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## NATURALISM AND ITS INADVERTENT DEFENDERS

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**ABSTRACT:** The interpretive turn in the social sciences, although much discussed, has effectively stalled and even begun to backslide. With the publication of *Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach*, we provide a systematic defense of interpretive inquiry intended to help reinvigorate this mode of study across the human sciences. This defense, unfortunately, needs to be deployed not only against social scientists who unwittingly adopt naturalistic philosophical assumptions, but against interpretivist fellow travelers such as Michel Foucault, who occasionally do the same thing; and even against interpretivists who assume that their philosophical position is secured by using only qualitative methods, and that quantitative methods are inherently unsuitable to interpretivist purposes.

Keywords: interpretive social science; hermeneutics; qualitative methods; quantitative methods; survey research.

We would like to begin by thanking the editors of *Critical Review* as well as the symposiasts—Cornel Ban, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, and Lisa Wedeen—for graciously taking the time to engage our book. When, nearly a decade ago, we embarked on the project of writing a single-volume exposition and defense of interpretive social science, our hope was that it would play a role in the ongoing efforts to stimulate a radical transformation of social research away from mechanism and technocracy and towards culture, history, and humanism. At the most basic level, the origin of our book was our own felt need, as practicing interpretive theorists, for a concise but systematic guide. Our book's role in responding to this lack is something very generously affirmed by both Ban (2019) and Wedeen (2019) in their thoughtful responses. Our aim was a volume that gathered together and condensed the interpretive tradition for readers of all stripes without oversimplifying or reducing its richness. In this sense, the addressees of our book are all those seeking what Wedeen calls "reasoned justifications" for an interpretive approach to the study of human behavior.

### **The Revolt Against Naturalism**

Long before we commenced this project, we were avid readers of many of the theoretical and social scientific tracts that constitute what is widely known as the "interpretive turn"—the immensely edifying work of such figures as Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Richard Bernstein, and Charles Taylor. The interpretive turn marked a push by this diverse set of thinkers, and many others in the latter half of the twentieth century, to render the study of human life and society more sensitive to meanings, culture, and history. This required rejecting the reigning tendency towards formalism and scientism that dominated research across the human sciences. Sadly, as we sat down to write our book, we recognized that the effort to "turn" or transform the social sciences had largely stalled or, even worse, had begun to backslide.

This is not exclusively due to the powerful cultural and ethical grip of scientism in modern societies. Another factor is the extent to which philosophers, social scientists, and other intellectuals who might otherwise be sympathetic to interpretive insights have also become entangled in what appear to us as ahistorical and naturalist forms of research. Our book attempts to flag the myriad ways in which well-meaning interpretive researchers unwittingly walk back into forms of scientism.

Perhaps more understandably, interpretive-friendly thinkers today often stop at philosophical disputes between say, post-structuralists and pragmatists, or phenomenologists and critical realists, without affirming or claiming an overlapping philosophical convergence around interpretive research. They delve into detailed studies of Foucault, Martin Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein and too often leave a cooperative venture in interpretive social theory to one side. These intellectual projects are by no means without merit, but collectively we interpretive-minded scholars have missed a chance for a more creative and complete paradigm shift.

For the subset of readers of our book consisting of philosophers and theorists, we tried to make clear how the interpretive tradition allows historical and critical inquiry to address key philosophical questions. Indeed, the interpretive paradigm offers many rich pathways that begin in philosophy and lead to historical, political, sociological, economic, and even psychological insights. This is one way to understand the structure of our book—beginning from a highly philosophical defense of interpretivism in the opening chapters and culminating in what we hoped were concrete, practical accounts of method, research topics, and policy analysis. In the hermeneutic way of seeing the world, the line between philosopher and cultural theorist is highly porous and sometimes nonexistent; and social science and policy analysis are, in our view, forms of cultural theory.

Above all, this book was written with social scientists and their students in mind. As theorists working in political science departments, we noticed that many of our colleagues in the social sciences had divided into rigid communities of professionalization centered largely on expertise in methods. The underlying assumption was that the fundamental questions in the social sciences were methodological and not philosophical. On this view, if you get your method right, the philosophy will follow. This seemed to us a grave error that the interpretive turn ought to have corrected. After all, interpretivism is a set of philosophical claims about the nature of meanings, human agency, and social reality. Interpretivism, in other words, begins life as ontology and linguistic philosophy and not as the canonization of a particular way of doing research in the social sciences. Our gamble in the book was that once social scientists grasped this basic distinction, they might see that the debates over methods were often a distraction from the central or vital philosophical issues that split the human sciences. Indeed, the well-intentioned effort to defend “qualitative” methods versus “quantitative” methods might ironically be contributing to the stalling of the interpretive turn—a point to which we return in greater detail below.

