

cal science class. I wish I could say that students who have already taken a political theory course seem better prepared for the class; but that does not seem to be the case. In my experience, many students regard courses in the history of political thought as curious addenda to the political science curriculum that lead few to think about the discipline differently. By contrast, I've had an easier time convincing my students in Scope and Methods that what they are learning is connected to what they have learned in other courses. But taking the next step—trying to provide my students with a conceptual vocabulary to use to think about how they have learned political science—has proven the most difficult. For instance, although students can readily grasp “positivism” as a general conception of science, it's considerably more difficult for most to explain why a particular piece is or is not positivist—or to say what sorts of things someone working within a positivist tradition is likely to overlook or dismiss. Though I cannot say I have hit upon a good way to do this yet, I see teaching this class as the best opportunity I have yet had to weave theoretical thinking into how students understand political science.

This coming spring, I will be teaching the Logic of Political Inquiry, a graduate-level course developed and taught for many years by my colleague, Alan Isaak. Because I believe that current standards for legitimate political inquiry are the result of recent disciplinary history, I plan on structuring the course around a number of intradisciplinary debates over what counts as sound political science. I intend to tie our discussions of the philosophy of the social sciences explicitly to that structure as well.

Teaching such an array of methods courses is unusual for a political theorist. I have tried to speak from my experiences not only to undo the opposition between theory and methods but also to show how its reproduction excludes political theorists from participating in part of what political science faculties do to teach their students to think about politics.

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Introducing Rigor to the Teaching of Interpretive Methods

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.996203>

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I offer several remarks on the way I introduce interpretive methods within a course on research design and intend to approach a new course devoted to a more systematic exposition of interpretivism and its methods. Due to space limitations, I signal the key issues that must be addressed and offer two examples of specific analyses, as the devil tends to be in details.

Interpretation, an intellectual operation whose essence has been variously rendered as translation, clarification, or placing in context, can be usefully introduced to students with the question, “What needs to be interpreted during the course of a social scientific inquiry?” In part, the answer to this question involves recognizing when we are interpreting. How are the concepts in our studies operationalized? Are their meanings transparent and universal or do they vary across cultural contexts? What accounts for the processes evidenced in formal modeling? To some degree all social science analysis, whether aimed at classifying a phenomenon, imputing a cause, or articulating a process involves interpretation. But in another important sense interpretation is a specific method of understanding the communicative process through which discursive objects are created, contested, employed, and interpreted (by actors) as part of the machinery of power.

Why Interpret?

While the utility of interpretivist approaches is taken for granted in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, or feminism, it is far from obvious to many practitioners of political science. The reasons for this may be complex, but they seem to be rooted in the predominantly naturalistic tenor of the discipline (for an alternative perspective see Chabal and Daloz 2006; Smith 2004).¹ But if we agree with an (anti-naturalist) assumption that the *signifying* process through which people build models of the world, particularly of the social and political world, has political relevance, then the study of how such models are constructed, transmitted, maintained, and received becomes of interest to us. The study of such issues is inconceivable without interpretation. Among the phenomena routinely studied with the help of interpretive approaches are, for example: (1) legitimacy (as its standards vary from society to society and depend on contextualized, culture-specific crite-

ria [Aronoff 1991, Kubik 1994]); (2) mechanisms of compliance, quiescence, and everyday resistance (as they involve the manipulation of cultural understandings of reality [Wedeen 1999]); and (3) generation, reproduction, and dismantling of collective identities (as such processes involve the use of “cultural materials” [Ross 2007, Fernandes 2006, Davis 2005]). Interpretive approaches also provide fresh and valuable insights into a number of problem areas usually studied through naturalistic modes of inquiry. Ample evidence of the fruitfulness of interpretation can be found in the study of non-Western political systems in comparative politics (Chabal and Daloz 2006, Ashforth 2005), constructivist work in international relations (Kratochvil and Ruggie 1986, Klotz and Lynch 2007), “culturalist” analyses in political economy (Blyth 2002), and even economics (Rao and Walton, eds. 2004).

The first task in introducing interpretation to students, then, is to get them to recognize that interpretation underlies the entire enterprise of social science. Whether we are conceptualizing a particular problematic, operationalizing concepts, or organizing observations for analysis, there is a dimension of interpretation. I try to demonstrate the reliance of fundamental concepts of political science analysis on a process of signification that is not necessarily transportable from one social context to another. Cognitive, symbolic, linguistic, and communicative dimensions of political processes vary and are clearly influenced by the historical experiences of the particular society. Recognizing that one is always interpreting is a critical aspect of acquiring methodological self-awareness. The question then is twofold: how interpretation supports or relates to other methods and how it is employed in a rigorous and systematic manner that meets the standards of scientific analysis we presume are achieved through these other methods.

