Symposium: Revisiting the impact of Charles Taylor's "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" after 50 years

Revisiting Charles Taylor's 1971 "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man"

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> The hegemony of Cold War analytical philosophy of language was disrupted by…Charles Taylor's critique of atomist behaviorism through his magnificent essay on "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man"….
> —Seyla Benhabib (2020, 1047)

> A study that aims to analyze the dominant ethnicity from the bottom up must rely on qualitative methods that allow the researcher to examine the social reality from the subjective point of view of those who live within it (Taylor, 1987 [1971]).
> —-Orna Sasson-Levy (2013, 34)

The year 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of the initial publication of Charles Taylor's influential article "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man." The article engaged how the human sciences might make sense of—interpret—meaning's multiple forms of expression, from language to acts to objects, and then evaluate that analysis. Taylor focused on "experiential" meaning—"for a subject," "of something," and existing only "in relation to the meanings of other things"— as distinct from linguistic meaning (1971, 11-12). The opening pages might be mistaken as a contribution solely to political theory or philosophy and the analysis of texts, except for the emphasis on the place of interpretation in the *human* sciences and on "text-analogues"—meaning-full acts (and, ultimately, objects) treated *as if* they were texts for analytic purposes—and their potential for manifold meanings.

Taylor's argument disrupted not only philosophy, as Benhabib (first epigraph) attests (pointing also to Rawls, Bernstein, and MacIntyre), but also methodological arguments concerning empirical research—what has since come to be called "interpretive"—and its legitimacy, as a phenomenological-hermeneutic undertaking. The second epigraph is an example of a common use of Taylor's article to defend a qualitative or interpretive research design. The purpose of this symposium is to celebrate the article's anniversary and reflect on what it has meant for interpretive political and social science. Contributors come from several subfields: public policy and administration, American government, comparative politics, and political theory. As background for considering its impact on methodological thinking and its standing in the discipline, this essay situates the article in the context of the social sciences at the time of its publication.

Appearing initially in the *Review of Metaphysics*, Taylor's article was quickly picked up in several important collections, becoming "one of the most widely-printed and widely-read articles ever published on the topic of interpretive social and political science" (David Forrest, personal communication, January 20, 2023): as of June, 2023, the original article and initial reprint had been cited over 3,600 times (according to Google Scholar; given its many reprintings, that number may well be higher). It is cited in many of the major works engaging interpretivism in political science (e.g., Bevir and Rhodes 2016, Lynch 2014, Schaffer 2016, Schatz 2009, Schram and Caterino 2006, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, Shenhav 2015, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014). In recognition of Professor Taylor's contributions to advancing interpretive research in political and other social sciences, in particular through this article, the American Political Science

Association's Interpretive Methodologies and Methods Conference Group presents the Charles Taylor Book Award annually, for "the best book in political science that employs or develops interpretive methodologies and methods" (Interpretive Methodologies and Methods, n.d.).[1]

The article's language is, in some places, dated. The title, for instance, with "man" as a generic referent, reflects its times, and Taylor subsequently turned to the language of "human sciences" (e.g., Taylor 1985b). Otherwise, for those immersed in interpretive thinking, encountering some of the article's ideas in a 50th anniversary re-reading is like meeting old friends. Still, although it is anachronistic to expect a writer to use language and voice ideas that were not yet part of public or academic discourse when he wrote, such as "positionality" and "reflexivity," we might ask what, if any, considerations a reading 50 years later brings into high relief.

Symposium authors explore the article's meaning and relevance for interpretive-qualitative methodological thinking today. Among other things, they explore how we might understand its influence and whether its argument is still compelling for political science and its subfields, research methods, teaching, and/or advising students, and how Taylor's thought could be extended to meet present concerns: the need for political scientists "to think otherwise about their research practices," especially concerning the centrality to explanation of social actors' meaning-making (Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, this symposium); interpretive research's potential to engender a more "disruptive" political science, one which "highlight[s] possibilities for ordinary people to rework [the] world in their favor" (David Forrest, this symposium); the need for greater engagement with "embodied positionality," especially bearing on "women of color scholars and third world feminists" (Natasha Behl, this symposium); potential contributions of interpretive empirical research to political theory or political philosophy, especially concerning the relationship between expectations for "rule-guided," "systematic" human action and finding a "measurable," "predictable" world (Matt Longo, this symposium); "messy realit[ies] of political life" that challenge objective political science assumptions of order (Carolyn Holmes, this symposium).