We are certainly heartened by Ban’s intriguing discussion of the ways in which international political economy, and even more so development economics, might arrive at new paths forward that point in an interpretive direction. Ban also rightly observes that one of our main aims was to refute the “popular myth that interpretivism (or hermeneutics) is a qualitative method preferred by touchy-feely minds that can, therefore, be safely discarded by serious social scientists.” Instead, as Ban and Wedeen both affirm, our ongoing argument throughout the book is that social science needs to undergo a paradigm shift and become more cultural and historical. Our view is that hermeneutics is universal and

ought to be non-optional in social science research. Wedeen is right when she suggests that we believe this will strengthen anti-essentialist and anti-naturalist schools of thought across the philosophical and political spectrum—including those forms of feminism that have taken an interpretive turn. We believe that the whole of social science and political theory need to be drastically revamped along more interpretive lines. The true divides in social science are between those defending and advancing the interpretive turn and those committed to more scientific and ahistorical approaches.

All of these points deserve more development and justification. Although it is impossible to rehash our book's entire argument here, briefly revisiting a few themes for the sake of readers unfamiliar with them might be helpful before turning to our response to the more critical reply to our book.

### **A Brief Recapitulation**

Our argument in *Interpretive Social Science* might be generally characterized in a few steps. First, we open with two chapters that offer a basic philosophical defense of (1) the interpretive concepts appropriate to the study of human agency, and of (2) the treatment of the meanings comprising social reality. As already noted, the project began from the conviction that interpretive-minded philosophers as various as Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Foucault, and Taylor, along with many others, had in fact converged on certain assumptions about the study of human behavior. For example, they had argued that meanings are holistic and that their explanation requires something like a hermeneutic circle, in which individual beliefs are only decipherable in relation to wider social or intersubjective webs of meanings. This implied that social-scientific explanation must not atomize or isolate the meanings of social reality, but must place them in the cultural contexts of the subject of study—which we defend and develop under the concept of “tradition.”

Traditions (and other such wide horizons of meaning) are generated by creative human agents who continually interpret and reinterpret their own beliefs, changing them over time and remaking the social world. Thus, Wedeen astutely characterizes traditions as not “something fixed or frozen” but radically historical.

One major upshot of the opening chapters of our book is the interpretive view that political reality is analogous to a text that embodies the linguistic meanings, ruptures, and changes of self-interpreting agents. Failure to grasp this nexus of philosophical insights leads social scientists to problematic research programs riven by misunderstandings and distortions. This claim is also related to the interpretive belief that the social sciences are fundamentally narrative in their explanatory form. That is, social scientists manage to explain social reality only insofar as they construct narratives about the societies they study that are true to the meanings of the actors in those societies. This is in sharp contrast to the dominant philosophical view in the social sciences, whose explanatory apparatus is formal and mechanistic—a philosophical view that we follow a number of interpretive philosophers, such as Taylor, in referring to as “naturalism.”

At the most general level, naturalism is a worldview—a diffuse and highly influential cultural, political, and philosophical movement—that attempts to model the study of human behavior on the concepts, themes, and methods of the natural sciences. Naturalists eschew the treatment of social reality as radically historical, as a text-analogue, or as a thick web of cultural and historical meanings.

Indeed, the historical particularity of meaning is often viewed by naturalists as “noise,” while they are in search of the underlying “signal”: a set of historically invariant causal mechanisms and structures.

In their quest for such invariant causes and structures, there is a tendency among naturalists to atomize meanings, to treat them as natural kinds or reified objects, to elide interpretation and use an empiricist epistemology of verification. Although naturalism can take the form of a truly astounding number of rival strains and research programs, it nonetheless is the hegemonic underlying attitude in the social sciences today. Ban and Wedeen are right to see this philosophical tendency as the chief antagonist of our book.

A true interpretive turn would mean a form of social science that looks very different from the kinds of research produced by most academics today. Anti-naturalist social science would be purged of all the concepts, themes, tendencies, and motivations of naturalist philosophy. Two thirds of the book is devoted to what such a fully interpretive social science looks like. Chapter 2 argues for an interpretive social science that would deploy concepts that are fully historicized and sensitive to cultural meanings. Banished would be the nearly ubiquitous tendency of naturalist social science to treat social reality as consisting of atomized, natural kinds to plug into formal “variables” analysis (Ban again provides a helpful precis of our work here). Efforts to create causal inferences that supposedly uncover laws or mechanistic statistical regularities would also need to go. In their place would be historical grand narratives, local tales, and critical genealogies.