Location of Interpretivism among Other Approaches

Interpretivists are beginning to systematize their approach and engage in an explicit exposition of its assumptions, methods, and techniques (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, eds. 2006). Situating interpretivism vis-à-vis the predominant qualitative and quantitative methodologies illuminates the basic ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the

different approaches to knowledge production. Table 1 is a simple tool I use to discuss the ontological split between naturalists and anti-naturalists with my students. I begin by introducing the *Geisteswissenschaften* versus *Naturwissenschaften* distinction of Droysen and Dilthey and then ask them to reflect on the proposition that anti-naturalism is associated with a specific ontology of the social and therefore calls for at least partial reliance on a specific method: interpretation or understanding. The debate on the “proper” match between methods and problems (Bevir and Kedar 2008) is a fruitful point of departure for considering both the information necessary to answer certain questions and the potentially complementary relationship between different modes of inquiry. For example, interpretivism can enhance survey work (Stoker 2003: 13–16) or game theory (O’Neil 1999, Bates et al. 1998, Johnson 2002).

Interpretation of What? Three Basic Varieties of the Operation

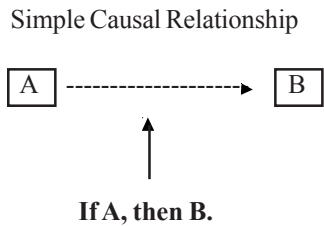
There are at least three dimensions of political science research that engage interpretive skills, whether consciously or not. The first is in recognizing and classifying observations (or “data”). For example, is a group of people gathered in a market square a religious procession, a political rally, or a crowd getting ready for an open-air concert? Does the uniform of a person whose actions we are studying signify a soldier or a miner? Interpretive skills enable basic coding and classification. Without them, much comparative work is inconceivable. Weber calls this type of interpretive work direct observational understanding. I refer to it as *classificatory interpretation*. The second interpretive moment comes when we try to specify what drives human agency: “Why does/did she do this?” When researchers ascribe motives (psychological approaches) or reasons (rational choice approaches) to human behavior, they engage in what Weber refers to as explanatory understanding. I call it *motivational interpretation*. The third is in reconstructing the meaning of actions, statements, displays, performances, etc. Discerning “What does she mean by this?” or “What is the meaning of this action?” involves *semiotic/communicative interpretation*.

Table 1: Ontological and Epistemological Dualism

		Ontology	
		Unity of Object (Naturalism)	Different Object (Anti-Naturalism)
Epistemology	Unity of Method	Positivism	Ontological Dualism/Epistemological Monism
	Different Methods	?	Interpretivism

Combining Motivational and Semiotic Interpretation and Causal Explanation

Systematic methodological reflection about the relationship between causal explanation and interpretation (understanding) began with Weber. My course thus takes Weber’s methodology, including his own writings and several critical commentaries on his seminal studies, as the point of departure. In addition, I present a sequence of slides designed to elucidate the difference between motivational and semiotic modes of interpretation, and to locate the latter within the explanatory sequence. I rely on an example offered by Martin (2000).

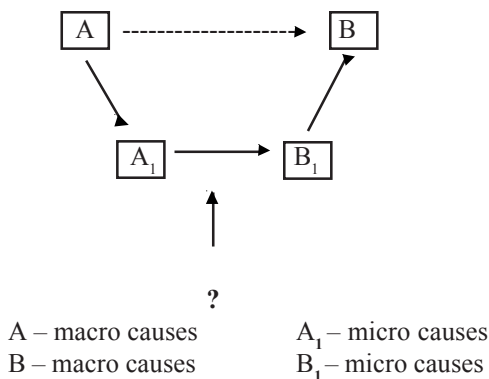


A – “Being the inhabitant of a city that is devastated by bombs”
 B – “The lack of resistance to aggression”

Source: Martin (2000)

