

Interpretive Methods for Political Science

Terrell Carver, Matti Hyvärinen (eds.): Interpreting the Political. New Methodologies. London: Routledge, 1997.

During the last two decades there was a remarkable boom of qualitative research methods and methodologies in the field of social and cultural studies. Many researchers obviously felt discontent with the traditional

standardized quantitative methods, realizing the specific limitations of these well established research strategies. In political science, the situation is somewhat different. Few efforts have been made to analyze the political by means of qualitative methods. The relatively small group of scholars trying to work out an interpretive approach, e.g. in research on political culture, are far from being regarded as part of the core of the discipline. Given this situation, a book developing “new methodologies” for “interpreting the political” must be quite welcome.

The editors state that the main purpose of the volume is to “further the new methodological pluralism in political science and political studies by employing interpretive methods” (1). In doing so, the main points of reference are approaches derived from semiotics and linguistics. The contributors apply theories and methods such as hermeneutics, discourse and rhetorical analysis, and deconstructivist perspectives. The common denominator of the papers is a special concern for language and its constitutive role for the everyday construction of the political. Consequently, the concept of the political cannot be determined in a fixed and essentialist way: the question of “what is political” must always be answered by “reading” and interpreting the concrete constructions used by people in their lifeworlds. Thus, according to the editors, defining the political by critical readings is in itself a political act (6).

The book presents papers from an ECPR workshop held in Limerick, Ireland, in 1992; some of the papers were already published in earlier versions. The authors illustrate the methodological constructivism not only by theoretical reflection but also by applying their categories and approaches to several concrete topics.

T. Carver analyses the subtexts and interpretive politics used by the protagonists in the famous Hill-Thomas hearings in 1991. He examines material delivered by the *New York Times* coverage, and his main point is that any

interpretation – whether by people within the field or by the researcher – is always driven by interests and strategic purposes. Carver shows that the Thomas camp was successful in constructing a variety of narratives about Hill that fit well into the expectations of a broader public already accustomed to media stories. These narratives, employing patterns from crime and courtroom drama as well as from TV sitcoms, were accompanied by statements on the relativity and plurality of ‘truth’; as a result, Hill’s accusations had no chance of acceptance.

But to point to the nexus of interest and interpretation is not sufficient to equate popular and scholarly interpretations. There is an important difference marked by Alfred Schütz through his concepts of first and second order constructions (Schütz 1932/1974). While the first are immediately bound to social practice, the second benefit from a certain distance and from criteria for methodological control. Of course, research is also situated in fields of power (cf. Bourdieu 1984). But the types of interest are located on different epistemological – and practical – levels of reality. This difference must be maintained if we don’t want to cultivate an “anything goes” attitude in political science.

M. Hyvärinen deals with the construction of political identities through autobiographical narratives. In his subtle and sophisticated analyses, the author probes and challenges the concepts of coherence, conversion and “thickness” (Denzin) by taking the discourse of the interviewees seriously and by avoiding hasty conclusions. The critical reading results in better defined and articulated concepts, e.g. a concept of coherence that allows for ruptures when there are persistent semantic oppositions structuring the biographical ruptures. The paper convincingly pleads for careful and cautious strategies of interpretation.

The discourse of the “Hite Reports”, with respect to interrelations among sexuality, language and power, is ex-

amined by *V. Mottier*. According to the author, the Reports bear a strong similarity to Foucault's genealogical approach. In her interviews, Hite produces a kind of counter-knowledge that can in turn help women work out their own sexual identity. A second analysis of 'scientific' discourse from a feminist point of view is given by *M. Keränen*. She re-reads Finnish behaviorist participation studies from the 60s. These studies maintained that women were always more passive and less politically "mature" than men. This gender myth, adapted from Anglo-American literature, persisted even though quantitative evidence clearly falsified the behaviorist researchers' assumptions.