The latter half of the book also argues that interpretive social science is loosely tied to certain empirical topics or ways of parsing social reality. We thus devoted two chapters to exploring the huge amount of exciting and dynamic interpretive research already done by heterodox scholars in the human sciences. We tried to carefully link this cutting-edge research to our original philosophical exposition of interpretivist concepts and themes to show why interpretive philosophers tend to favor the cultural and historical study of beliefs, identities, practices, and traditions. This once again contrasts against naturalist tendencies to occlude the interpretive weave of social reality with such mystifications as ahistorical structures, institutions, and transcendental agents (as in the case of much neoclassical economics and cognate fields).

### **Foucault and Naturalism**

Here it would be appropriate to discuss Wedeen’s deft reconstruction of our complex relationship to the work of Foucault, a figure we highly admire, but whom we also believe could have afforded, at times, to go in a more radically hermeneutic direction (a road that we suspect he was taking towards the end of his life). We are thus highly sympathetic to Wedeen’s suggestions for how to reform and rescue Foucault’s sensitivity to the intransigence of some social systems of meaning, as revealed by his method of discourse analysis. Indeed, we hope that future Foucauldians, as well as interpretive social scientists more generally, will incorporate something like Wedeen’s efforts to remain alive to the social and political background of traditions, resisting the tendency to fall into mythic versions of the autonomy of the individual over his or her social world. This will have to be done, however, in a way that retains hermeneutic insights into the self-interpreting capacities of human agents situated against a historical background.

A brief recapitulation of some of our sympathetic critique of Foucault’s approach (which is more fully developed in chapter 2 of our book) might be helpful. What Wedeen rightly affirms in Foucault’s

work is his profound awareness of the way that human beings always find themselves situated against background practices of meaning which are given to them and over which they often have little control. This is an inescapable feature of human life: that we find ourselves in a social world that is created for us. In Interpretive Social Science, we follow Gadamer in conceptualizing this background set of meanings as horizons and traditions. This situatedness against a background of meanings helps justify Foucault's rejection of the autonomous subject that was evident in the work of old-school phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl (1970) and Alfred Schutz (1967) who were overly impressed with the heroic individualism adopted by some forms of existential philosophy.

However, those who rightly follow Foucault in the rejection of an autonomous, ahistorical subject should also be careful not to drift subtly back into naturalism. In the book we argue that there are times when Foucault (2010) seemed at risk of falling into this error—particularly in his early work, when he emphasized the famous “death of the subject” and the need for an archaeological recovery of epistemes. The problem with epistemes is that they often seem to eliminate the role of any human agency whatsoever. This entangled Foucault in various irresolvable problems that we do not have the space to fully develop here, but which include: an inability to explain the historical change of those epistemic structures; an ahistorical, transcendental treatment of epistemic meanings that erased local, contextual variances; and an inability to self-narrate the position of the Foucauldian archaeologist.

This by no means invalidates Foucault's work. Rather, it means that we should look to the later Foucault's shift to genealogy as a more radically interpretivist and anti-naturalist stance. The philosophical ghost haunting Foucault's thought was the return to naturalism via a creeping structuralism.

Our book ended with two chapters focusing on how interpretivism rejects the naturalist notion that social science itself is somehow outside of history and politics. To the contrary, all social science has evaluative and performative implications. Naturalist social science, we argued, has affinities to technocracy and top-down forms of power and politics. By contrast, interpretivism resonates with participatory democracy, a critique of rule by experts, and bottom-up conceptions of society. These chapters focused not only on the way that naturalists helped build the politics of the last half century (including the rise of neoliberalism and other technocratic politics), but also on how interpretivist social science provided a site for resistance. Indeed, interpretivism, far from being value neutral, suggests a completely different way of formulating and conceptualizing public policy that contrasts with naturalism. On the interpretive view, the social scientist is never a value-neutral observer. The naturalist dogma of the fact-value dichotomy, which holds that scientific theory is always “value free,” is another false analogy with the natural sciences.

### **Interpretation and Method**

We now turn to the sharply critical remarks by Schwartz-Shea (2019) Given the general outlines of our position, we were disappointed by her interpretation of our argument, especially as we consider her an ally and fellow scholar within the broader interpretive community in the United States.

First, we are honestly puzzled how someone who carefully read our book could come to the conclusion that our use of the term “anti-naturalism” is meant to “eschew” the “legacy” of interpretivism. Indeed, our goal was nearly the exact reverse: to champion and consolidate a big- tent

vision of interpretive philosophy and social inquiry. Fortunately, this is something that both Ban and Wedeen affirm in their reviews.

