify conceptual puzzlements about "democracy." And case studies of various qualitative stripes might contribute to on-going theoretical work by generating propositions for testing (e.g., that the very fragility of some authoritarian states --with weak capacities to generate national loyalty-- may enhance opportunities for widespread political activism and critical, deliberative, public discussion).

Because my area of interest and expertise is interpretive social science, it strikes me that in this case, political science needs to learn from other disciplines whose practitioners have thought more concertedly about that domain of interpretation, ranging from the semiotics of Roland Barthes, through structuralist anthropology, hermeneutics, practice-oriented post-structuralist anthropology, and science studies, to name a few. What a political scientist can bring to bear on those disciplines most familiar with interpretative methods is a fine-grained, rigorous attention to conceptual clarification through the political theory of philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein; an appreciation for the importance of ambiguity in the existing theories of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Thomas Hobbes (both of whom are being used these days to think about sovereignty); and a particular kind of tacking back and forth between theoretical insights and empirical evidence so that theoretical work illuminates the empirical world and the empirical world also raises questions about our long-standing theoretical presuppositions and findings. Political science is particularly good at asking the “so what?” question. Why should we care about identity-formation in contemporary Yemen or “swanking taxis” in South Africa, for example? Coming up with compelling responses can make social science work relevant across disciplinary and sub-disciplinary divides.

To my mind the most promising interpretive work conceives of culture, not as sedimented essences inhering in particular groups, nor as group traits, nor as a closed symbolic system synechdochic with a particular group, but rather as practices of meaning-making --as “semiotic practices.” Studying meaning-production entails analyzing the relations between actors’ practices (e.g., their work habits, self-policing strategies, and leisure patterns) and their systems of signification (language and other symbolic systems). This conceptualization operates in two ways. First, culture as semiotic practices can be thought of as an abstract theoretical category, a lens that focuses on meaning, rather than on, say, prices or votes. It offers a view of political phenomena by focusing attention on how and why actors invest them with meaning.

Second, this formulation refers to what symbols *do* –how symbols are inscribed in practices that operate to produce observable political effects (Wedeen 2002). By thinking of meaning construction in terms that emphasize intelligibility, as opposed to deep-seated psychological orientations, a practice-oriented approach avoids ambiguities that have bedeviled scholarly thinking and generated incommensurable understandings of what culture is. So, for example, Samuel Huntington's notion of culture as a bounded civilization in which essences inhere in particular groups –e.g., Westerners, Muslims -- is simply incommensurable with a notion of culture as semiotic practices. These two distinct notions have fundamentally different objects of inquiry. Culture as semiotic practices, I want to argue, has added value because it enables social scientists to examine the historical processes and power relationships that generate a group's "thin coherence" (Sewell 1999) without assuming that coherence a priori. Such an approach also allows us to recognize and explain the heterogeneous practices and vigorous communities of argument that exist within putatively coherent nation-states, pious traditions, etc.

While every activity has a semiotic component, the point here is not to assert that politics must be examined from a semiotic-practical point of view. Whether one does or does not explore processes of meaning-making will be determined by the particular research problem one confronts. Critical understandings of culture as practices of meaning-making facilitates insights about politics, enabling political scientists to produce sophisticated causal arguments and to treat forms of evidence that, while manifestly political, most political science approaches tend to overlook.

A practice-oriented cultural approach *can* help us explain issues of abiding concern to political science, such as how rhetoric and symbols generate compliance, how political identities crystallize or change over time, how preferences get generated, and why particular material and status interests are taken for granted, are viewed as valuable, or become available idioms for dissemination and collective action. By paying attention to the ways in which certain meanings become authoritative while others do not, political scientists can use this practice-oriented concept of culture to help explain why recognizable events or empirical regularities occur.

More generally, qualitative methods may be used to think through a variety of research problems. Ethnographic work may be able to give us a subtle and nuanced comparison of the divergent ways in which Hutus and Tutsis experience their ethnicity in towns and in refugee camps, respectively (Malkki 1995). Historical and comparative analysis may help us understand the origins of elite actors and the constraints they face in "democratic transitions," in industrializing, or in the processes of state-formation (Pierson 2004). Textual analysis can help us analyze how ideas of national unity are idealized in official sources, for example, while also enabling us to think about what work these discourses actually *do*. Attending carefully to the specific logics of a discourse on piety or on democracy, to name two examples, requires investigating the relationships between the concepts and practices constitutive of a particular "discursive tradition" (Mahmood 2005). But whereas texts do not actually "talk back," people in unstructured interviews do, thereby enabling us to understand the effects of particular images or actions, the multiple but nonetheless specifiable ways in which people make sense of their worlds.

