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Interpretation and the 'science' of international relations*

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The issue of 'interpretive' approaches to the study of international relations has achieved prominence in recent meta-theoretical discussions of the discipline. It has been suggested, for example, that the work of interpretive theorists, such as Hayward Alker, Richard Ashley, Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie and Robert Cox, represents an approach which is qualitatively different and distinct from the traditional, positivist-inspired approach to the study of international politics.[1]

This poses at least two important sets of questions. First, what is it about an interpretive approach that distinguishes it from the traditional, positivist-inspired one? Specifically, what are the distinguishing elements of the two approaches? On what points does an interpretive approach differ from a positivist one? And what, if anything, do the two approaches hold in common?

The second set of questions is equally important. What is the potential contribution of an interpretive approach to the study of international politics in relation to the traditional, positivist-inspired approach? Specifically, can an interpretive approach be used to supplement the traditional, positivist-derived one? Can it be employed to undermine the traditional, positivist-derived approach? And what are the implications—political as well as intellectual—of these two research strategies?

Taking these two sets of questions as its guide, this paper will proceed as follows. First, by drawing on the work of interpretive theorists in the realm of political and social theory,[2] it will identify the distinguishing characteristics of both positivist and interpretive social science. This background discussion will then be related to

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[1] In particular, the study of international institutions. See Robert O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly*, 32, no. 4 (1988), pp. 379–96. It should be noted that what in this essay are termed the 'interpretive' and 'positivist' approaches, Keohane refers to as 'reflective' and 'rationalist' approaches, respectively.

[2] This essay will draw most specifically on the contribution of Charles Taylor whose germinal piece, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', served to inspire the title and much of the content of this paper. Taylor's piece has been reprinted in P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 33–81. Taylor's work is ideally suited to the main objective of this paper—i.e., to underscore what is unique to an interpretive approach to the study of the social world—in that it is both accessible to the uninitiated as well as representative of interpretive social science more generally.

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traditional efforts to theorize international politics. The affinity of the dominant approach(es) to the study of international politics to positivist social science will be noted.

Finally, the potential contribution of an interpretive approach to the study of international politics will be discussed. It will be argued that interpretive approaches can be used either to supplement or to undermine the traditional, positivist-inspired approach to the study of international politics, and, by extension, to serve either a political agenda embedded firmly in the status quo or one having a radical-emancipatory content. As a consequence, the debate within the camp of interpretive theorists may prove to be as vigorous as that between interpretivists and their positivist critics.

To conclude, it should be noted that the concern of this paper is neither empirical nor theoretical, but rather meta-theoretical in nature. Its purpose is to contribute to a process of conceptual clarification around the issue of interpretation and international politics. Such a meta-theoretically derived clarification process cannot, of course, be the endpoint of intellectual inquiry. It is the starting assumption of this paper, however, that such a process is a necessary—and for the moment at least, underdeveloped—point of departure for the discipline.

Social science and the question of human consciousness

One of the best ways to distinguish positivist social science from interpretive social science is in terms of their respective conceptualizations of human consciousness. One of the central tenets of the positivist tradition is that of the methodological unity of science—a tenet which, in turn, rests on the assumption of 'naturalism'. That is, it is assumed that there is no fundamental difference between the social world and the natural world; the social world contains the same kind of regularities independent of time and place—in this case, 'behavioural regularities'—as exist in the natural world. For this reason, the approach developed to conduct a scientific analysis of the natural world—an approach designed to identify regularities and subsume them under general covering laws—is held to be equally appropriate to the social world. This underlying assumption of naturalism accounts for the way human consciousness has been conceptualized and treated within mainstream social science.

As the same time, it is important to note that the positivist conceptualization of human consciousness has not gone unchallenged in contemporary social and political theory. Specifically, theorists concerned with developing and promoting an 'interpretive approach to the study of society,[3] have argued that the positivist conceptualization of human consciousness has served to obscure and misrepresent the fundamental role of human consciousness in social life.

I will begin by reviewing briefly two distinct ways that human consciousness has been conceptualized within positivist social science. I will then proceed to a review of the criticisms of positivism developed by 'interpretive' theorists, and the alternative they offer.

[3] Also sometimes referred to as 'hermeneutics'.

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Positivist formulations of human consciousness

Human consciousness has been conceptualized in two distinct ways in positivist social science. The distinction between the two approaches derives from the different answers positivist social scientists have given to the question of the significance of what Weber called 'subjective meanings'—i.e. the meanings which human subjects attach to behaviour—and the value of trying to apprehend those meanings in terms of the goal of 'causal adequacy'. Depending on the answer given to this question, positivist social scientists fall into one of two camps: (1)'strict behaviouralism' and (2) 'meaning-oriented behaviouralism'.

'Strict behaviouralism' is the original version of the behaviouralist movement in social science, a movement representing perhaps the most concerted effort to apply the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science to the study of the social world. 'Strict behaviouralism' takes overt behaviour as the proper object of study. Considerable energy is directed toward achieving standardization in the measurement of human behaviour, and especially in operationalizing theoretical concepts in terms of observed behaviour. The ultimate goal, of course, is the subsumption of regularities in overt behaviour under general covering laws, themselves derived axiomatically from basic assumptions.

What then of human consciousness? What of the insistence, found in the work of Weber, for example, on the importance of the 'subjective meanings' that human beings attach to their behaviour, and of the *Verstehen* tradition in social science which orients itself toward understanding those 'subjective meanings'?

In general, strict behaviouralists hold that the understanding of 'subjective meanings' is not only not sufficient for the validation of scientific knowledge about the social world, but that 'subjective meanings' are in no way necessary to the development of scientific accounts of social life. The reasoning behind this position is simple. Scientific knowledge of the social world—positivistically conceived—must be based on empirical evidence only (i.e., publicly observable objects or events—a category into which behaviour would fall). Since the domain of human consciousness is not amenable to such observation—since the 'subjective meanings' attached to social phenomena do not exist in the public realm, (but rather in the private consciousness of the individual(s) concerned)—it can have no place either as a component of reliable knowledge of the social world, or as a means of validating such knowledge (i.e., no place in the 'context of justification').

This is not to say, however, that 'strict behaviouralists' see absolutely no role for efforts to understand subjective meanings attached to behaviour. *Verstehen*, a technique oriented toward 'empathetic identification'—putting oneself in the subject's shoes—is regarded by strict behaviouralists as a potentially fruitful method for generating hypothesis relating external stimulus to behavioural response; a useful tool in the 'context of discovery'. In no sense, however, does the employment of interpretive techniques (*Verstehen*) affect the *logic* of social inquiry, or serve to demarcate it from the logic of the natural sciences.[4]

[4] On this point, see Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy (eds.), *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (London, 1977), pp. 77–80. The positivist philosopher Otto Neurath has equated *Verstehen* techniques with a 'cup of coffee': something which might increase the 'serendipity' of the social scientist, but which has no place in empirical work. Dallymayr and McCarthy, *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, p. 6.

