

Introduction

At least since the middle of the twentieth century—when successful efforts were made to create a *political science* by modeling the modern study of politics according to the methods and goals of the natural sciences—the appropriate terms upon which the study of politics should be carried out and the goals toward which it should aspire have been matters of great contestation. Our studies in political science have exposed us to this contestation. Many of our teachers were committed to making claims about politics with the same aspirations and precision that physicists, biologists, or chemists make claims about causal relations between natural phenomena. While learning from them, however, we began to notice that the state of the field was characterized by plurality and ongoing debate. Not all classes or professors supported the goal of making the study politics scientific. Some, for example, questioned the idea of scientific objectivity and offered alternative ways of explaining and interpreting politics. Today, the field of political inquiry is characterized by even more diversity than when we, the authors, were students. Efforts to unify the field around the scientific project are themselves diverse, and there are legitimate alternatives to scientific approaches.

This book arises from our understanding of this diversity and the importance of teaching it to students of politics. In our experience, the diversity of the field often puzzles students, who go from one class to another finding themselves, sometimes without explanation, learning about *how* to think about politics in very different ways. They may learn the names of different approaches, but unless there is explicit attention given to exploring the assumptions of the approaches they are encountering, students continue

to have only a vague sense of each. This is unfortunate—in our experience, when students are exposed directly to the implicit assumptions and goals that motivate professors or experts to examine a political issue from a certain perspective, or to advocate that students or citizens act in certain ways when approaching that issue in real life, student understanding is enriched. Their engagement is intensified, and the study of politics becomes more relevant. That is to say that, when students are exposed to the varying assumptions and goals that underlie what they have learned *as knowledge* of politics from their teachers or textbooks, they better understand their relation to both their studies and the high stakes of debates over the foundations of political inquiry. In short, we believe that *Interpreting Politics* will be immensely helpful for making sense of the analytical diversity that students encounter in their study of politics. For students who have not yet encountered this diversity, this book invites you into an important conversation that has been taking place both within and outside the formal institutional spaces of Political Science today.

In what follows, we will introduce and explain the underlying presuppositions, assumptions, goals, and aspirations of the major approaches to the study of politics: scientific empiricism (or positivism), hermeneutics (or interpretivism), critical theory, scientific realism, discourse analysis, post-colonial and subaltern analysis, and post-interpretive approaches. We will explore the process of how and why political analysts committed to each approach frame a particular issue, ask particular questions about it, and arrive at claims that they offer as knowledge. We want to show you how the convincing power of these claims often comes from a variety of underlying assumptions that they make about method, purpose, and approach. As we shall discuss, within each of these approaches, there is also important variety, and there are connections and important relations between some of them that make fruitful combinations possible.

Interpreting Politics comes from over twenty years of learning, examining, and teaching these issues together, first as teacher and student and now as colleagues. When we dig even deeper into our purposes for writing this work, we realize that we are asking us all to consider who we are and who we seek to be as students, teachers, scholars, and interpreters of politics. In taking the study of politics as our subject matter, we are asking all of us to risk considering deeply what we ought to be doing or seeking to do when we engage in political explanation—when we attempt to make compelling, persuasive, or authoritative claims about what is happening politically in the world. We want this book to broaden your sense of possibility about what we are doing as practitioners of political analysis. We want to offer clarity where we believe some of the deepest questions about the study of politics reside.

In offering you that clarity and an awareness of the diversity in the field, we hope this book will make you a more active participant in your studies, and ready to make your own contributions in political analysis. We hope you will be able to use your new awareness to ask more informed questions, to use the different approaches creatively, and, finally, to make political inquiry something uniquely important for you.

We hear from students that using textbooks is foreboding. This book has been written out of our teaching experience at Vassar College, a small liberal arts school in New York. In those classes, our primary aim is to inspire and provoke conversation as much as it is to have students master certain material. We feel that the latter is best attained when the conversation is most robust, and so we write in a manner that seeks to engage you in conversation, not only instruct you. Our discussion proceeds somewhat chronologically, with the first chapter centering on the empiricist or positivist effort to make the study of politics scientific. It then evolves from there, following debates generated by that effort, out of which alternatives to empiricism—whose philosophical roots in many cases precede empiricism—emerged. Throughout our discussion we will use real-world examples to illuminate each mode of inquiry. We hope you'll read from start to finish, but we also encourage you to read in a different order if your curiosities reside elsewhere. Each chapter is connected to its prior chapter, but they are all related and connected in multiple ways. So skip and return as you need. Keep in mind as you do, that because we are writing for *conversation* with you, rereading can often be helpful, just as when you ask someone with whom you are conversing to repeat something so that you better understand them. To elaborate the underlying assumptions and goals of each approach, we will highlight sometimes very dense, classic writings that have described those assumptions and goals. Understanding these texts often requires reading them closely and sometimes rereading them even more closely. We constantly ask our students to reread, and we spend time in class rereading and discussing important portions of these materials with them. As you read, therefore, try to re-read difficult portions and let that re-reading feel less like work and more like a conversation, which is what the book is most intended to offer.

One final note of some importance: In the course of our careers, we have worked fruitfully within the terms of all of these approaches. We also have our own commitments to particular approaches, even particular aspects of different approaches, and we expect that you will, too. We will make our commitments clear to you over the course of our conversation. One of those commitments is to take the terms of each approach that we study as meaningfully and as seriously as they are intended to be taken. We ask you to do the same. We endeavor to converse with the claims of each approach as fully

as possible, even as we may find some more compelling than others. This openness, critical at times, underlies this entire work, and we believe it is indispensable. As you will see, debates over the foundations and objectives of the study of politics are not over, nor should they ever be. These debates generate new questions and proposals out of which innovative thought and new approaches emerge. For this reason alone, the field of interpreting politics is ready to receive your thoughts, ideas, and contributions. It's time to join the conversation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are immensely grateful to so many colleagues, students, teachers, and interlocutors at the University of Minnesota and Vassar College, where the ideas for *Interpreting Politics* took shape, grew, and have continued to grow through over twenty years of intensely engaging conversation, learning, and teaching. During the preparation of the manuscript, we enjoyed valuable editorial insight and support from Sam Beckenhauer, Arjun Chowdhury, Sino Esthappan, Gürol Irzik, Vasundhara Mathur, Richard K. Matthews, Sahara Pradhan, and Darren Walhof. We are also tremendously grateful to our publisher, Bill Webber, whose patience, availability, and personal engagement and dedication to intellectually challenging textbooks on new ideas in political analysis have made writing this work a true professional pleasure.