

# INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE. AN INTERVIEW WITH DVORA YANOW\*

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## ABSTRACT

This interview, which was conducted in July 2012, focuses on the history of interpretive analysis within political science and on some of the conceptual issues raised in Yanow's articles "Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods" (*Qualitative Methods* 1 (2) Fall (2003): 9-13) and "Interpretation in Policy Analysis: On Methods and Practice" (*Critical Policy Studies* 1 (1) (2007): 109-121).

**KEY WORDS:** Interpretive Political Analysis, Qualitative Political Analysis, Political Science

## ANÁLISIS INTERPRETATIVO Y CIENCIA POLÍTICA. UNA ENTREVISTA CON DVORA YANOW

Esta entrevista, realizada en julio de 2012, se centra en la historia del análisis interpretativo en la ciencia política y en algunas cuestiones conceptuales planteadas en los artículos de Yanow "Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods" (*Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 1 No 2 Fall (2003): 9-13) y "Interpretation in Policy Analysis: On Methods and Practice" (*Critical Policy Studies*, Vol 1 No 1 (2007): 109-121).

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**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Análisis político Interpretativo, análisis político cualitativo, ciencia Política

**Hernán Cuevas (HC):** In a short and dense piece that you wrote for the Newsletter of the Qualitative Methods Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA) entitled “Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods”<sup>1</sup> you attempted to clarify a sort of misunderstanding between what is qualitative and what is interpretive. Can you remind us about that discussion?

**Dvora Yanow (DY):** Well, I can’t quite say that the distinction was a misunderstanding. First of all, the essay was part of a Symposium in the Newsletter that evolved out of a panel at the American Political Science Association, at which someone down at the other end of the table was characterising qualitative research. I remember saying: “That bears absolutely no resemblance to what I know as qualitative research.” And then I realised that what some people saw as ‘qualitative’ research no longer resembled what that term has long designated—that is, those methods developed in the so-called Chicago School of sociological and anthropological field research. That meant that to refer to those sorts of methods, we needed to claim a term that was already being used in other fields: we were already talking about interpretive policy analysis; there was already interpretive sociology; and so forth. So it was time to explain to people working in this APSA section that there was a whole other way of thinking, an ontological and epistemological way of thinking, that didn’t fit their scheme of the world.

Basically, the distinction that has developed—in practice, I think, even before it was discussed methodologically—demarcates two different modes of doing ‘qualitative’ research. One of these draws on realist ontological presuppositions and objectivist epistemological ones. That is, it is conducted in keeping with the same presuppositions that characterize most ‘quantitative’ research; and these are informed, usually implicitly, by positivist understandings of science. The other draws on constructivist ontological presuppositions and inter-subjectivist, interpretive epistemological ones. This means that we are not living in a bipartite quantitative-qualitative methods world, but in a tripartite one, of quantitative-positivist, qualitative-positivist, and qualitative-interpretive methodologies and associated methods. It is the latter that is most closely associated with those older Chicago School studies. The language of qualitative and quantitative is

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1 Dvora Yanow, “Interpretive Empirical Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods”, *Qualitative Methods* 1 (2) Fall (2003): 9-13. Online at: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/moynihan/cqrm/Newsletter1.2.pdf>

misleading; those terms say very little about a study other than perhaps something about the character of its data, as anthropologist Michael Agar and sociologist Howard Becker, among others, have been saying for some time. And those two words have for some time been place-holders for interpretive and positivist methodologies, respectively. Because those compound adjectives are so clumsy, linguistically, we more commonly speak of quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive methods.

**HC:** I wonder to what extent the divide can be framed in terms of a variable-centred analysis on the one hand, and a more comprehension oriented, interpretive oriented analysis on the other hand.