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While all positivistically minded social scientists accept, by definition, that the 'understanding' of 'subjective meanings' has no place in the context of validation, not all would be comfortable with the notion that 'subjective meanings' themselves have no place in the scientific explanations of 'social action'. Indeed, the adherents of a second positivist formulation of human consciousness—termed here, 'meaning-oriented behaviouralism'—insist that the integration of 'subjective meanings' into social scientific accounts of human behaviour is necessary for the achievement of 'causal adequacy'.

This of course raises the question of how 'subjective meanings' are to be integrated into a scientific or positivistic logic of investigation which stresses publicly verifiable standards of proof. Specifically, how is the social scientist to determine the exact nature of the preferences/motives/goals of the subject(s) under study?

All positivist-inspired social scientists—including those committed to integrating 'subjective meanings' into causal analysis of 'social action'—share unease with regard to variables not open to public scrutiny. As a consequence, 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' have expended considerable effort to develop research techniques—content analysis, interviews, surveys, questionnaires—which are designed both to bring 'subjective meanings' (preferences/motives/goals) into the public realm and to facilitate standardized measurements of them. Like 'strict behaviouralists', 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' would no doubt acknowledge that the methods of *Verstehen* ('sympathetic imagination'/'empathetic identification') have proved useful in the 'context of discovery'.[5] The final goal, however, remains the bringing of 'subjective meanings' attached to social action into the public realm, so that they can be treated as 'intervening variables' between the 'stimulus' (the action context) and the 'response' (behaviour).

By correlating particular beliefs/motivations/values with a particular behaviour in a particular context, it becomes possible to 'derive empirically testable hypotheses about uniformities of behaviour under specific conditions'.[6] In this way, argue 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists', the importance of 'subjective meanings' in 'social action' can be accommodated without violating the positivist standard of 'causal adequacy'.[7]

The suitability of 'meaning-oriented behaviouralism' in terms of the goal of positivist social science is clear. By integrating 'subjective meaning' into regularities linking context and behaviour, and by devizing ways of ensuring that those variables remain open to public scrutiny by the members of the scientific community, this approach conforms completely to the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science. In short, while the 'subjective meanings' attached to behaviour would seem to require a modicum of innovation at the level of research techniques, 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists'—like 'strict behaviouralists'—do not see the 'meaningfulness' of social life as necessitating any qualitative change at the level of the positivistic logic of investigation.

[5] For example, in designing questionnaires, guiding the researcher in the interview process, etc.

[6] Thomas A. McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), p. 153.

[7] It can, of course, be argued that 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' have brought 'subjective meanings' into the public realm only by operationalizing those meanings in terms of specific forms of behaviour—i.e., a specific opinion on an issue is operationalized in terms of a specific response to a question in an opinion survey. From this perspective, what is being correlated is not a 'subjective meaning' with a specific behaviour, but rather one type of behaviour (e.g., the response to an opinion survey) with another (e.g., a vote in an election).

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It is this view—and the assumption of naturalism of which it is the expression—that is the prime focus of criticism of those wishing to promote an alternative to positivist approaches to the study of social life. It is to their criticisms—and their alternative formulation—that we now turn.

Beyond positivism: human consciousness as constitutive of social life

We have seen in our brief review of conventional positivist-inspired treatments of human consciousness in the social sciences, that consciousness has been conceptualized as 'subjective meaning' which either has relevance only in heuristic terms in the 'context of discovery' or which is integrated into scientific investigation as an 'intervening variable' between context and behaviour. In either case, the dimension of human consciousness in social life does not pose any challenge to the assumption of naturalism which underlies the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science. That is, human consciousness is not seen to raise any challenge to the idea that regularities independent of time and place exist in the social world in the same way as they do in the natural world.

It is the positivist accommodation of human consciousness to the assumption of naturalism that theorists advocating an interpretive approach to the study of society reject. It is important to be clear about the exact nature of the challenge posed by the interpretive approach to positivist social science. Interpretive theorists do not deny that behavioural regularities exist in the social world. Nor do they contest that individuals attach 'subjective meanings' to their behaviour.

What interpretive theorists contest is that the behavioural regularities which can be observed in the social world exist independently of time and place as they do in the natural world. What interpretive theorists contest is that the notion of 'subjective meanings' attached by individuals to their behaviour is an adequate conceptualization of human consciousness in social life.

Interpretive theorists start with the understanding that human beings are 'fundamentally self-interpreting and self-defining'.[8] That is, human beings live in a world of cultural meaning which has its source in their own interpretations of that world; human beings act in the context of a 'web of meaning'—a web that they themselves have spun. As a consequence, the social world—in contrast to the natural world—'is itself partly constituted by self-interpretation'.[9]

The fundamental dimension of self-interpretation in the social world has important consequences for social science. As a consequence, argue interpretive theorists, the object of study of social science must include the interpretations and definitions of the human subjects whose interaction makes up the social world. Social science, then, is interpretive in a double sense. On one level, it is, like any knowledge-generating

[8] Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, 'The Interpretive Turn', in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, p. 7.

[9] Charles Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,' p. 46. This is not to say that human beings are always fully cognizant of their participation in this on-going self-definition and self-interpretation process. Rather, in Giddens' terms, the activity of self-definition and self- interpretation often takes place at the level of 'practical consciousness' (and not the more explicitly self-consciousness level of 'discursive consciousness'). See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 375.

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activity, an interpretive enterprise. What distinguishes it from interpretations of the natural world, however, is that an important part of the subject matter of social science is itself an interpretation—the self-interpretation of the human beings under study.

The 'web of meaning' spun by human beings is fundamental to the nature of their behaviour. For it is the 'web of meaning' which makes the behavioural regularities observed in the social world what they are—*human* practices—and distinguishes them from the non-human regularities observed in the natural world.[10] And it is for this reason, affirm interpretive theorists, that the practices in which human beings are engaged cannot be studied in isolation from the 'web of meanings', which is, in a fundamental sense, constitutive of those practices, even as it is embedded in and instantiated through those same practices.

It is clear then, that while interpretive theorists may agree that behavioural regularities are an identifiable feature of the social world, they would nonetheless oppose strict behaviouralism's exclusive focus on actions 'that are supposedly brute-data-identifiable'[11] to the neglect of the 'web of meaning' constitutive of and embedded in those actions. But what of the alternative offered by 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists'? Doesn't their approach, which renders the concern with 'meaning' compatible with the positivist goal of subsuming behavioural regularities under general covering laws, meet the concerns of interpretive theorists?

Interpretive theorists deny that it does. The approach of 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' is not satisfactory, argue interpretive theorists, because of the way it conceptualizes both the 'web of meaning' and the relationship of the 'web of meaning' to human practices. Specifically, 'meaning-oriented behaviouralism' conceives of the 'web of meaning' as the sum-total of the 'subjective meanings' of the individuals involved. And it conceives of the relationship between the 'web of meaning' and human practices as a correspondence of specific 'subjective meanings' to specific actions—a correspondence which allows for the establishment of verifiable correlations compatible with causal explanation.