Along with some of the other contributors to this symposium, I engage the article personally, remarking on when and how I first became aware of it, the significance of that context for my reading of it, and its impact on my thinking. Revisiting the article after so many years enables several additional sorts of reflections. For one, awareness of its existence can remind political scientists that *interpretive social science is not only not new*, but, indeed, *has important origins within the discipline*. It is not an interloper imported from elsewhere. Such a reminder can be significant for newer generations of scholars, in particular, especially in an era that has seen, and is still experiencing, arguments advancing various "innovations" from a kind of "unity of science" perspective—that is, as if all political and social sciences should be held to one, single standard reflecting one analytic method. That is precisely the argument that Taylor sought to counter in the article being celebrated here.

Situating the Article

A text such as Taylor's might be situated in several ways. I briefly touch on where it stands in his own scholarly work and the article's publication history and then take up the methodological context in which it landed, as seen through other publications bracketing 1971.

The Author

Born in Montreal, Charles Taylor earned two undergraduate degrees: in history at McGill, followed three years later by Politics, Philosophy, and Economics at Oxford's Balliol College. He took his DPhil at Oxford in 1961 working with Sir Isaiah Berlin. In the decade between receiving that degree and publishing the article in question, he brought out two books and several journal articles. Afterwards, he published, among articles and chapters, two books on Hegel; three relating social theory (or social philosophy) and the social sciences, a theme he returned to in his latest book; four on identity and multiculturalism; and one taking up religion (see references for details). Political activity—helping resettle hundreds of refugees in Vienna after the 1956 Hungarian revolt, delivering underground seminars in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s (Lukes 2018, 737)—and various awards—including as inaugural recipient of the prestigious Berggruen Prize in philosophy—were interspersed betwixt and between. The teaching and research areas listed at his McGill faculty page indicate the range of Taylor's interests and scholarship: Philosophy of Action, Philosophy of Social Science, Political Theory, Greek Political Thought, Moral Philosophy, the Culture of Western Modernity, Philosophy of Language, Theories of Meaning, Language and Politics, German Idealism (Abbey 2021; Calhoun 2016; McGill University, n.d.).

The Article: Publication History

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1 The award was proposed at the founding meeting of the Conference Group in Spring 2008; Ido Oren suggested naming it in honor of Professor Taylor's contributions.

Between 1973 and 2003 "Interpretation and the sciences of man" was reprinted seven times in collections edited by scholars in phenomenology, political science and philosophy, anthropology and philosophy, and philosophy of science or social science (Taylor 1971). It is the first chapter, for example, in both the 1979 and 1987 editions of Rabinow and Sullivan's influential *Interpretive Social Science* (which have a combined citation of nearly 2000). Taylor included it as Chapter 1 in his own *Philosophical Papers 2: Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (1985b, 15-57), which has garnered over 3400 citations.[2]

A Broader Context of Ideas

Bracketing its initial 1971 appearance by a handful of notable publications brings the article's place in developing ideas into greater focus, explaining, too, perhaps, the demand to reprint it. Literary theorist Kenneth Burke's two major works—*A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), republished in a single volume in 1950—drew out the performative implications of plays, in particular, for human action (see also Burke 1989), making the latter subject to analytic ideas developed in literary criticism, anticipating one of Taylor's key hermeneutic insights. Two publications in 1962 marked significant rifts in the landscape of thinking about knowledge and knowing, the one concerning language, the other, the practice of science. J. L. Austin's 1962 *How to Do Things with Words*, the 1955 William James lectures delivered at Harvard University, shifted the established understanding of language as descriptive alone to a sense of its performative dimensions, drawing a link between words (of a certain type) and what they enacted. "I do" (in a marriage ceremony) and "I christen thee" (spoken of a ship) accomplish more than just descriptions of events, Austin argued; they perform them (1962, 12). And Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* showed that science does not proceed as had been thought, building brick by brick on previous, solo inventions. Instead, physical sciences are social practices, with new, "revolutionary" ideas developing when sufficient numbers of research anomalies can no longer be explained effectively through existing theories. These new ways of seeing would typically come from people on the margins of disciplines—women, for instance, or members of demographic minority groups—who had not yet been fully socialized to a discipline's dominant paradigm (1962, 209).

Attention to language was also beginning to grow in political science, often in reaction against the behavioralism that had captured it and other social sciences. Murray Edelman's *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* ([1964] 1985) focused on language and other symbols of government, implying a method of analysis of empirical materials drawing on the kind of hermeneutics that Taylor would develop a few years later. (In the 1985 edition's Afterword, Edelman was even more pointed in critiquing the positivist thinking that was his foil.) Two more path-breaking works followed, both in 1966. Chemist-cum-philosopher Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) condensed his argument from the 1958 *Personal Knowledge* concerning science as a social practice, emphasizing its tacit dimensions: "We can know more than we can tell," he wrote (1966, 4; see also Nye 2011). And, bringing Schützian phenomenology to English-reading audiences, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) articulated the processes through which intersubjective meaning-making becomes institutionalized.

