

**NSF Workshop on Interpretive Methodologies in Political Science  
Toronto, 1-2 September 2009**

**A Reader's Guide for the Plenary Session Readings**

The purpose of the assigned readings is to provoke questions and to get us thinking about where and how to situate "interpretive" work. There were two basic ideas in mind in selecting them:

1) Situating "interpretive" approaches with respect to broader philosophical issues requires a certain working knowledge of those basic philosophical issues. Such a basic working knowledge is far from commonplace in political science. These readings recall the basic methodological distinctions and debates that we still have -- and may also dispel some myths and (strategic?) mis-rememberings of those issues and their presentation.

Hempel is there, for instance, to pose the question of whether all explanations have to be expressible as lawlike generalizations. If we want to say no, then we need to wrestle with Hempel's arguments about this.

And are "interpretive" techniques really all that different from formal modeling, in terms of the epistemic status of the knowledge generated? Likewise, could (or should) there be a distinctively "interpretive" way to conceptualize and/or study "causal mechanisms"?

2) The second purpose in selecting these readings is to open up the possibility that "interpretive" is not a single, unified, coherent category but that, instead, it encompasses a variety of issues and can be cashed out in a variety of different ways. Scholars identifying as "interpretivists" might disagree, for example, about whether there are non-causal types of explanations (such as "constitutive explanations"), and if there are, whether interpretivists should specialize in providing such explanations.

Charles Taylor's "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (orig. 1971) or Peter Winch's book (*The Idea of a Social Science*, orig. 1958.) or any of the other work that starts off with the premise that the study of the meaning-making practices of human actors are somehow essentially or fundamentally different from any other potential object of study forecloses many of the most interesting conceptual issues.

One can investigate human beings and their meaning-making practices in a whole bunch of different ways, and so what we actually mean when we say "interpretive" is not simply that we are looking at meaning-making. Rather, we suspect that what is meant is that we are unwilling to accept the dualistic picture of knowing subjects constructing mirror-like representations of a mind-independent world, which is a properly methodological concern and not just a substantive focus.