Once again, it must be stressed that an interpretive approach has no more difficulty accepting that individuals may attach 'subjective meaning' to their actions than it does acknowledging that behavioural regularities may be identified in the social world. What an interpretive approach contests, however, is: (1) that the 'web of meaning' should be understood as the sum-total of individual 'subjective meanings', and (2) that the relationship between the 'web of meaning' and human practice is one of correspondence.

Interpretive theorists, in contrast to 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists', conceive of the 'web of meaning' not as a sum-total of 'subjective meanings' which grow out of individual self-interpretations and self-definitions, but rather as being comprised of '*intersubjective* meanings' which are the product of the collective self-interpretations and self-definitions of human communities. These 'intersubjective meanings', moreover, are not the same as the positivist notion of a 'consensus' about beliefs or values. As Charles Taylor notes,

When we speak of consensus we speak of beliefs and values which could be the property of a

[10] For example, the regularities in the interaction of molecules which serves as the focus of chemistry need not be considered in relations to any self-interpretations' or 'self-definitions' of those molecules.
[11] Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 48.

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single person, or many, or all; but intersubjective meanings could not be the property of a single person because they are rooted in social practice.[12]

Furthermore, the relationship between the 'intersubjective meanings' which make up the 'web of meaning' and human practices is not one of correlation, where 'intersubjective meanings' serve as an 'intervening variable' in a causal sequence. Rather, the 'intersubjective meanings' are constitutive of those practices.

There is no question that positivist-dominated social science has great difficulty in coping with this notion of 'intersubjective meanings'. As Taylor has noted in a discussion of positivist political science,

> Intersubjective meanings, ways of experiencing in society which are expressed in the language and descriptions constitutive of institutions and practices, do not fit into the categorical grid of mainstream political science. This allows only for an intersubjective reality that is brute-data-identifiable. But social practices and institutions that are partly constituted by certain ways of talking about them are not so identifiable. We have to understand the language, the underlying meanings, that constitute them.[13]

This is not to deny that 'subjective meanings' can be placed in a relationship of covariance with specific actions. Notes Taylor,

> We can allow, once we accept a certain set of institutions or practices as our starting point and not as objects of further questioning, that we can easily take as brute data that certain acts are judged to take place or certain states judged to hold within a semantic field of these practices—for instance, that someone has voted Liberal or signed the petition. We can then go on to correlate certain subjective meanings— beliefs, attitudes, and so forth—with this behaviour or its lack.[14]

But this approach has serious—and from the perspective of interpretive theorists, pernicious—consequences for social science. Continues Taylor,

> But this means that we give up trying to define further just what these practices and institutions are, what the meanings are which they require and sustain. For these meanings do not fit into the grid; they are not subjective beliefs or values, but are constitutive of social reality. In order to get at them we have to drop the basic premise that social reality is made up of brute data alone . . . . We have to admit that intersubjective social reality has to be partly defined in terms of meanings; that meanings as subjective are not just in causal interaction with a social reality made up of brute data, but that as *intersubjective* they are *constitutive* of this reality.[15]

An example provided by Taylor may serve to illustrate the points being made here. Let us take the case of negotiation, a form of social interaction familiar to the inhabitants of liberal, capitalist societies. First, it is quite plausible that behavioural

[12] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 58.
[13] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 59.
[14] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 59.
[15] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 59. As Taylor notes, one particularly promising way of conceptualizing 'intersubjective meanings', the full implications of which are beyond the scope of this paper, is as 'rules' having both normative and constitutive effect. Once again, Anthony Giddens has made an important contribution in this regard. See his discussion of 'structuration theory' in *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretive Sociologies* (London, 1976). For a useful discussion and critique of Giddens' contribution, see John B. Thompson, 'The Theory of Structuration', in D. Held and J. B. Thompson (eds.), *Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and His Critics* (Cambridge, 1989).

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regularities might exist in negotiation settings, and that furthermore, 'strict behaviouralists' might succeed in identifying those regularities. It is also true, virtually by definition, that different parties in a negotiation setting will have different subjective motivations, goals, and values, and that 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' might succeed both in identifying those 'subjective meanings' and in establishing significant correlations between them and specific actions (e.g., negotiating positions).

What interpretive theorists stress, however, is that those behavioural regularities and those diverging 'subjective meanings' are dependent upon the existence of negotiation as a social practice for their very possibility. Moreover, negotiation, as a social practice, is itself constituted by a specific set of 'intersubjective meanings'.

> The actors may have all sorts of beliefs and attitudes which may be rightly thought of as their individual beliefs and attitudes, even if others share them; they may subscribe to certain policy goals or certain forms of theory about the polity, or feel resentment at certain things, and so on. They bring these with them into their negotiations, and strive to satisfy them. But what they do not bring into the negotiations is the set of ideas and norms constitutive of negotiations themselves. These must be the common property of the society before there can be any question of anyone entering into negotiation or not. Hence they are not subjective meanings, the property of one or some individuals, but rather intersubjective meanings, which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act.[16]

The 'intersubjective meanings' which constitute the practice of negotiation are very specific. Taylor observes:

> Our whole notion of negotiation is bound up . . . with the distinct identity and autonomy of the parties, with the willed nature of their relations; it is a very contractual notion.[17]

These particular 'intersubjective meanings', moreover, are themselves context specific. As Taylor notes, the set of 'intersubjective meanings' which constitute the practice of negotiation and bargaining, are not present in every society:

> But other societies have no such conception. It is reported about the traditional Japanese village that the foundation of its social life was a powerful form of consensus, which put a high premium on unanimous decision. Such a consensus would be considered shattered if two clearly articulated parties were to separate out, pursuing opposed aims and attempting either to vote down the opposition or to push it into a settlement on the most favourable possible terms for themselves. Discussion there must be, and some kind of adjustment of differences. But our idea of bargaining, with the assumption of distinct autonomous parties in willed relationship, has no place there . . . [18]

As a consequence, the naturalist assumption that regularities in the social world—conceived independently of or in causal relation to individual 'subjective meanings'—are, like regularities in the nature world, independent of time and place, must be rejected. By extension, the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science can no longer be sustained.

It is important to be clear about the argument that is being advanced by interpretive theorists. Two points, in particular, merit attention. First, while it is true that an interpretive approach stands opposed to positivism's 'mechanical materialism', it would be a mistake to conclude that what it proposes as an alternative is a return to a radical

[16] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 57.
[17] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 52.
[18] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 53.

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form of idealism (i.e. that the world is a creation of mind). It would be a mistake, first, because interpretive theorists have consistently argued that just as human practices are always constituted by a 'web of meaning', so also a 'web of meaning' is always embedded in, and instantiated through, concrete human practices. Thus, just as practices cannot be understood apart from the 'web of meaning' which constitutes them, neither can a 'web of meaning' be understood in isolation from the practices in which it is embedded. Furthermore, an interpretive approach does not imply idealism because such an approach recognizes that the process of self-reflection and self-interpretation always takes place in relation to a concrete historical context (material and social).