The enlarged second edition of Kuhn's *Structure* was published in 1970, garnering a still wider readership. One year later, Taylor's article appeared in September as philosopher Paul Ricoeur's "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text" was being published in *Social Research*. (With Taylor's, it, too, was picked up in the Dallmayr and McCarthy 1977 and Rabinow and Sullivan 1979 and 1987 collections.) The parallels between the two articles are strong, both of them arguing for the analytic utility of treating human action as if it were a text. Where Ricoeur's approach sought to join phenomenology and hermeneutics, Taylor's remained more grounded in language, treating acts as "text-analogues." That same year saw Edelman (1971) extend his explorations of the expressive dimensions of political acts in *Politics as Symbolic Action*. Two years on, anthropologist Clifford Geertz published *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), setting out an argument for seeing human action as expressive of meaning. Invoking empirical examples, he described the double hermeneutic of researchers developing their own interpretations of the interpretations made by situated actors in fieldwork settings. Capping off the decade in political science, Edelman's *Political Language* (1977) focused fully on that over the material objects and acts that had featured in his two previous books; and Richard F. Fenno's appendix "Notes on Method: Participant Observation" in *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (1978) detailed the kind of method Taylor's arguments justified.

This abbreviated publishing history points to the burgeoning interest across political and other social sciences in the ideas Taylor engaged in 1971: the characteristics and processes of a science of interpretation. A shift in textual interpretation may have been in the air, toward the phenomenology of "reader-response theory" (Iser 1989) and various dimensions of

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2 I owe the push to feature citation counts to David Forrest.

the "linguistic turn." But in many respects this article lit the path, being all the more significant and laudable for advancing ideas of interpretation and meaning given the near-hegemonic command held by behavioralist thinking at the time. Its significance, as David Forrest notes, lies in its place as "a signal early publication from one of the most accomplished political and philosophical thinkers of the last half century, …[giving] voice to a much broader and more general transformation in academic thinking about interpretation…. [The article] reflects, exemplifies, [and] presages many of the most important insights to come out of that transformation" (personal communication, January 20, 2023), as the essays that follow make clear.

One Meaning of the Text

Taylor's article got into my hands sometime between my 1982 dissertation and my first book (1996), reworking that dissertation. I know I had read it by 1988, when I had the good fortune to join the third-tier observers at an NEH summer seminar on interpretation. I learned a great deal from its "first-tier" who's who of hermeneutic, phenomenological, and practice studies scholars: seminar organizers Hubert Dreyfus and David Hoy and presenters Geertz, Kuhn, Taylor, Stanley Cavell, Alexander Nehamas, and Richard Rorty. (See Hiley, Bohman, and Shusterman 1991 for a set of seminar papers.) My memory is much sharper, however, on what the article meant to me at the time.

It constituted, first and foremost, validation of the line of argument that I was working to advance in the fields of public policy and organizational studies, concerning the centrality of meaning in human action and the place for expressing that meaning in more than instrumental-rational ways. The article's grounding in hermeneutics and the idea of "text-analogues" provided justification for going beyond literal legislative texts to include implementation acts treated as texts for purposes of analysis. Another of its important contributions was, in effect, a philosophical-methodological rationale for participant-observer ethnographic research in policy and organizational settings, including multi-sited ones.[3] In short: I had "fieldnotes"—diagrams as well as narrative "texts" and analytic thoughts, in some cases scratched on bits of paper; in others, in bound notebooks— recording observations, formal interviews, snippets of

conversations, descriptions of events and interactions and the buildings and other spaces in which those had taken place, including who sat where and who spoke (or did not speak) to whom. These were my "translations" into words of what I had seen, heard, and experienced, useful reminders later, once I was out of "the field," of the details of those acts, events, interactions, and so forth as I tried to make sense of it all in relation to my research question. I had a method, in other words, or rather a handful of them, which I had used in situ, and I had started thinking about their methodological underpinnings. Taylor's article gave me ideas and language to think with, which were also useful in trying to explain to others how I was reasoning about what I had done.

