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Training in Critical Interpretivism, Within and Beyond the Academy

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Introduction

Methodology is not benign. Far too much time and effort have been invested in promoting some methodological orientations over others, or defending some methodologies thought not to be 'mainstream.' Advisors 'train' their students in specific methodological orientations, and students respond by imbibing or resisting them, or a combination of both. But, rather than rehashing methodological controversies, we ask how specific approaches that critically address the historiography, philosophy, and sociology of International Relations as a discipline (IR) – which we call 'critical interpretivism' – are important and useful for professionals as well as scholars, and how we might make them intelligible to both, despite contrary sociological pressures. In other words, how and why should interpretive and critical orientations to scholarship be 'taught,' including to non-academic professionals who have not been socialized into these approaches, but are concerned with international issues?

We address these questions because (a) we believe that scholarship and knowledge production should be relevant outside as well as inside of the academy, and (b) we are involved in multiple efforts to expand interpretive and critical orientations in what we believe are innovative ways. These include efforts to socialize scholars-in-training in interpretive methodologies for the purpose of writing dissertations, articles, successful grant applications, and eventual books; efforts to prioritize the knowledge and concerns of African scholars, students, and activists in debates about humanitarianism in Africa; and efforts to start a Master1 program that enables professionals to bring critical perspectives into their work. More specifically, we assert that the areas of knowledge this Handbook prioritizes– historiography, philosophy, and sociology – are particularly crucial for those who conduct research on global and international events, those who experience their ill effects, those who try to intervene in them, and those who report on them. We do not argue that such critical and interpretive forms of knowledge production are the only kinds that are useful for these goals. But we do insist that they are important and necessary. Without them, analysts and observers risk facile understandings and explanations of the world, which too often produce problematic and even dangerous theories and policies. For instance, essentialist understandings that treat religion as inherently divisive lend support to xenophobic immigration policies (here, the prototypical example is Huntington (1996), but numerous other, less blatantly binary works also reinforce ahistorical and hence reified notions of religion). Alternatively, simplistic explanations of poverty in Africa ignore decades of colonialist ruptures and postcolonial economic interventions by focusing exclusively on 'domestic' or internal corruption.

Given these and numerous other examples, we begin by discussing aspects of the sociology of knowledge that shape the contemporary socio-political and historical context of the social sciences, including the study of international politics. One issue that needs to be acknowledged upfront is that students and mentors in these disciplines, perhaps especially in the USA, are socialized into terminologies and forms of knowledge-making that privilege monocausal explanations, hypothesis testing, and ahistorical knowledge building, which we group under the rubric of 'positivism' (Habermas, 1968). As a result, those who teach classes in critical interpretive methodologies as well as the students who want to learn about them frequently begin at a disadvantage. Consequently, in the first section, we develop our argument about the sociological necessity of the kinds of knowledge at issue in this Handbook, the conceptual and philosophical basis for them, and the benefits they offer. Next we address the too frequently ignored practical implications of academic socialization processes that mainly focus on positivist approaches. In the second part of the chapter, we reflect on three projects in which one or more of us is engaged, to assess how they might demonstrate ways forward, along with actual and potential problems. Each project represents an attempt to reorient knowledge (and potentially action) toward historiography, philosophy, and sociology situated in time and place (and across temporal and geographic boundaries).

First, we address graduate student and junior scholar 'training' by drawing on common issues arising from

a workshop held in 2013 at the University of California, Irvine, and Cecelia Lynch's Interpretive/Qualitative Methods graduate course. Second, we address how to make knowledge and practice regarding Africa more egalitarian by drawing on efforts to construct and promote a blog founded in 2009 (the Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa, or CIHA Blog), with scholars and students at institutions in Ghana, South Africa, Senegal, Kenya, and the USA. Third, we address how to deploy knowledge about both of the above experiences, as well as critical interpretivist perspectives in general, for professionals in both non-profit and for-profit worlds. This possibility is related to the design of a Master program, which is very much a work-in-progress that may or may not come to fruition, although the signs are currently positive.

Conceptual and practical implications of the sociology of knowledge production

Since the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the work of authors such as Cynthia Enloe (1980), Richard Ashley (1981), Robert Cox (1981, 1987), Friedrich Kratochwil (1986, 1989), James Der Derian (1987), Alexander Wendt (1987, 1992), Nicholas Onuf (1989), J. Ann Tickner (1992), R.B.J. Walker (1993), Christine Sylvester (1994), Siba Grovogui (1996), Brooke Ackerly et al. (2006), and numerous others, IR has experienced a slow process of diversification. The so-called third debate of the late 1980s opened the doors for approaches initially labeled either post-structural or postmodern, but also included social constructivist, feminist, green, and postcolonial, to enter the realm of IR (Lapid, 1989).2

Notwithstanding this process of diversification, the path has been far from smooth or consistently welcoming. The socialization of scholars and professionals in IR continues to be dominantly positivist and rationalist, especially in the USA.3 For example, some of the most cited and utilized works in the discipline are still either liberal or realist. Most IR texts and programs also focus on a troika of perspectives: realist, liberal, and constructivist (replacing the 1980s' dominance of realist, liberal, and Marxist approaches). Within this context, constructivism has become a catch-all term for a wide range of approaches. Some of these include interpretivist and critical methodologies, but others do not. In turn, each of these overarching frameworks represents numerous internal debates and multiple epistemological tendencies, but many realist and liberal approaches still neglect interpretivist and critical understandings of knowledge and power.4

Despite the current plurality of approaches in IR, some scholars still promote the reunification of the discipline under a single and monistic logic of judgment as well as knowledge production (e.g., Gerring, 2012). This tendency creates a disciplinary space in which some voices are more visible than others. It also teaches a particular language, even vernacular, for IR, which is designed to facilitate the understanding of already dominant approaches while also diminishing the legitimacy of critical and interpretivist work. As we discuss in more detail in the next section, the dominance of positivist approaches can make the writing of grants, dissertations, and potential publications more onerous for critical interpretivist scholars. It also leaves non-interpretivists, or those who have not yet made up their mind about their own methodological orientations, wondering what critical interpretivism brings to the table – both in terms of scholarship and in broader spheres of non-governmental organization (NGO) work and policymaking. The genealogical processes concerned in the disciplinary power relations that prioritize positivist approaches have been described elsewhere (e.g., Dunne et al., 2013), but the questions about what is being too easily dismissed in IR and why it is important to include it still need discussion.

We define interpretivism as a heterogeneous group of approaches that study social worlds by analyzing meanings (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014). This concentration on meaning results from the philosophical understanding of the interaction between humans and the world as mediated by language, broadly construed to include all the media used by humans to make sense of our worlds. It is the primary medium through which we relate to and constitute our worlds.5 A critical form of interpretivism also emphasizes that language cannot be a perfect representation of the world itself. What we call critical interpretivism, then, renounces the positivist notion of language as corresponding to truth through some kind of direct connection between words and objects. Instead, language is understood as a socially constructed medium used to act upon the world and interact in it (Nietzsche, 1989). Moreover, critical interpretivism views the logic, essence, foundation, or structure of language as indefinable (Wittgenstein, 1958). The impossibility of defining language a priori leads critical interpretivists to assume that meaning is context-dependent. Despite the differences found between critical interpretivists, most use these three philosophical assumptions as a point of departure, that is, they view language as a socially constructed