The second point which needs to be stressed—and at somewhat greater length than the first—is that an interpretive approach should not be equated with what might be termed the 'hermeneutics of recovery'. That is, it should not be understood as advocating that: (1) the true subject matter of social science is individual consciousness; (2) the appropriate methodology for the researcher is one of empathy; and (3) the appropriate goal of the social science is one of 'recovering' the original 'intentions' of human agents. The interpretive approach 'emphatically refutes the claim the one can somehow reduce the complex world of signification to the products of self-consciousness in the traditional philosophical sense'.[19] As noted above, interpretive theorists do not argue that the object of investigation is individual consciousness (subjective meaning), but rather the 'web of meaning'—'the web of language, symbol, and institutions that constitutes signification'[20]—comprised of 'intersubjective meanings'. As a consequence, 'intentionality'—like human behaviour itself—is understood to be 'dependent on the prior existence of the shared world of meaning within which the subjects of human discourse constitute themselves'.[21]

As a consequence, 'empathy' is not seen as an appropriate methodology for an interpretive approach. For empathy is a methodology oriented to gaining access to private consciousness. But as noted above, the 'intersubjective meanings' are not confined to the realm of private consciousness. They are embedded in and instantiated through social practices which are part of the public realm. As Rabinow and Sullivan note:

> Meanings or norms 'are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves; practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relations, or mutual action.' These meanings are intersubjective; they are not reducible to individual subjective psychological states, beliefs, or propositions. They are neither subjective nor objective but what lies behind both.[22]

Instead of empathy, the methodology appropriate to an interpretive approach can be described as the 'hermeneutic circle'. By 'hermeneutic circle' is meant that the social scientist endeavours to 'make sense' of the social world by demonstrating that 'there is a coherence between the actions of an agent and the meaning of the situation

[19] Rabinow and Sullivan, 'The Interpretive Turn', p. 6.
[20] Rabinow and Sullivan, 'The Interpretive Turn', p. 6.
[21] Rabinow and Sullivan, 'The Interpretive Turn', p. 6. The work of Hans-Georg Gadamer has particular relevance to this point. For a good introduction to his work in this regard, see Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford, California: 1987).
[22] 'The Interpretive Turn', p. 7 Rabinow and Sullivan are quoting Taylor. Or again, as Taylor notes, 'It is not just that all or most people in our society have a given set of ideas in their heads and subscribe to a given set of goals. The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as as set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action' ('Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', pp. 56–7).

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for him'.[23] 'Making sense' of the social world, then, involves a process of 'testing' the adequacy of a proffered 'reading', that is, (1) of the 'web of meaning' in terms of the concrete social practices in which it is embedded, and (2) of the 'coherence' of observed social practices in terms of the 'web of meaning' which constitutes those practices.[24] As a consequence, the interpretation of a given 'web of meaning'/social practice can never be tested against an objective standard. Rather, the testing and refinement of particular interpretations is always done in terms of other interpretation. It is never possible to escape the 'hermeneutic circle'.[25]

And finally, to conclude this second point, it would not be correct to equate an interpretive approach with a 'hermeneutics of recovery' because the objective of social science for those committed to an interpretive approach is not limited to 'recovering' the self-interpretations and self-definitions which constitute social practices.[26] Because social practices are constituted by 'intersubjective meanings', 'recovering' those meanings—by means of the 'hermeneutic circle'—is an important step.[27] Yet as is apparent from Taylor's statements that '. . . social reality has to be *partly* defined in

[23] Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 43.

[24] It should, of course, be emphasized that to 'make sense' of some behaviour in no way implies that the behaviour is rational. On the other hand, as Taylor notes, 'even contradictory irrational action is "made sense of", when we understand why it was engaged in'. ('Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 43).

[25] From the perspective of the 'hermeneutic circle', then, the proper analogy for the methodology of an interpretive approach is not the method of physics (the subsumption of empirical regularities under covering laws, nor that of Dilthey's 'romantic hermeneutics' (empathic identification), but rather the learning of a second language (the 'web of meaning' which constitutes observed social practices) and then the translation of that language into one's mother tongue (the concepts of the social scientist). For a discussion of hermeneutics not as 'empathy' but as a form of 'translation', see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1988).

[26] Though it might be argued that the formulations of some interpretive theorists—starting with Dilthey—have tended in this direction. For a critique of this more limited notion of an interpretive approach to the social world, see Brian Fay, *Social Theory and Political Practice* (London, 1975), ch. 4. For a response which argues that Fay's critique does not apply to all forms of interpretive social science—in particular, to that proposed by Charles Taylor—see Michael Gibbons, 'Introduction: The Politics of Interpretation', in Michael Gibbons (ed.), *Interpreting Politics* (Oxford, 1987).

[27] I have placed the word 'recovering' in inverted commas to underscore the problematic nature of the 'recovery' process. Specifically, the notion of 'recovering' the intersubjective meanings particular to a community of human agents is problematic for at least two reasons. First, though such meanings are always the product of an on-going process of self-interpretation and self-definition, as was noted above, that process is rarely one about which human agents are reflexively self-conscious. As a consequence, the human agents themselves may be incapable of articulating the 'intersubjective meanings' which constitute their practices. To 'recover' unarticulated 'intersubjective meanings' is then no simple and straightforward activity.

Secondly, the notion of 'recovery' must also be nuanced through the recognition that all acts of 'recovery' involve interpretation. That is, the 'reading' of a specific 'web of meaning' and social practice is, in keeping with the reality of the 'double hermeneutic', expressed in the language and terms of the social scientist. And because there is no way to escape the 'hermeneutic circle'—because there is never any way to establish the validity of a particular reading beyond any doubt—every 'reading', no matter how plausible or sophisticated, remains potentially contestable.

In short, an interpretive approach does not alter in any way the sense in which a 'science' of international politics is 'interpretive' in the way that all scientific activity is 'interpretive'—i.e., all scientific activity involves the 'interpretation' of data in terms of paradigm-specific conventions about what constitutes 'valid knowledge'. In other words, the focus on the 'intersubjective meanings' which constitute social practices is no escape from the 'Cartesian anxiety'; i.e., that should objective standards for truth and knowledge not exist, we are left with chaos and madness. On the nature of the 'Cartesian anxiety', see Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia, 1985). For an argument which does advocate the incorporation of 'intersubjective meanings' into international relations theory as a means of getting around the problems posed by the paradigm-determined nature of all knowledge, see Roger Tooze, 'Economic Belief Systems and Understanding International Relations', in R. Little and S. Smith (eds.), *Belief Systems and International Relations* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 132—3.

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terms of meanings',[28] that 'that of which we are trying to find the coherence is itself *partly* constituted by self interpretation',[29] an interpretive approach is quite capable of accepting that the subject matter of social science extends beyond 'webs of meaning'.