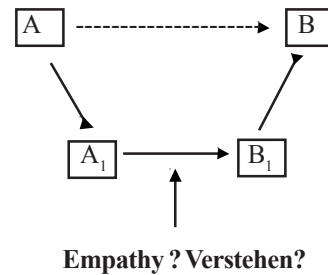
We begin with a simple model of a causal relationship. The first step in analysis is to formulate a proposition that captures the nature of the relationship between two social-level phenomena. Such a proposition can be expressed thus: “If a city is bombed, its inhabitants will not resist further aggression.”² Explanation generally involves more than a simple statement of cause and effect, however. The link between them must be articulated by demonstrating why or how a presumed cause produces a presumed effect. In an influential admonition to specify the underlying mechanisms in causal explanations—effectively linking “macro” to “micro” explanations—Coleman (1990) proposed what has come to be known as the “Coleman boat” (Coleman-Lindberg diagram). This model, illustrated below, inserts between two “macro” phenomena and at least one “micro” mechanism.

From Macro to Micro: Coleman’s “Boat”



Micro causes and micro effects are states or attributes of individual people. How do we know whether A₁ “causes” B₁? How do we get into “their heads”? What method or research procedure do we need to discern why people act as they do? One answer may come from empathy, understood roughly as a combination of introspection and reasoning through analogy (what transpires in my psyche can be attributed to other human beings).³ The next image demonstrates location of empathy in the construction of motivational explanations.

(1) Weber’s Explanatory Verstehen
 (According to Martin 2000: 18–25)



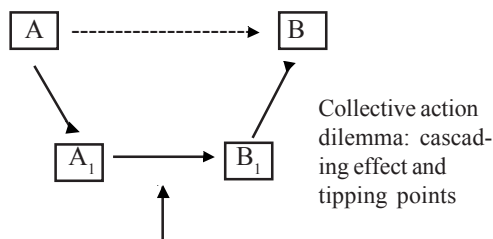
A₁ – “Feeling of terror and dread”
 B₁ – “Feeling of helplessness”

Empathy generates a bridging proposition that states, for example: “If an individual feels terror and dread, as a result (s)he also develops a feeling of helplessness.” Then, a testable set of propositions can take us from the “experience of being bombed” to the “feeling of terror and dread” connected through empathy to the “feeling of helplessness” experienced individually, and finally to the “lack of resistance” by the whole/majority of/a part of the population. The bridge between A₁ and B₁ can be built in many ways, without empathy, but with the use of psychological theories about motivation. I do not develop this here for lack of space.

We can also model the argument in game theoretic terms. For example, statements about “feelings” can be replaced with statements about “strategic calculations,” including a reconstruction of an individual preference ordering and assessing the viability of various courses of action (given the assumed or observed actions of others).

A well-known benefit of game theoretic analysis is that it helps to analyze the collective action dilemma and investigate under what conditions rationally calculating individuals engage or do not engage in (collective) action given what they know about the actions of others. A researcher may identify “tipping points,” “cascading effects,” etc. Interpretation is nonetheless a critical component of linking individual agency to observed collective behavior by attributing “reasons” (rather than “motivations”) to individuals. In this task we may rely on “empathy,” but usually we employ a deductively constructed model of a “calculating, rational individual.” One way or another, however, we begin our analysis by *interpreting* the motives or reasons “causing” individual (in)action.

(2) Rational Calculation



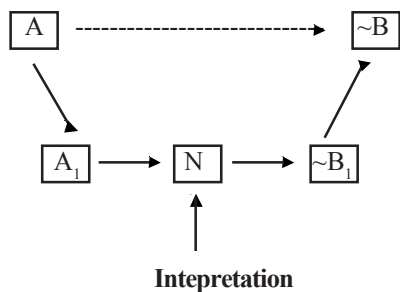
Reconstruction of strategic decision making

A₁ – Evaluating various preferences for courses of action (represented by a utility function)

B₁ – Responding strategically (rationally) to actions of others

Now, let's imagine a modified situation. After a bombing that most likely contributes to the lowering of the "fighting spirit" of the population, a popular leader goes public (in all/ some available media) with a story that recounts the city's heroic past. She or he reminds people that once before their ancestors successfully mobilized after an initial defeat, asks them to overcome their fears and despondency, and appeals to them for a common action against the enemy. In short, the leader offers a narrative of empowerment. People listen; some of them redefine their situation and begin to see it in a more positive light. They convince themselves that success is possible or that they want to defend their city even if the chances of success are miniscule. Mobilization for defense can be quite effective among this section of the population.