**DY:** I wouldn't say that researchers using variables aren't trying to comprehend their data. But you could make a distinction between research that turns words into variables and research that retains word data in word form. When Peri Schwartz-Shea and I write about this (e.g., in the 2013/2006 book), we mark the difference between variables-based and word-based analysis. Most people familiar with statistical analysis of, say, survey questionnaires will recognize that the researcher takes respondents' word answers and translates them into numerical equivalents (e.g., on a Likert scale), and these numbers are then analyzed through some software package (these days) that runs statistical analyses of various sorts (e.g., regression analysis via SPSS). An interpretive or a qualitative researcher conducting, say, an interview-based study or an ethnography, in which much of the data is originally in word form, whether oral or written (e.g., documents), retain the word form of those data when analyzing them. (The exception is acts—what people do—and objects—aspects of the material world, such as the spatial setting of a political rally—both of which are translated into words for communication and analysis.)

**HC:** What do you think has been the impact of interpretive analysis in political science since then?

**DY:** The position of interpretive analysis in political science is much stronger today than what it was a few years ago. A number of things have been changing. Within the Qualitative Methods Section of APSA, now called Qualitative and Multi-method Research, the interpretive group is one among many others. (These include people who want qualitative research to do what King, Keohane and Verba said in their 1994 *Designing Social Inquiry*<sup>2</sup>; there are others who combine historical and comparative research.) A few years ago interpretive researchers formalized what the APSA calls

<sup>2</sup> King, Gary et al. *Designing Social Inquiry* (1995, Princeton, Princeton University Press).

a conference group or a conference-related group called Interpretive Methodologies and Methods.<sup>3</sup> It offers three prizes every year: a student paper award, in Hayward Alker's memory; a book award, honoring Charles Taylor; and the 'Grain of Sand Award', a lifetime or prolonged contribution award. Susanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph received the first award; Bud Duvall, an IR scholar from Minnesota, was awarded the second; and Anne Norton received it last year.

Other activities also support the broad interpretive research community. There is an Interpretation and Methods list serve<sup>4</sup> whose membership is fairly international, with activity also supporting the US system. I'm told by a colleague in Colorado that many of her students are subscribed, and while they may not contribute to the list, they're very happy to see the discussion because it helps them to feel less alone. I guess that's what characterizes interpretive work in the United States. People feel fairly isolated, so we've been trying to create a community of scholars where people will feel less isolated and more supported. That list serve is not constantly active, but every now and again someone posts a question and there's a flurry of activity as people try to help this person reason through the issue that's facing them. It's also used to communicate about new publications (journal articles, books), upcoming conferences and workshops, and so forth.

Publications of interpretive work across the social sciences and in political science more specifically have also established a stronger presence for these approaches. Peri Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and I coedited the 2006 *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*<sup>5</sup> book, which people tell me has created a space in political science for this kind of research. We've also created the Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods. Our own book, *Interpretive Research and Design: Concepts and Processes* (Routledge, 2012), is the first volume in that series, and we have several volumes under contract and others in various stages of preparation. Cecelia Lynch is writing one on interpretive approaches in international relations; Tim Pachirat has one on ethnography; Lee Ann Fujii is writing on interviewing; Fred Schaffer is working on a book on interpretive approaches to concept development; Shaul Shenhav is developing one on narrative analyses. We are actively looking for ideas from people who want to write. All the books are intentionally relatively small so that they can be read in one sitting and so that they can be worked into an existing syllabus without the instructor having to redesign the whole course. Ed Schatz published *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the*

3 See at: <http://community.apsanet.org/apsanet/communities1/viewcommunities/groupdetail?sCommunityKey=2d63fe2c-d008-4f65-9e26-99781fb0b047>

4 See at: <http://listserv.cddc.vt.edu/mailman/listinfo/interpretationandmethods>

5 Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine y Yanow, Dvora *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn* (2006, Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe); a second edition is in press and due out late Spring 2013.