Rather, the objective of an interpretive approach is to re-express the relationship between 'intersubjective meanings' which derive from self-interpretation and self-definition, and the social practices in which they are embedded and which they constitute—in short, the 'form of life'—in order to exercise critical judgement.[30] In short, the goal of an interpretive social science is not to re-state the understanding of the human agents involved, but to 'attain[ ] greater clarity than the immediate understanding of the agent or observer'.[31]

In sum, we have seen that notion of 'intersubjective meanings' associated with an interpretive approach to the study of the social world offers an alternative to the positivist conceptualization of human consciousness and meaning in social life as either an 'heuristic aid', or as 'subjective meanings' which can be correlated to specific actions. We have also seen how the alternative offered by an interpretive approach challenges the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science by undermining the assumption of naturalism. In this way, interpretive social science opens a space for conceiving of human consciousness as both constitutive and potentially transformative of the social world.

We are now in a position to move to a consideration of theorizing in the discipline of international relations. It is to that task that we now turn.

Positivism, interpretation, and the study of international politics

Positivist formulations of human consciousness in international relations theory

On the basis of our review of positivist and interpretive social science, it is now possible to place positivist formulations of human consciousness in international

[28] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 59 (my emphasis).

[29] 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 46 (my emphasis).

[30] Because an interpretive approach focuses, first and foremost, on 'intersubjective meanings', there is no difficulty in accommodating the need to examine, for example, unintended consequences of human behaviour or structural dimensions of human interaction (as there would be were 'subjective meanings' the exclusive focus).

It should be noted that although Taylor's work is being privileged in this article, contemporary interpretive social science draws on and has been influenced by at least five distinct traditions, including (i) the tradition of phenomenology/ethnomethodology as developed by Husserl and Schutz; (ii) the 'linguistic tradition' as developed by the later Wittgenstein and Winch (and into which Taylor's work falls); (iii) the hermeneutic tradition as developed by Heidegger and Gadamer; (iv) the tradition of critical theory as developed by Marx and Habermas; and (v) the tradition of genealogy as developed by Nietzsche and Foucault. Despite their differences, the five traditions do share the commonality of seeing the dimension of 'meaning' as both 'intersubjective' in nature and 'constitutive' of social reality. For useful introductions to the various traditions represented in contemporary interpretive social science, see Gibbons, *Interpreting Politics*; Dallmayr and McCarthy, *Understanding and Social Science*; and Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*.

For a critical discussion of the distinctive characteristics of Taylor's approach—an approach Gibbons terms 'Critical-Expressivism'—see Gibbons, 'Introduction: The Politics of Interpretation', in Gibbons (ed.), *Interpreting Politics*. For an interesting comparison of this approach with that of genealogy, see Michael T. Gibbons, 'Interpretation, Genealogy and Human Agency', in T. Ball (ed.), *Idioms of Inquiry: Critique and Renewal in Political Science* (Albany, 1987).

[31] Taylor, 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', p. 47. For a good discussion of the place of the 'hermeneutics of recovery' in interpretive social science, see Michael Gibbons, 'Introduction', in Gibbons (ed.), *Interpreting Politics*.

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relations theory in a larger meta-theoretical context. We shall begin with a review of the methodological pronouncements of an individual who, it can be argued, serves as a model for positivist theorists working in the discipline of international relations. Specifically, we will begin with a look at the work of Hans Morgenthau.

On the consecutive pages of the classic *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau makes the following two statements:

(I) Political realism believes that politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature . . . The operation of these laws being impervious to our preferences, men will challenge them only at the risk of failure.[32]

(II) For realism, theory consists in ascertaining facts and giving them meaning through reason . . . To give meaning to the factual raw material of foreign policy, we must approach political reality with a kind of rational outline, a map that suggests to us the possible meanings of foreign policy. In other words, we put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances . . . We assume that statesmen think and act in terms of interest defined as power . . . That assumption allows us to retrace and anticipate . . . the steps a statesman—past, present, or future—has taken or will take on the political scene. We look over his shoulder when he writes his dispatches; we listen in on his conversations with other statesmen; we read and anticipate his very thoughts.[33]

This raises the question of how one is to understand the relationship between these two statements. One possible response, as typified by Jim George, is to argue that Morgenthau's work is marked by a 'pronounced theoretical tension'—even a 'paradox'.[34] The roots of this tension/paradox, argues George, lie in the fact that Morgenthau's work attempts to unite two distinct and mutually opposed methodological traditions: specifically, positivism (as expressed in Morgenthau's first statement) and interpretive theory (*Verstehen*) (as expressed in the second). The interpretive/hermeneutic tradition, argues George, is in evidence in Morgenthau's admonition to put ourselves in the place of the statesman—in short, to 'get "inside" the world of the diplomat, the foreign policymaker, the strategist, and the power broker'.[35] The positivist approach, of course, is clearly visible in Morgenthau's affirmations that '[international] politics is governed by objective laws' which are 'impervious to our preferences'.[36]

If George is correct, it would seem to pose a major problem in terms of the coherence of Morgenthau's contribution to the foundations of the discipline. Indeed, George argues that it is further evidence discipline's uncritical strategy of turning its back on the 'theory question that an "ambiguity" of this magnitude within its exemplar text' has so rarely provoked serious intellectual debate.[37]

There is, however, good reason to question this interpretation. It is important to note, for example, that the identification of a paradox/tension in Morgenthau is

[32] *Politics Among Nations*, 5th edn (New York, 1973), p. 4.

[33] *Politics Among Nations*, p. 5.

[34] 'The Study of International Relations', in Richard Higgott (ed.), *New Directions in International Relations? Australian Perspectives* (Canberra, 1988), p. 92.

[35] George, 'The Study of International Relations', p. 92.

[36] It should be noted that George is not the only one to identify a tension in Morgenthau. For a parallel interpretation which sees the same kind of tension in Morgenthau's work—this time expressed as a conflict between a hermeneutically inspired 'practical realism' and a positivist 'technical realism'—see Richard Ashley, 'Political Realism and Human Interests', *International Studies Quarterly*, 25, no. 2 (1981), pp. 204–35.

[37] George, 'The Study of International Relations', p. 93.

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dependent on equating an interpretive approach with the techniques of empathetic identification associated with *Verstehen*. Yet as was noted in the first part of this paper, *Verstehen*'s emphasis on private, subjective meanings stands in stark contrast to interpretive social science's concern with public, intersubjective meanings. On the other hand, positivists have had little difficulty in incorporating *Verstehen* into positivist research. Specifically, positivists have remained faithful to the tenet of the methodological unity of science and the assumption of naturalism by employing *Verstehen* as a technique potentially relevant to the context of discovery, and by subordinating its results to the methods appropriate to the testing of hypotheses in the context of justification.

In short, it can be argued that the two statements by Morgenthau noted above are less a sign of paradox/tension in his work than evidence that mainstream international relations theorists have accommodated *Verstehen* techniques to their positivist-inspired study of world politics in the same way as mainstream theorists in social science more generally—i.e., by re-defining *Verstehen* as a technique potentially relevant to the context of discovery, and subordinating it to the methods appropriate to the testing of hypotheses in the context of justification.[38]

This is not to say, however, that all positivist-minded international relations scholars have taken the same stance regarding human consciousness. For as in the case of positivist social science more generally, it can be argued that to mainstream international relations theory's reconciliation of 'subjective meanings' to the exigencies of the positivist tradition correspond two distinct positivist formulations in international relations.