(3) Interpretive Turn

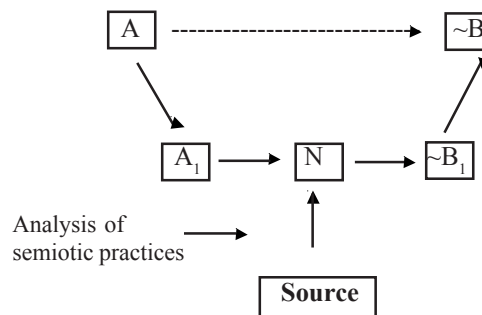


A₁ – "Feeling of terror and dread" ~B₁ – Feeling of power
 N – Narrative of empowerment ~B – Resistance to aggression

Once a narrative of empowerment begins to circulate among the members of the group, it influences their conceptualizations of the situation and as a result it may change their motivations (or calculations). The story is a crucial element of the analyzed situation. Many researchers will conclude that an account of what happened that does not include an interpretation of the narrative of empowerment and an analysis of its effectiveness is incomplete. They will want to know the details of the story, its origins, and how it fits within the

broader context of the group's culture. Often they will want to know more: who told the story, through what channel(s) of communication (and if there were several, which was most effective and why?), from what position (was this person powerful?), to whom, and with what effect (were there groups in the population who responded more readily to the appeal than others and why)? As the next image suggests, interpretively oriented researchers want to study the semiotic practices that shape individual motivation and rational calculation rather than the message alone (Wedeen 2004).

(4) Interpretation "In Context" (of Power and Institutions)



The insertion of analyses of semiotic practices into studies of international conflicts, electoral campaigns, or strategies of political resistance is increasingly common; it is particularly intriguing in the work of developmental economists (Rao and Walton, eds. 2004).

Interpretation and the Study of Semiotic Practices

The study of semiotic practices can be designed in many ways. For example, it can be fashioned as a reconstruction of an event in terms of a Turnerian⁴ social drama (Wagner-Pacifici 1986), an ethnographic case study (Geertz 1973), ethnographically grounded sociology (Wedeen 1999), policy analysis (Yanow 1997), or game theoretic modeling (O'Neill 1999). It can be grounded in the vocabulary and models proposed by political economists or "pure" institutionalists. All of these approaches, however, involve an interpretive component.

There are many ways to begin studying semiotic/communicative interpretation and its components. Umberto Eco breaks down the process into three tasks. First, we may want to identify the *intended* meaning of the message (text, discourse, poster, painting, speech, performance, etc.). *Intentio auctoris*—as Eco calls it—is not always available and usually difficult to reconstruct. Nonetheless, a skillful interviewer or diligent biographer may shed a light on this component of cultural creation. Second, we need to analyze the meaning(s) of the message, *intentio operis*. This is the proper subject of semiotic analysis and structural work. Methods of reconstructing syntagmatic chains (how to build "sentences" of culture?), paradigmatic sets (what are building blocs of cultural forms appropriate for a specific task?), and pragmatic strategies (what is more likely to "work" in a given population?) are described in countless manuals, including works on content and discourse analysis (for a useful introduction of some key issues,

see Herrera and Braumoeller 2004). Third, the study of reception, the interpretation of the message by the (intended or unintended) audience, is a critical aspect of understanding public communication. Reception can vary substantially within a given group and in many cases reflects an active process of resistance through deliberate re-characterization of the message. *Intentio lectoris* can be studied through in-depth interviewing, participant observation, and surveys. This last tool is routinely used in the approach called political culture. It is important to remember that the study of attitudes, orientations, and perceptions contributes to the reconstruction of only one dimension of the cultural process. A complete analysis of this process must include two other elements: the reconstruction of the authors' intentions (particularly intended meanings) and the study of the message itself.

If we agree that the study of politics should encompass the analysis of the communicative (cultural) process through which some actors propose certain world-views, encode them in symbolic vehicles, and try to disseminate them, while others encode and interpret these messages and accept, reject, or simply register their "meaning," then the study of the "symbolic content" of the messages is unavoidable.⁵ Only if we understand the message and its place in a broader cultural context can we deduce its political significance. Each cultural product is formed by its author, who selects from a rich albeit not infinite repertoire of available cultural materials. If we want to understand the strategy (politics) behind such choices we need to be able to contrast choices that are actually made with the options that are (deliberately or not) forgone. That is why interpretation needs to go beyond merely determining if a cultural message does or does not have a causal effect (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 36–41). In most cases, we want to know *how* a semiotic practice works and *why* it is (in)effective.