*Study of Politics* (Chicago) in 2009, an edited collection that has brought that method (in both positivist-realist and interpretive versions) further onto the methods map. Other recent publications that also do this work are too numerous to itemize, so I'll just mention a few. Tim Pachirat and Lisa Wedeen have published field studies, Tim in a slaughterhouse in the US and Lisa, in Yemen and Syria. Kathy Cramer Walsh has two books out studying US politics at the neighborhood level. Samer Shehata has a wonderful book using shop floor experiences in two manufacturing firms in Egypt as a lens onto power structures there. Christian Büger has been exploring both science studies and practice studies in recently published articles; Cai Wilkinson has very thoughtful work emerging from her field research in Kyrgyzstan. Ilan Danjoux is doing exciting work on political cartoons. And Patrick Jackson's 2010 book takes on some foundational methodological distinctions. And these are just what I can think of off the top of my head, without including earlier works.

The funding front is still a challenge. Peri and I got funding from the National Science Foundation to run the Workshop on Interpretive Methods in Political Science in 2009, again trying to bring colleagues together with doctoral students and newer post-doctoral scholars. (Some materials are still available from that Workshop: <http://www.ipia.utah.edu/imps/>). Our argument there, as elsewhere, was that interpretive work is scientific and that it has a place at the science table.

With respect to departments, we have anecdotal evidence that some have changed what they do. Various departments have expanded their curricular offerings, no longer requiring PhD students to take basic and advanced courses only in statistics, but also now recognising that there are other ways of doing science in the study of politics and are adding courses in interpretive and/or qualitative methods.

I get emails every now and again that also suggest a changing methods landscape. One that comes to mind came about a year ago from a colleague at a campus somewhere in the middle of the US, who said that although as an 'Americanist' he does not do interpretive work himself, since getting tenure he now sits on committees evaluating junior colleagues' promotion cases and has been learning that for many of them, publication in *APSR*, with its longstanding bias toward quantitative research, is not seen in other subfields as the top journal they should aim for. He was evaluating the case of a colleague who works in comparative government, in "in area studies," doing field research, and learning that other modes of analysis than the quantitative ones he himself used, and other journal outlets, were more relevant for this colleague's research.

I don't want to be Polyanna-ish and paint a completely rosy picture. It's not completely rosy, and there is still very strong resistance in many circles to interpretive work. I was talking to Tim Pachirat, at the New School,

who had a conversation with a couple of students recently from another university. He had been teaching political ethnography, including a general overview of what it means to do interpretive research; and afterwards those students said that neither of them would try to have a conversation back at their home universities about ethnography or interpretive work. They just struggle to get the department to accept the fact that something that's not regression analysis or some other form of quantitative work is also legitimately political science. So, I wish I could say that there's been a revolution and everybody now sees political science as a broad tent. That would be my goal, but it we're not there yet.

**HC:** Being an American political scientist based here in Europe, do you think the situation in Europe is any different?

**DY:** Yes, it has long been different. Part of that, I suspect, is due to the behaviouralist revolution. US political scientists working there from an older generation than mine who were educated in the fifties and the sixties say they always had courses in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of social science, engaging ontological issues and epistemological issues in their curricula. Social scientists educated in US graduate programs since the 1970s, myself included, were not introduced to those two words. I had to come back every night and ask a colleague who had studied philosophy to tell me again what ontology and epistemology meant until I got them into my head.

I think that what's going on in Europe until recently is parallel to what went on in the United States up until the behaviouralist revolution. That is, the education is still, we might say, "classical", in the sense that it raises questions of knowledge, knowing, how do you know, how do you represent what it is that you want to study. Plus I think there's a language advantage. The people who grew up in the Netherlands, for example, and in German-speaking countries and in parallel in French-speaking countries have their own literatures which very much engage these ideas. If you read German, if you read Dutch and can also understand German, you can read Schütz, Husserl, Gadamer, and other key writers in the original. If you read French, you have access to Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur, and others. Those ideas, that for all their differences, provide a grounding for interpretive thinking, which is still much more rooted in such treatments than the kind of work that one has been educated on in the United States for the last forty years. In a sense, we've lost an entire generation in the United States because the generation coming to graduate school during and immediately after the behaviouralist revolution who were not educated in ontological and epistemological notions are now in professorial positions where they

are repeating what they learned and not educating their students to these matters. That's the "lost generation" that I suspect is putting very strong brakes against the present generation's interest in interpretive research. Students from new generations are saying: "But wait a minute, I didn't go into the study of politics in order to run regressions, I wanted to understand lived experience." And for many of them, their departments and their professors are not supporting them in this.