On the one hand one finds those international relations theorists who correspond to our discussion of 'strict behaviouralism' in the first part of this paper. These scholars followed Morgenthau in affirming that the central focus of the study of international politics must be 'the examination of political acts performed'.[39] Dominated as the discipline has been by realist assumptions,[40] it comes as no surprise that the political acts focused upon were performed by states.

The realist-inspired 'strict behaviouralists' congregated to form one of the two main approaches to the study of international politics: that of 'systems theory'. From this perspective, states were treated as billiard balls, operating in a system.[41] Moreover, in keeping with the general orientation of 'strict behaviouralism', it was assumed that 'the perceptions of the actors . . . [were] essentially irrelevant to the task of explanation'.[42]

Others, however, appealed to Morgenthau's (and Weber's) assertions to argue that while the examination of the behavioural facts of intentional politics—the 'political

[38] This is not to say that Morgenthau is consistently positivistic in his approach to the study of international relations. I would agree with Ashley (see note 36 above) that Morgenthau's positivist 'technical realism' is somewhat mediated by his hermeneutic 'practical realism'. However, contrary to Ashley (and George), I do not think that Morgenthau's incorporation of *Verstehen* into his work is evidence for the 'practical', non-positivist dimension of his approach.

[39] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 4.

[40] See John Vasquez, *The Power of Power Politics: A Critique* (New Brunswick, 1983).

[41] For an overview of the literature of the early wave of systems theory, see Michael P. Sullivan, *International Relations: Theories and Evidence* (Englewood Cliffs, 1976), part II. The most sophisticated and elegant contemporary contribution to 'systems theory' is, of course, Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* (New York, 1979).

[42] Steve Smith, 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', in Little and Smith (eds.), *Belief Systems and International Relations*, p. 16.

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acts performed'—was vital, the 'examination of the facts is not enough'. They followed Morgenthau in affirming that

> To give meaning to the factual raw material of foreign policy, we must approach political reality with a kind of rational outline, a map that suggests to us the *possible meanings* of foreign policy. In other words, we put ourselves in the position of a statesman . . . [43]

That is, these theorists—corresponding to the category of 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists'—affirmed that the 'subjective meanings' attached to 'political acts performed' were a vital component of the development of scientific *explanations* of those acts. In the words of Philip Lawrence, 'In judging and explaining foreign policy decision-making, the most crucial elements that must be evaluated are purposes and motives'.[44] And once again, reflecting the realist hegemony in the discipline, the behaviour in question was that of the leaders of states, while the 'subjective meanings'—the 'purposes and motives'—to be evaluated were those attached by these state managers to their actions.

If the 'strict behaviouralists' in the discipline of international relations were to be found in the 'systems theorists' camp, 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists', as suggested by the Lawrence quote above, tended to gravitate to that of 'foreign policy analysis'.[45] Here the attempt to determine the 'subjective meanings' attached by state managers to their actions took a variety of forms employing a wide range of creative methodological techniques. These ranged from 'the image',[46] to 'belief systems',[47] to 'operational codes',[48] to 'cognitive maps',[49] to 'lessons of the past',[50] to 'Brecher's research design'[51] in the case of form, and included techniques such as 'content analysis' and questionnaires.[52] The underlying commonality which unites these

[43] Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, p. 5.

[44] 'Strategic Beliefs, Mythology and Imagery', in Little and Smith (eds.), *Belief Systems and International Relations*, p. 140.

[45] As Smith has noted, the dual focus of the discipline was manifest in Waltz's analysis of the causes of war, as well as serving as the subject of a classic article by Singer, in which he spoke of the 'level of analysis problem' in international relations theory (Smith, 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', p. 16). See Kenneth Waltz, *Man, The State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York, 1959), and J. D. Singer, 'The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations', in K. Knorr and S. Verba (eds.), *The International System: Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 77–92.

[46] See Kenneth Boulding, *The Image* (Ann Arbor, 1956).

[47] See Ole Holsti, 'The Belief System and National Images: A Case Study', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 6 (1962), pp. 244–52.

[48] See Alexander George, 'The 'Operational Code': A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making', *International Studies Quarterly*, 13 (1969), pp. 190–222.

[49] See Robert Axelrod (ed.), *Structure of Decision* (Princeton, 1976).

[50] See Ernest May, 'Lessons' of the Past (New York, 1973). See also, Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, *Thinking in Time* (New York, 1986).

[51] As Steve Smith notes, the 'Brecher Research Design' involves a research framework based on the relationship between beliefs and information not dissimilar from the other approaches noted. It is based on the concept of an analytical foreign policy system, the core of which is the postulated 'linkage between the psychological environment of the decision-makers and the operational environment in which decisions are implemented' ('Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', p. 26). The operative assumption which underlies this approach is that:

> To the extent that decision-makers perceive the operational environment accurately their foreign policy acts may be said to be rooted in reality and are thus likely to be 'successful'. To the extent that their images are inaccurate policy choices will be 'unsuccessful'.

See Michael Brecher, Blema Steinberg and Janice Stein, 'A Framework for Research on Foreign Policy Behaviour', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 13 (1969), p. 81. See also S. Smith, 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations,' pp. 25–7.

[52] For an excellent overview of the distinctive characteristics of these different approaches and techniques, as well as references, see Smith, 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', pp. 17–27.

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approaches, however, is adoption of the 'subjectivist' position[53]—that is, the concern with identifying the 'subjective meanings' attached to international behaviour and with bringing those meanings into the public realm. As with 'meaning-oriented behaviouralism' in general, the 'subjective meanings' of state managers—their 'perceptions' and 'beliefs'—were understood as intervening variables—a 'filtering device'[54]—between the empirical reality of the international context and international behaviour. And in keeping with the positivist tenet of the methodological unity of science, it was the position of 'meaning-oriented behaviouralists' in the discipline of international relations that if the 'perceptions [of state managers] could be studied and if significant regularities could be found, then here was another route to [scientific] international relations theory'.[55]

As with treatments of human consciousness in positivist social science in general, then, in positivist international relations theory the realm of human consciousness is conceptualized as either an 'heuristic aid' in the context of discovery, or as a significant 'intervening variable' which can be correlated to specific behaviour in specific contexts. What this shows is that positivist international relations theorists were just as determined to assimilate human consciousness to the tenet of the methodological unity of science in accordance with the assumption of naturalism which underlies it as were positivists in social science more generally. As a consequence, positivist international relations theory—whether 'strict behaviouralist' or 'meaning-oriented behaviouralist'—is fundamentally unable to appreciate the constitutive and potentially transformative nature of human consciousness in terms of the global order.

There is, however, an alternative formulation of human consciousness in international relations theory—a formulation which draws not upon positivism, but upon interpretive social science for its inspiration—which does not suffer from positivism's limitations. It is to that alternative formulation that we now turn.