One of the untapped (by political scientists) reservoirs of high-quality interpretive work is the Russian (and Soviet) school of semiotics. Its authors have long recognized that cultural mechanisms—together constituting a huge coordinating system—need to be carefully studied in order to improve our understanding of politics and, in particular, the machinery of power. A study of how Peter the Great built legitimacy for his power, by Boris Uspenskij, is exemplary of carefully crafted interpretive work. In the following passage drawn from Uspenskij's analysis, italicized and boldfaced words or phrases signal critical stages in the interpretive process, which are briefly discussed below:

In 1721, Peter *assumed* a new title: he began to be officially called "Emperor," "the Great," and in addition, "father of the fatherland."... This expression is nothing other than a *translation* of the Latin *pater patriae*, an honorary title of the Roman emperors. However, it had a different ring in a *Russian cultural context*. Since paternity in general can be either blood or spiritual kinship, and Peter obviously could not be the people's father in the sense of blood kinship, this name was understood to be a pretension to spiritual kinship. But only a member of the church hierarchy could be a spiritual father, and in turn,

the title "father of the fatherland" could only be applied to an archpastor-bishop and primarily to the patriarch... therefore the designation in question *could be interpreted* as meaning that Peter was head of the church and proclaimed himself a patriarch. And that is precisely how it *was interpreted*. (Uspenskij 1977:109)

First, by using the word "assumed," Uspenskij signals that he practices a post-structuralist style of analysis. It calls for the identification of agency and its actions and is founded on an assumption that cultural change is not a matter of apersonal transformations, as it was usually modeled in structural analyses, but, rather, is caused by deliberate actions of specific actors. Second, the word "translation" identifies a specific semiotic operation. Uspenskij identifies the source of the "translated" cultural idea: the classical Rome. Third, the context ("Russian") into which the translated element is inserted is identified and its transformative capacity is emphasized. Fourth, the mechanism of (potential) semiotic transformation is actually (albeit briefly) described. The analyst, in this case an "expert" on the Russian culture, identifies the field of *potential* meanings of the new element and points to the meaning that is privileged by the *logic of culture*. I believe that the interpretive (or semiotic) analysis is seriously flawed if such logic is not reconstructed *independently* from the reconstruction of actors' actual (interpretive or otherwise) choices and actions. Fifth, Uspenskij informs the reader how the new cultural idea (Peter as *pater patriae*) actually began to function: the popular interpretation followed the path privileged by the cultural logic predominant at that time in Russia. He does not tell us how he knows this (his historical studies?), but we can easily imagine the utility of modern survey instruments in arriving at such a conclusion.

Misconceptions and Myths: Interpretation Clarified

The perception of interpretive methods in political science is fraught with misconceptions. Some are based on the lack of knowledge or erroneous understanding of what "interpreters" do. Some have deeper philosophical roots and are related to misplaced specifications of differences among various epistemological positions (see Bevir and Kedar 2008 for some important comments on this issue). For lack of space, I will only signal several problems belonging to the first group.

First, it is sometimes asserted that interpretive methods are non-empirical (Ragin 1987: 3, 35). The validity of this argument rests, of course, on the definition of empiricism. Without entering a complex philosophical debate, it may be advisable to offer students some readings from art history and discuss with them the meaning of "empiricism" in concrete interpretive studies. I often recommend studying Ervin Panofsky's method of iconological analysis (1972) and its application in a short work on Gothic architecture and scholasticism (1951).

Second, interpretation is sometimes presented as an intellectual operation based only on empathy or introspection. It is not difficult to show that this is simply not true. Dilthey, one of the founding figures in the history of hermeneutics, moved ahead from "psychological" introspection to intersubjectively

verifiable reconstruction of cultural meanings. My favorite method of dispelling this misconception is to have students re-read Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. I ask them to find examples of "empathy." None is to be found. Weber works like a semiotician employing a form of content analysis (admittedly rudimentary by today's standards). He reconstructs and interprets the meanings of, say, Franklin's sayings. His interpretations are contestable and falsifiable.