That was important methodologically as both policy and organizational analyses had been colonized by instrumentally-rationalist accounts of human action, decentering previously engaged phenomenological-hermeneutic approaches. My political-organizational ethnographic work engaged the expressive, symbolic dimensions of human action and collective meaning. Taylor's critique of contemporaneous thinking in political and other social sciences encouraged me to consider not only that my inquiry was legitimate, but that I wasn't flying solo.

Looking back, I see three key contributions that the article made. First, as noted above, the idea of treating acts as "text-analogues" provided conceptual justification for extending analysis to acts in their own right and the material objects involved in these— including in policymaking and implementation, such as the built spaces in which acts and interactions take place (Yanow 1996). That idea lends itself to thinking not only about the fieldnotes that are significant in participant-observer and ethnographic research methods, but also about the transcripts that are central to interviewing research practices. Compare Taylor's "text-analogues" to Ricoeur's observation (1971, 530) concerning analysis: the object of exegesis includes not only writing, but also "the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing." The ideas are similar: Ricoeur's documents and monuments—which I inferred meant a form of built space—could be treated as we might literal texts, whether written by Senator Bernie Sanders or by an organization's Executive Director. Although the ideas run in parallel, Taylor's phrasing was

3 A distinction between "methodology" and "method" is key for understanding the discussion here and in some of the other essays in this symposium. Methodology is the "applied philosophy" of ontological and epistemological presuppositions that shape a research project and undergird particular research methods; methods put those presuppositions into practice. Some methods, such as ethnography, lend themselves to different methodological presuppositions; others, such as regression analysis, are inherently interpretivist or positivist in their presuppositions. See, e.g., Yanow ([2003] 2016), Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2014, xxiii ff.). As David Forrest notes (personal communication, June 28, 2023), although ethnography might be used to generate "brute data" and assess mechanistic propositions about political behavior (although that would greatly diminish its promise), the methodological perspective that Taylor articulated permits an appreciation of its far more fruitful potential for exploring meaning-making.

more "operationalizable" for research practices.

Second, in his delineation of the meaning of "meaning," Taylor opened the door to a wider range of human traits than just instrumental rationality. Values, heartfelt beliefs, and feelings, not just "thinkings," have a central place in his philosophy and methodology. Third, his explication of how scientific analysis works insists on the intersubjective, societal dimensions of knowledge, much as Polanyi and Kuhn both argued concerning the practice of science and Geertz did with respect to the learning and transmission of culture.

Rereading the article now, I find other ideas for which at the time I lacked the "toeholds of the mind" (Sir Geoffrey Vickers, personal communication, January 1981) that would have enabled me to grasp them, but which I have since come to engage. One is the extent to which Taylor anticipated practice studies, especially phenomenological approaches to workplace and other practices such as Schatzki's, drawing on Heidegger and Dreyfus, which have influenced my own analyses (e.g., Yanow 2004, 2015; Yanow and Tsoukas 2009). Taylor subsequently developed those aspects of his thinking (1983, 1985b, 91-115). The second concerns the implications of parts of the article for writing. Taylor says, for example, "We cannot measure such [human, hermeneutic] sciences against the requirements of a science of verification…." This, it seems to me, points to the role of persuasion in scientific writing: that is, data alone do not compel a reader to accept an argument; instead, writing and content are intertwined. Studying both structure and components shows *how texts persuade*, including in their use of metaphor and story-telling, ideas that have also been developed in other fields (e.g., Brown 1976 and Gusfield 1976 in sociology; McCloskey 1985, 1994 in economics). Such approaches undergird the whole idea of writing as method (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2002, 2009) and the notion that in considering the reader of our texts, we are dealing with a third hermeneutic—that is, with readers' interpretations of our analytic interpretations of situational members' interpretations (Yanow 2009).

Taylor was not writing in a vacuum—meaning that his ideas were not the only ones to contribute to interpretive thinking, which was developing at the time, such that teasing his legacy apart from other thinkers' is nigh impossible. But three key factors (at least) have made his essay so significant: it came very early in the development of interpretive social science; the clarity of the argument and expression made it accessible; the stature of the author and his position among political theorists engaging empirical questions lent it added weight.

In Closing

As I was contemplating the chronology surrounding Taylor's article, I realized that it was published the year I graduated college. I was not a good "Politics" undergrad: its concerns, as presented in my courses, did not resonate for me. How different my undergraduate "career" might have been, I thought, had the article appeared a bit earlier, especially in a political science journal, and circulated among the department's faculty (perhaps along with Murray Edelman's 1964 book). That might have meant, for me, a less circuitous route to graduate school, perhaps even a degree in political science itself—although I would have missed out on the experiences that grounded my understanding of those and other works when I did encounter them and which became the focus of my initial research and writings. Sadly, it remains the case that people in the discipline still challenge new scholars (and others) who choose to pursue interpretive empirical research. I have heard or read some comments—others have been reported to me—which communicate that such undertakings are not quite legitimate, not fitting the image of what empirical research in political science is "supposed" to look like.