The other thing is that US political science is dominated by the subfield "American government"; international relations, comparative government, and political "theory" are the other three, and this has been widely seen as the structure of the discipline since the early part of the last century. (Tim Kaufman-Osborn did a wonderful piece of research<sup>6</sup> based on departmental curriculum descriptions published in college catalogues, showing that this structure is a historical artifact.) This dominant "American government" subfield is largely behaviorist, and within it is where public policy and public administration are located in US disciplinary structures. Those two subfields are themselves dominated by an econometric, instrumentalist-rationalist model. But within public administration is the Public Administration Theory Network (founded in my former department at California State University-Hayward/East Bay some thirty years ago), where you'll find critical theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and other approaches. Then there is the Interpretive Policy Analysis group that you're experiencing here<sup>7</sup>, although it's been much harder to get this level of activity going in the United States, something that Frank Fischer and I have been trying to do for some time.

**HC:** I guess the environment in the USA is less fertile for such messages to be transmitted. But have you heard of the situation of interpretive analysis in other areas of the world where political science is being practiced, such as Asia and Latin America for instance? I think that in this particular Conference I'm maybe the only Latin American person taking part.

**DY:** This year you may be the only one, but there have been before. I have a colleague from Buenos Aires, Ricardo Schmukler, who had been active in the Public Administration Theory Network, for example. I am more familiar with what has been happening on the organizational studies side of things: APROS (Asian and Pacific Researchers in Organizational Studies) is active

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6 Kaufman-Osborn, Timothy V. "Dividing the Domain of Political Science: On the Fetishism of Subfields." *Polity* 38 (1) (2006): 41-71

7 Dvora Yanow refers to the 7th International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis which took place in 2012 at the University of Tilburg, the Netherlands, under the theme "Understanding the Drama of Democracy. Policy Work, Power and Transformation.". Prior to Tilburg, there have been annual IPA International Conferences in Birmingham (UK), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Essex (UK), Kassel (Germany), Grenoble (France) and Cardiff (Wales).

in Australia and New Zealand, Latin America, India and other parts of South East Asia, often with hermeneutic-phenomenological-critical ideas represented in papers presented there.

**HC:** What do you think of post-structuralists taking part, along with interpretivists or hermeneutically oriented interpretivists in instances such as this Interpretive Policy Analysis Conferences? Are these traditions of thought and research compatible?

**DY:** Tell me what you mean by post-structuralists.

**HC:** Post-structuralists are, for instance, people who do political analysis using a framework of Foucauldian ideas, such as Carol Bacchi, or some others that do discourse theory such as Aletta Norval, Steven Griggs, David Howarth, or Ewen Speed. They are all anti-foundationalists, and that seems to me a different ontological position from the one most interpretivists would hold.

**DY:** For me the language of interpretivism is a broad tent; I don't see ontological differences between interpretivist ideas and post-structuralist ones, as you define that term. Carol Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be?" work, for instance, is, in my reading, a version of the kind of frame analysis developed initially by Martin Rein and Donald Schön, which is central to much of the work presented at this conference or among its members (i.e., who might not be here this year). Interpretivism is not only about phenomenological hermeneutics. For instance, because it's also the "application" of such methodological (i.e., ontological and epistemological) presuppositions to political issues, we can't ignore the kinds of issues that critical theorists have addressed. For me Foucauldian analysis or any theorist dealing with issues of power and structure and agency has a place here. Interpretive policy analysis is not of a single piece. It includes a very strong, normative theoretical dimension around issues of democracy, citizenship, participation and so on. But then there's also a methodological orientation that's agnostic with respect to that normative dimension, whose exponents try to do research in order to figure out what's going on in a given setting or case without framing the analysis in terms of democracy or citizenship or some other liberal concern.