Interpretive approaches to the study of international politics

Given the preceding discussion of the differences between positivist and interpretive social science, and given the traditional predominance of positivist research in international relations, we are well placed to understand both the distinctiveness and unorthodox nature of interpretive approaches to the study of international relations. We can, for example, grasp the significance of Keohane's observation that an interpretive approach to the study of international institutions is marked by an emphasis on the 'importance of the *intersubjective meanings* of international institutional activity',[56] and that such an approach 'stresses the impact of human subjectivity

[53] The term is A. N. Oppenheim's. See his 'Psychological Processes in World Society', in M. Banks (ed.), *Conflict in World Society* (Brighton, 1984), p. 114.

[54] Smith, 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', p. 11.

[55] 'Belief Systems and the Study of International Relations', p. 16.

[56] 'International Institutions', p. 381. In addition to the interpretive efforts undertaken by Ruggie, Kratochwil, Alker, Ashley, Haas and Cox, one might also note those of Nicholas Onuf, Alexander Wendt, and Raymond Duvall. See Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Columbia, 1989); Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization*, 41, no. 3 (1987), pp. 335–70; as well as Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall, 'Institutions and International Order', in J. Rosenau and E. Czempiel (eds.), *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges* (Toronto, 1989).

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and the embeddedness of contemporary international institutions in pre-existing practices'.[57]

But what is the specific contribution of interpretive approaches to the study of international relations? The remainder of this paper will provide an answer to this question with special reference to the sub-field of international organization. I will begin with the potential contribution of interpretive approaches to mainstream, realist/positivist-inspired theorizing.

Interpretive social science and realism

In the 1980s, neo-realist-inspired analysis of international organization dominated much of the field of international relations. The substantive concern of this approach was the institutionalised cooperative behaviour existing among advanced capitalist states in the context of the Liberal International Economic Order (LIEO). The approach featured a focus on the monetary and trade institutions—the 'regimes'—which regulated that order, where regimes were defined as

> implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations.[58]

This definition was well-suited to positivist international relations theory. The traditional concern with 'prevailing practices', 'behaviour', and 'action', lent itself well to analysis according to the approach of 'strict behaviouralism', while the emphasis on 'expectations' and 'beliefs' seemed to leave open the possibility of a 'meaning-oriented behaviouralist' analysis of regimes.[59]

In time, however, some scholars began to sense the inherent limitations of the positivist approach to the study of international institutions. The prime difficulty lay in a disjuncture between 'ontology and epistemology'—that is between that nature of international institutions and the dominant modes of analysis. Specifically, it was argued by interpretive theorists such as Kratochwil and Ruggie that difficulties in understanding the workings of regimes—i.e., when they were present and when not, and how they changed over time—arose because of the incompatibility between on the one hand an intersubjectively constituted object of study requiring an interpretive method of study and, on the other, a positivist method of study premised on the assumption of naturalism.[60]

Given this analysis of the difficulties in positivist regime analysis, the solution was clear: the resolution of the problems in the analysis of regimes, affirmed Kratochwil

[57] 'International Institutions', p. 379.

[58] Stephen D. Krasner, 'Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables', in S. Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca, 1983), p. 2. The definition continues:

> Principles are beliefs of fact, causation, and rectitude. Norms are standards of behaviour defined in terms of rights and obligations. Rules are specific prescriptions for action. Decision-making procedures are prevailing practices for making and implementing collective choice.

[59] For a representative sampling, see Krasner, *International Regimes*, as well as Kenneth A. Oye (ed.), *Cooperation Under Anarchy* (Princeton, 1985).

[60] Friedrich Kratochwil and John Gerard Ruggie, 'International Organization: A State of the Art on the Art of the State', *International Organization*, 40 (1986), p. 764 (my emphasis).

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and Ruggie, 'will require the incorporation into prevailing approaches of insights and methods derived from the interpretive sciences'.[61] In short, interpretive social science was seen to offer an important contribution to the resolution of a number of fundamental anomalies in the neorealist analysis of regimes.[62]

Despite their important insights, however, it can be argued that Kratochwil and Ruggie's discussion of the potential contribution of an interpretive approach is incomplete. For the contribution of the approach is, in their view, limited in its scope. Interpretive epistemologies will not be required, they conclude

> in circumstances that require little interpretation on the part of the relevant actors—because the environment is placid, because shared knowledge prevails, or because coercion determines outcomes.[63]

It is important to stress that in limiting interpretive approaches in this way Kratochwil and Ruggie are departing from one of the main insights of interpretive social science—namely that all social practices—whether they occur in an environment that is 'placid' or overtly coercive in nature—are constituted through intersubjective meanings; that all social activity requires interpretation both by immediate participants and by those seeking to analyze that activity in a systematic fashion.[64]

Indeed, it can be argued that a second contribution of interpretive social science to mainstream theorizing is exactly this: to re-establish the fundamental commonality

[61] 'International Organization', p. 771. Nor are they daunted by predictable attempts by at least some members of the international relations community to discredit interpretive approaches:

> Interpretive epistemologies that stress the intimate relationship between validation and the uncovering of intersubjective meanings are simply too well developed today to be easily dismissed by charges of subjectivism—or, more likely in the arena of international relations theory, of idealism. (p. 765)

[62] For example, Kratochwil and Ruggie argue that by treating the norms which are an integral part of regimes as intersubjective elements of a 'web of meaning' which form the 'constitutive basis of regimes'—instead of the more common practice of treating them as 'causal variables' determining behaviour—regimes can be seen to be vibrant and robust even when norms are ignored in specific instances. See the discussion by Kratochwil in 'Regimes, Interpretation and the 'Science' of Politics: A Reappraisal', *Millennium* 17, no. 2 (1988), pp. 277–8.

Similarly, they argue that recognizing the intersubjective nature of the 'principles', 'norms', etc. which constitute regimes as social practices (and not as timeless behavioural regularities) also provides a means of theorizing the change within, and of, regimes. In short, regimes are subject to change because they are the product of an on-going process of community self-interpretation and self-definition in response to changing context. As such, an interpretive approach to the study of regimes avoids positivism's problematic assumption that 'once the machinery is in place, actors merely remain programmed by it' ('International Organization;, p. 770).

It is lamentable—if not surprising given the traditional antipathy in the discipline to meta-theoretical questions—that in a recent re-printing of Kratochwil and Ruggie's 'International Organization' the discussion of the need for interpretive methodologies has been deleted. See Paul F. Diehl (ed.), *The Politics of International Organizations* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 17—27.

[63] Kratochwil and Ruggie, 'International Organization', p. 774.

[64] Nor is this the only difficulty in their treatment of interpretive social science. Even as they are promoting interpretive social science as a distinct alternative to positivism, for example, the formulation of regimes as intersubjective in nature because they involve 'converging expectations' comes dangerously close to confusing the important distinction, noted earlier by Taylor, between intersubjective meanings and consensus in terms of subjective meanings. Similarly, in an earlier piece, Kratochwil seems to link an interpretive approach to an analysis of the 'background of intentions', rather than the intersubjective meanings which make subjective intentions possible in the first place. See Friedrich Kratochwil, 'Errors have Their Advantage', *International Organization*, 38, no. 2, (1984), p. 319. It should be noted that Kratochwil has revised his position in a fashion more in line with interpretive social science in more recent contributions.