Third, critics claim that interpretation is imprecise, impressionistic, undisciplined, and arbitrary. It is, however, easy to demonstrate that in specific areas of interpretive scholarship there exist specifiable rules, accumulation of knowledge, methods of achieving (and challenging) consensus, and inter-subjective checks and balances. A useful way of introducing these issues is to study the debate initiated by Geertz's celebrated interpretive essay on the Balinese cockfight, not merely the essay itself (Jones 1998, Martin 1993, Segal 1999). Eco (1992) offers another useful primer. In his exchange with Rorty on the limits of interpretation, he warns against overinterpretation, shows how we may try to avoid it, introduces a useful distinction between interpretation and use, and demonstrates that the former is not completely arbitrary.

Fourth, semiotic interpretation is often seen as an inductive mode of inquiry. Here, three arguments are worth fielding. First, students may be asked to examine semiotic or hermeneutic studies that focus on the way standardized and prescribed methods of meaning encoding are realized in practice. An example may be the study of the way various artists employ prescriptions codified in manuals of allegorical and symbolic representations (see Ripa 1971). Similar "manuals," though usually rather less explicit and precise, exist in other areas, for example in the field of political advertising. The method employed in the examination of the "fit" between a manual's instructions and specific realizations is at least partially deductive. Second, much interpretive work is founded on the falsificationist logic of conjectures and refutations à la Popper rather than induction. Third, it can be argued that the logic of interpretation is neither deductive nor inductive. It is *abductive* in the Peircean sense. In turn, reflection on the logic of abduction, understudied by comparison with deduction and induction, helps to grasp the benefits and pitfalls of the critical Popperian distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification, and inject some rigor into thinking about the former.⁶

Fifth, given the difficulty of separating the context of justification from the context of discovery in interpretation (its *abductive* character), another criticism, that interpretation is good only for hypothesis generation and not for verification or falsification, is misdirected.

Sixth, it is sometimes argued that interpretivists see interpretation as the only goal of social science. Geertz's famous words that the analysis of culture is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973: 5) are often quoted in support of this view. Geertz's views evolved and grew more complex in his several decades of work following that statement (see, for example, 1983; 2003:

27). But more importantly, many interpretivists do pursue causal explanations and see interpretation as one research procedure among many.

Seventh, interpretation is said to be unscientific. However, interpretation is arguably no less "scientific" than causal inference. The relative status of either task depends on the definition of science. For King, Keohane and Verba (1994), "good research, that is, scientific research" (7) has four characteristics:

- (1) The goal is inference. There are two types of inference: descriptive and causal. Descriptive inference involves "using observations from the world to learn about **unobserved facts**." Causal inference involves "learning about causal effects from the data observed" (8)
- (2) The procedures are **public**
- (3) The conclusions are **uncertain**
- (4) The content is **method**

Interpretation meets all four criteria: (1) it relies on inference to connect observed phenomena (signifying elements) with the (unobserved) meanings (signified elements); (2) its procedures are (or at least are supposed to be) public and repeatable; (3) its result are provisional (uncertain) and always subject to verification and updating; and (4) its content can be construed as method.

The task, whose realization has already begun, is to systematically demonstrate the validity of these points as well as specify and examine the method's:

- (1) ontological affiliations (How are society and politics understood and defined?);
- (2) epistemological commitments (How are societies and politics defined in a specific manner knowable?);
- (3) rules and procedures;
- (4) disciplinary varieties (semiotics, hermeneutics); and
- (5) specific techniques (for example, content analysis, [critical] discourse analysis, ethnographic accounts of meaning-formation through rituals, etc.).

Notes

¹ These remarks are mostly based on and related to the field of comparative politics, my area of academic specialization. Amy Lynch's assistance in sharpening my argument was invaluable. I also thank my colleagues and students at Rutgers, who provided many critical remarks while listening to my early efforts to develop this essay.

² There are, of course, many ways to finesse this proposition, express it in probabilistic terms, offer clearer conceptualizations of the key concepts, etc.

³ It is easy to trivialize the role of empathy in Dilthey's or Weber's methodologies. Martin (2000) provides a very useful discussion of how empathy relates to other components of the understanding (*Verstehen*) method.

⁴ Victor Turner's approach and methods are clearly presented in Turner (1974).

⁵ "The struggle over world views should itself be treated as a strategic process" (Bates et al. 1998: 633–635).

⁶ For a useful, brief introduction to these issues, see Uve Wirth (<http://user.uni-frankfurt.de/~wirth/inferenc.htm>), who observes: "The Peircean account of abductive inference denies the possibil-

ity to draw a sharp borderline between ‘context of discovery’ and ‘context of justification.’”

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