Second, we are confounded by Schwartz-Shea's claim that we gave little attention to the ways in which social scientists are themselves always situated in the social and political world. The last two chapters of the book are devoted to this very problematic. The entirety of chapter 7, on ethics and democracy, and a good deal of chapter 8, suggest that social science is never value-neutral but involves commitments to certain conceptions of human anthropology, rational authority, and institutions by the social scientist. There we argue that the effort to render social science a "view from nowhere" in fact naively participates in naturalism as a form of technocratic, top-down power. By contrast, we attempt to persuade readers that interpretive social science shares certain affinities with more egalitarian forms of social organization. As part of this we include extended arguments on the way that social science has performative and ideological dimensions—for example, in chapter 9 we make the case that social science helped create "particular policy styles [that] enact different kinds of political realities." Similarly, chapter 8 includes accounts of how social scientists helped generate Thatcherite and Reaganite forms of neoliberal politics.

As part of this line of critique, Schwartz-Shea also mischaracterizes us as "philosophers" opining on the social sciences paternalistically from the outside. Both of us work in political science departments and, in much of our other work, advance interpretive studies of the political world. We consider ourselves not philosophers standing outside the social sciences but interpretivists who do not easily fit the disciplinary boundaries of philosopher versus social scientist. Indeed, as already mentioned above, the interpretive tradition problematizes this dichotomy. On the anti-naturalist view, doing social science always requires philosophy, and certain philosophical questions cannot be pursued separately from inquiry into social reality. This is part of the genius of the hermeneutic tradition. As hermeneuticists working in social science departments, we are in fact all too aware of the curricular context of social-science research. Indeed, like Schwartz-Shea, we are dismayed by the dominance of quantitative methods in graduate training. We are not asking for the continuance of the status quo with a few philosophy of social science classes tacked on. We are envisioning a radically integrated social science that is philosophically humanistic and so cannot justifiably polarize into methods camps.

This brings us to the claim that stimulated the most detailed critical response from Schwartz-Shea: our argument that the social sciences ought to be divided over philosophy, not method. Although this claim is chiefly the point of chapter 7, a theme throughout the book is the notion that inadequate philosophy is the basic problem of the social sciences, and that if this problem is solved, various methods will produce results that are true to the way that human beings are: that is, to their self-interpretive anthropology.

Schwartz-Shea suggests, in contrast, that certain methods "respect meaning-in-context" and are thereby inherently interpretive (she uses the example of "in-depth interviews"), while other methods are inherently naturalistic (for example, "mass surveys"). She therefore thinks we committed a grave error when we argued that interpretive social scientists might, with adequate philosophical reflection, make careful use of methods across the qualitative and quantitative divide. As she puts it, "Bevir and Blakely . . . treat methods as neutral tools that can always, somehow, be brought back in line with the anti-naturalist philosophy that, they contend, all social scientists should adopt." At the heart of

Schwartz-Shea's critique is her assumption that "ontological conceptions of causality" are "embedded in particular methods."

Schwartz-Shea is of course right to assume that most social scientists today who use ethnography and other qualitative methods tend to be of a more interpretive mindset than those using mass surveys or statistical research. We certainly find more philosophical allies among qualitative researchers who are open to hermeneutic insights. And we frequently feel more intellectually at home with qualitative research groups. However, Schwartz-Shea is mistaken when she implies that method always involves an "ontological conception of causality." Indeed, as the book argues at length, many early ethnographers (we cite the example of Margaret Mead) spent time ethnographically embedded in local cultures only to construct ahistorical, naturalist explanations of the societies they visited. Mead's case shows that one can use qualitative methods and still arrive at naturalist, formal, structural conclusions.

The naturalistic work of ethnographers such as Mead illustrates that although it might be contingently the case that the epistemic communities built around ethnography and qualitative methods are more interpretivist, this is not necessarily or inescapably the case. Conversely, an interpretivist might make use of mass survey data as a starting point for the careful construction of meanings, eschewing law-like generalizations and mechanistic variables in the interpretation of survey responses. Just as nothing automatically makes ethnography immune to naturalism, neither are mass surveys useless for those seeking to interpret culture.

Schwartz-Shea's response leaves unclear whether social scientists and theorists can ever use mass surveys, statistics, and other quantitative methods, or if the latter are somehow chained to naturalistic ontological conceptions of causality that we also reject. She rightly worries that people trained in such methods often think in terms of variables and carve up social reality into isolated, reified chunks. We join her in rejecting such wrongheaded research. But mass surveys do not force this atomistic outlook on researchers; rather, a particular philosophical vision of them does.