For example, there were two panels on "non-western studies" in this IPA Conference this year in Tilburg. Those panel organizers wondered whether interpretive policy analysis has a place outside of the "West," and papers dealt with various cases in Africa, primarily. Navdeep Mathur (IIM, Ahmedabad) and Steven Connelly (Sheffield) (15.54) were the co-convenors of that stream, along with another colleague from India who couldn't get



funding to come (which was the enactment of the very thing that people are trying to study). We concluded at the end of the two panels' discussion that the Western – non-Western language doesn't capture what we're trying to articulate (nor does "global south" versus "the north"), because the situations are not all that different from what happened in North America and this part of Europe, if you take the historical view. For example, in the United States there's a very strong history of ballot box stuffing and election fixing and so on, or the electoral reform movement in the 1940s and 1950s to drive out the machine politics in the cities of the East as far as Chicago—the sorts of things that some of these papers were critiquing. I do think it's still a legitimate question, and a useful one to think about, to ask whether there is something about interpretive policy analysis or about its methods that articulates a particular normative position.

**HC:** You mentioned that whoever deals with agency structure and issues of power has a certain place within interpretive analysis. But I wonder if we can reframe my question from the point of view of the *locus* of meaning or the source of meaning. Because I guess that for interpretivists it is more or less clear what the subject is, whereas for many post-structuralists the presence of discourse is so important, that maybe the source of meaning is not necessarily the subject but a structure of meaning. If this is true, they might even end up having different units of analysis: the experience of the subject in the case of interpretivists and discourse in the case of post-structuralists. I wonder how deep is that divide, and if it reflects somehow their different social ontologies.

**DY:** I'm not entirely clear on what your view of 'interpretivism' is. It seems rather different from what I understand the term to entail. For interpretivists, whether we claim, explicitly, to be using one school or another of discourse analysis or not, language is central to the communication of meaning and contestations of it. Most interpretive analyses circle around the question of what language means, for whom it has meaning, what those meanings are, etc. So I would hardly say that the subject is "clear"! My own analysis of the Israel Corporation of Community Centers<sup>8</sup>, for instance, circled in large part around the meaning of various terms, such as "community center," to various actors in that organizational setting. My next project explored the meanings of "race" and "ethnicity," not in some abstract, academic locus, but in everyday policy and administrative practices<sup>9</sup>. My present research extends this approach to the Netherlands and its (im)migrant integration

8 Dvora Yanow, *How does a Policy Mean? Interpreting Policy and Organizational Actions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1996).

9 Dvora Yanow, *Constructing "Race" and "Ethnicity". Category-Making in in Public Policy and Administration* (New York, M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

discourses: what precisely, in “everyday” sorts of policy and organizational practices, do *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* mean (the operative state, policy, and general terms in use to designate “foreigners” and “natives”). I am looking at individuals’ experiences, but I am also looking at state discourses. For me, this is what it means to do interpretive analysis. It is similar to what post-structuralists such as Steven Griggs and David Howarth do when they look at the airport and do discourse analysis there: they’re looking at contestations of meaning in the language and in the concepts used to frame various positions with respect to the development of that second runway of Manchester Airport that they’ve been investigating<sup>10</sup>. I see no difference between that and the work of Rein and Schön, or van Hulst, or other interpretivists doing empirical analyses.

It seems to me that in order to understand what “interpretive policy analysis” means, one has to go back and see that it emerged in contestation with things like cost-benefit analysis. Seen in that light, I think the sense of a shared concern comes out. I was teaching a preconference course on Wednesday with Steve Connelly, a critical realist. Ordinarily, we might have conflicting philosophical positions, but ontologically and epistemologically, in terms of how we framed what we were doing in terms of methods and methodological positions, we weren’t all that far apart.

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<sup>10</sup> David Howarth and Steven Griggs, “An Alliance of Interest and Identity? Explaining The Campaign Against Manchester Airport’s Second Runway”, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 7 (1) (2002): 43-58.