The reflections in this symposium's essays suggest that Taylor's article still has relevance today, for its ideas as well as for the politics of science. Substantively, the article remains a forceful argument on behalf of a science of interpretation—one worth funding alongside other sciences by governmental agencies and foundations world-wide. It also voices a challenge to epistemological orientations that would banish interpretation from the human sciences (1971, 17). The article's critiques of political behavior studies and its engagement with the language of "brute data" may be a bit dated, but those ideas survive in the discipline under newer rubrics, such as in debates over replication. Other things have not changed so much. For example, "Intersubjective meanings…do not fit into the categorial grid of mainstream political science" (1971, 29)—still.[4] Finally, growing attention has focused of late on matters of truth, non-knowledge, and ignorance, in public and academic discourses alike. One implication of this development for methods "training" (and perhaps methodological argumentation) suggests "a shift away from traditional research strategies of reducing ignorance" towards those encompassing greater coping capacity when faced with ambiguities (Gross 2007, 745). The place of ineradicable ambiguity in human meaning-making was part of Taylor's argument in 1971 for recognizing the interpretive dimensions of political and social research. His article still gives those engaging such inquiry solid conceptual, theoretical, and methodological ground on which to stand.

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4 On related points, see David Forrest's essay (this symposium).

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From Philosophical Insight to Methodological Language: Charles Taylor, Interpretive Social Science, and Empirical Practice

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Sometimes men show amazing prescience: the myth of Faust, for instance, which is treated several times at the beginning of the modern period. There is a kind of prophesy here, a premonition. But what characterizes these bursts of foresight is that they see through a glass darkly, *for they see in terms of the old language*: Faust sells his soul to the devil. They are in no sense hard predictions. Human science looks backward. It is inescapably historical.

–Charles Taylor (1971, 50-51; emphasis added)

As might be expected given the place of political theory in the discipline of political science, Charles Taylor seems to be better known in that subfield than in the "empirical" subfields.[1] Yet in the article that is the topic of this symposium, he planted a seed that provided many of the insights that have since coalesced into a methodological language for imagining, designing, conducting, and writing up interpretive empirical political science projects—projects that, by definition, put the meaning-making of social actors at the center of explanation.

The epigraph provides inspiration for this way of reading the influence of Taylor's article. Its language is clearly of its time and for its intended audiences even as it introduced key interpretive ideas and anticipated others. After briefly considering the purpose of Taylor's piece in its disciplinary context, I consider the connections between it and the vocabulary available today to interpretive researchers. Some of these connections are readily evident, such as Taylor's use of the "hermeneutical circle,"[2] whereas others are implicit in his thinking, with subsequent developments producing new terms that summarize methodological thinking over the decades. There now exists, in a way that was not the case fifty years ago, an interrelated set of concepts,[3] a methodological language, that is appropriate to conducting interpretive social science and, also, to teaching what it means to do empirical, rather than philosophical, work (cf. Bevir and Blakely 2018).[4] Such methodological language has enabled the interpretive community to articulate to peer reviewers, editors, funding agencies, and others *how* its own scientific practices generate trustworthy knowledge.

Taylor's Article as a Provocation

What might have been Taylor's primary purpose

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1 The publication history in Yanow's symposium contribution shows this general pattern, with editors from philosophy or political theory outnumbering editors from the fields of anthropology, political science, and sociology. The division between political theory and the empirical subfields (i.e., international relations, comparative politics, American politics, among others) has been constructed historically (Kaufman-Osborn, 2006, considering U.S. political science) and bolstered by the fact-value dichotomy (Mihic, Engelmann, and Wingrove, 2005)—with the latter contested in interpretivism.

2 The "hermeneutic circle" examines how the meaning of the whole of a text cannot be grasped independent of its constituent parts (and vice versa). It characterizes the sense-making processes of interpretive research and, more broadly, of learning in general (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 30-1).

3 For an overview, see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012).

4 For an insightful take on the extent to which philosophers writing on social science do and do not read the relevant social scientific literature, see Becker (2011). I would add to Becker's point the importance of working with actual empirical evidence for understanding how philosophical presuppositions are enacted in methods practice (Schwartz-Shea 2019). Taylor himself did pay attention in his article to some of those methods practices; see his discussion of opinion surveys (19-22) in which he brings out their philosophical implications.