Thus, an interpretive researcher might be greatly helped by a mass survey with fixed responses showing what percentage of American households owns a firearm, or what the median income is in Gallup, New Mexico. Surely it is not reasonable to tell social scientists to forgo such information on the grounds that only open-ended interviews are ontologically acceptable. The ontology of causality and method can be separated, although we would agree with Schwartz-Shea that quantitative researchers must use great caution against a return to naturalism. We also would join her in calling for far more engagement of methods outside of quantitative obsessions with "data." Ethnography will be a vital part of any revived interpretive social science.

We sense two further problems in Schwartz-Shea's call to confine interpretive social science to qualitative methods. First, this approach risks falling into the view that methods are somehow formal steps that secure truth, which we call the conception of methods as "logics of discovery." Ironically, the fixation on formal methods by qualitative scholars reflects, in part, the historical and cultural influence of naturalism and the notion of a scientific method of discovery. We now live in a time where many interpretive social scientists have adopted a faith that method will save them from naturalism. This faith holds that so long as they become sufficiently adept at the right method (e.g., ethnography or open-ended interviews), social scientists will have secured validly interpretive conclusions. Instead, we argue

that methods are ways of generating knowledge about social reality that might be informed by either naturalist or interpretivist philosophical understandings.

The other (related) problem is that a defense of the interpretive turn by rallying around qualitative methods risks reifying the meanings of “methods.” In some passages, Schwartz-Shea’s treatment of quantitative methods suggests that they must be naturalistic because they somehow entail a mechanistic notion of causality. But this misses the fact that methods are also meanings and, as such, can be creatively reinterpreted by researchers. We cannot a priori legislate that the meaning of mass surveys is naturalistic without mistakenly assuming that a method always and everywhere means the same thing to different researchers. In other words, we need to use our interpretive sensitivity to local meanings to look at the very methods we use in interpretive research. What our book calls for is a creative and subversive takeover of quantitative methods for interpretive uses. In some cases (such as rational-choice theory) we argue that this will mean that the quantitative method in question will become radically less important and helpful to social researchers.

As should now be abundantly clear, our intention was never to eliminate reflection on methods (what Schwartz-Shea calls “methodology”). The entirety of our book’s chapter 5 consists of a series of arguments and meditations on precisely this topic. Rather, we tend to think of reflection on methods as inevitably an exercise that involves philosophical reasoning. What Schwartz-Shea wants to refer to as “methodology” we simply think of as hermeneutical reflection on the tools used to inquire into social reality. Thus, we accept there is a loose distinction between using a method and stepping back to reflect abstractly on the nature of that method. Far from “disappearing” or eliminating this task, we very clearly are doing our best to honor it.

Part of what such philosophical reflection on method will make clear is that even heuristics such as rational-choice theory are attempts to model some feature of social reality. Schwartz-Shea is right to see that sometimes rational choice can become a rival (anthropological and explanatory) theory to hermeneutics. When it does so we reject it. However, hermeneutic conceptions of humans as self-interpreting are also expansive enough to allow for a narrow use of rational choice as heuristic attempts to idealize descriptions of social scenarios. In such narrow cases, rational choice fits within a family of practices in the social sciences meant to generate information about human behavior.

At bottom, we believe, Schwartz-Shea wants the same thing we want: a radically more interpretive form of social scientific inquiry. We simply disagree about how to think about and carry out such a change. We recognize much value in the work that she endorses, but we worry that her call for interpretivists to double down on qualitative methods will simply serve to perpetuate the current intellectual landscape. This is a landscape in which naturalists feel emboldened by the notion that interpretivists are people who want to turn all of social science into small-scale ethnographies and open-ended interviews. Quantitative researchers rightly see that some questions can be answered with the assistance of such methods as mass survey research and complex statistical methods. When interpretivists present themselves as researchers whose primary goal is a single-minded defense of qualitative methods, they relegate themselves to the status of researchers unable to answer such important and simple questions as: What is the average earning potential of women with college degrees in the United States versus those without them? What percentage of Trump voters had previously voted for Barack Obama? To hamstring social science in this manner is neither reasonable nor attractive.

In short, the interpretive turn is not a spat over which method specialists are to use. Researchers themselves should exercise their own judgment over the tools appropriate to studying the political and social world. But these judgments need to be philosophically informed. They should not misconstrue the nature of the objects of study: human beings. If interpretivists conflate this philosophical issue with methodological ones, they will unwittingly cooperate in their own marginalization in fields that desperately need their voices.

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