V. Bresnihan develops a promising approach to political culture by combining hermeneutics and structuralism. She conducted intensive interviews attempting to reconstruct citizens' everyday theories of the political. Bresnihan identifies three basic models of politics, and each one can be connected to a distinct position in the history of ideas: the realist "politics of the fox", referring to Machiavelli; the "politics of containment", referring to Aquinas; and the "politics of the wounded heart", stemming from the liberal tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Mill. The interpretations give some helpful hints for qualitative research on political culture. Nevertheless, two aspects of the essay deserve critical scrutiny: First, when pointing out certain contradictions within the models, Bresnihan reverts to some highly speculative elements of feminist philosophy and psychoanalytical thought in order to explain them. These speculative points are combined with normative statements in the case of the first Irish female president. The author would have been better off keeping her analytical perspective closer to the empirical data. Second, she introduces the "politics of the fox" by relying on only one interview. This may be legitimate for a case study or preliminary research, but instead the author claims that this case is representative: "Raymond refers to and identi-

fies with the largest political party in the country. Thus this model must have significant representative value” (66). It should be clear that a serious problem like that of representativity in qualitative research cannot be solved with a sleight of hand.

With less pretension and more interpretive sophistication *K. Palonen* describes how certain dimensions of the political, mostly neglected by political scientists, can be grasped and ‘read’ by using travelling as a methodological device. Palonen shows how German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his collection of essays “Ach Europa!”, discovers relevant forms of politicising and politicking. Travelling all over Europe, Enzensberger developed a peculiar sensitivity for the dimensions of language, space and time. This enabled him to uncover relevant aspects of the political. Palonen systematizes Enzensberger’s essayistic knowledge, pointing, e.g., to the naming of streets and cities, to letter boxes and their telling inscriptions, to the appropriation of urban space by means of graffiti, and to varying rhythms of time as indicators of different political cultures. Palonen gives the reader stimulating insights into the cultural complexity of the political in a modern world.

In contrast to these refreshing observations, *K. Sonderrmann’s* analysis of three national anthems as “textual icons” is somewhat disappointing. Sonderrmann right away categorizes his subject as “glorified triviality”, characterized through “pomp and kitsch” with “ridiculous pathos” (129). The author seems to have no questions but only firm opinions about national anthems, and this lack of methodological curiosity leads to a couple of problems. With regard to the large amount of literature on nations and nationalism, the author’s assessment of national anthems as dull containers for dull ideologies is, at the very least, an oversimplification. In calling the anthems “depoliticising”, he neglects the historical fact that they were highly politicising symbolic forms that gave the abstract concept

of “nation” sensible contours, thereby enabling many people to participate in political movements. As to the present, the author in no way shows how the anthems are used and appropriated by political agents and ‘normal’ citizens. To put it more concretely: one wonders why Sondermann does not mention the important fact that in Germany (one of the author’s three examples) only the third stanza of Hofmann von Fallersleben’s poem is officially performed. It would have been interesting to explore how this odd situation influences the status and the possible functions of this symbolic form. But this kind of questions remains out of sight in Sondermann’s essay.

More convincing is *J. Bleicher* in analyzing the different modes of “inventing” the European Community as a politically relevant construction of meaning. His typology ranges from ideological simulacra to creatively constructed projective images. Unfortunately the author does not consider Ulrich Beck’s stimulating essay on the “Invention of the Political” (1993) and recent contributions by Anthony Giddens on the same topic (1994). The final, rather short paper by *J. Der Derian* speculates about the negative impact of simulation techniques on the individuals’ sense of reality.

The book, with its plurality of methods and methodologies, offers many helpful hints that can encourage further interpretive research in political science. As is generally the case with anthologies, the heterogeneity of approaches is paralleled by a heterogeneity of the papers’ quality. But the main problem with the book lies elsewhere. Neither the editors nor the contributors contextualize their efforts within recent methodological discussions in the social sciences. Thus, e.g. questions of validity and reliability are not dealt with, and consequently procedures for proving the quality of the empirical research, such as triangulation techniques, are not taken into account. A reader seeking new methodologies should enter into the

particulars of these problems (see, for example, recent handbooks: Flick et al. 1991, LeCompte et al. 1992, Denzin & Lincoln 1994, Miles & Huberman 1994). Even within political science, there was a broad dispute over the possibilities of qualitative research methods when applied to political culture (cf. Welch 1993). It would have been helpful if the contributors had referred to these discussions, thus enabling a better assessment of the specific value of the suggested approaches.

However, the book is an important contribution to a discussion urgently needed in the discipline. It deserves broad attention by the scientific community so that critical discussion about methods and methodologies will go on, opening new ways to 'read' and interpret the political.

Andreas Dörner

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