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between institutions regulating interaction in the realm of 'low politics',[65] and institutions regulating interaction in the realm of 'high politics'. And in this regard, it is noteworthy that one of the most recent and most extensive discussions of interpretive social science and the study of international politics—Hollis and Smith's *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*[66]—extends the purview of interpretive approaches to include the realm of 'high politics'.

Hollis and Smith draw on Winch's Wittgensteinian formulation of interpretive social science as the exploration of intersubjectively-recognized rules constituting 'games',[67] affirming that the approach has much to offer in the study of international politics. It can be argued, of course, that the 'power of tanks and missiles is not the internal authority of an abbot', and that 'moving a nuclear submarine is different from moving a castle in chess'.[68] Even so, argue Hollis and Smith, there are interesting similarities between the arena of international politics—including the realm of 'high politics'—and games in a Wittgensteinian sense:

> Nuclear submarines function as threats and bargaining counters: the abbot's authority may have something to do with threats of hell-fire. Unless some kind of international society had been constructed, there could be no United Nations, with its Assembly and its fragile but often effective agencies.[69]

thus, affirm Hollis and Smith,

> The more the constructed arena of international diplomacy matters for what nations are enabled and constrained to do, the more it is worth thinking of the arena as a place where Wittgensteinian games are played.[70]

In short, interpretive social science directs us to see that the coercive state practices which make up the 'balance of power' can and should be analysed in the same way as one would analyze the liberal trade and monetary practices associated with the LIEO—by analyzing them to uncover the intersubjective meanings which constitute those practices and which are simultaneously instantiated through them.[71]

To conclude, it can be argued that the interpretive approach has much to offer the realist tradition, specifically in regards to theorizing the institutions which regulate the global order. It must also be recognized that an interpretive approach can be used to pose a considerable challenge to it as well. It is to that issue that we now turn.

[65] E.g., liberal trade and monetary regimes.

[66] Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Clarendon Press, 1990).

[67] A formulation with strong affinities to that of Charles Taylor.

[68] *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, p. 179.

[69] *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, p. 180.

[70] *Explaining and Understanding International Relations*, p. 180.

[71] It is even possible that with this latest turn in mainstream interpretive theory, there may be hope for a re-discovery and re-valuation of the contributions of those classical realists who—in contrast to neo-realists—saw even conflictual, coercive forms of state interaction such as the 'balance of power' as 'social institutions', comprised of rules and roles, and serving to regulate the conflict-prone 'anarchical society' of states. The contribution of Hedley Bull—in particular, his *The Anarchical Society* (New York, 1977)—is perhaps the prime example here, though one might read Morgenthau's comments on balance of power as a moral consensus (*Politics Among Nations*, ch. 14) as an attempt to draw attention to the intersubjective meanings underlying the practices which together comprise the 'balance of power'.

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Interpretive approaches and critical international relations theory

In order to understand the potential an interpretive approach holds for challenging the realist mainstream, it is necessary to consider the standard objections to progress in the realm of international politics. Specifically, a long-held realist objection to the development of 'progressivist' approaches to international politics lies not only in the emphasis upon the essentially conflictual nature of international politics (war of all against all), but on the characterization of the international order as fundamentally unchanging (and hence fundamentally unchangeable). In a formulation having obvious affinity with the positivist assumption of naturalism, Martin Wight declared international politics to be 'the realm of recurrence and repetition'; 'the field in which political action is most regularly necessitous'.[72] Moreover, given the unchanging nature of the global order, international relations theory can never be a theory of the 'good life', but, at best, a theory of 'survival'.

Of course, the realist formulation did traditionally allow for the possibility that human practice might mitigate some of the worst effects of the global order. Many realists accepted that international institutions can play an important role in regulating the global orders in which they are 'nested'[73]—the capitalist world economy in the case of trade and monetary regimes; the anarchical Westphalian system of states in the case of the balance of power.

As was noted above, interpretive approaches can be used to achieve new insights into the constitution and functioning of regulative international institutions. It must also be recognized, however, that interpretive approaches offer more than just a means for understanding the constitution and functioning of regulatory international institutions. They can be used as well to generate insights into the very orders in which regulatory international institutions are embedded.

The uniqueness of interpretive social science is the insight it provides into the fact that the *totality* of social existence is an on-going process of self-interpretation and self-definition by human collectivities. Consequently, not only the regulating institutions but the underlying world orders themselves are comprised of social practices, are themselves constituted by and instantiating intersubjective meanings.

It is in this regard that an interpretive approach can provide a welcome antidote to realist-inspired pessimism about the possibility for progress. To reiterate, interpretive social science maintains, in opposition to naturalistic orientations, that all social and political orders—including the global order—are the products of social practices. In short, from the perspective of interpretive social science, both the LIEO and international anarchy can be seen as constituted by intersubjective meanings.

It has been the concern of critically-oriented interpretive international relations scholars, moreover, to identify these meanings. Thus, affirms Robert Cox, examples of the intersubjective meanings which constitute the contemporary global order

> are the notions that people are organised and commanded by states which have authority over defined territories; that states relate to one another through diplomatic agents; that

[72] Martin Wight, 'Why is there no International Theory?' in H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London, 1966), p. 26 (my emphasis).
[73] Oran R. Young, *International Cooperation* (Ithaca, 1989), p. 14.

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certain rules apply for the protection of diplomatic agents as being in the common interest of all states; and that certain kinds of behaviour are to be expected when conflict arises between states, such as negotiation, confrontation, or war.[74]

Given this understanding of the nature of the global order, it is clear how interpretive approaches offer support for notions of progressive and emancipatory change in the global order. The intersubjective meanings which constitute the global order are themselves the product of an on-going process of self-definition and self-reflection; they are, then, like the practices which instantiate them, open to change.[75]

It is important to recognize that such a perspective does not deny that regularized behaviour patterns have characterized much of international politics (e.g., power-seeking states, power-balancing interactions). The point is not to deny the existence of the behavioural regularities that positivistic analysis has identified in the social world, but rather

to determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed.[76]

The notion of regularized behaviour in the global order as an expression not of natural necessity, but of 'ideologically frozen relations of dependence' also has consequences for our understanding of mainstream theorizing in international relations. To begin, it places in a new light Keohane's observation that

Realist and neorealist theories are avowedly rationalistic, accepting . . . a 'substantive' conception of rationality, characterizing 'behaviour that can be adjudged objectively to be optimally adapted to the situation'.[77]

For once one sees the 'situation' not as a 'given' reality but rather as a socially-constructed order, then it is possible to see the regulative ideal of 'substantive rationality' in a rather different light—not as a neutral formulation capturing a timeless, universalized thought-process, but rather as a self-limiting form of 'instrumental rationality' severely circumscribed in its capacity for fundamental self-

[74] Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York, 1986), p. 218.

Radical interpretive theorists have traditionally worked to show how the intersubjective meanings which underpin the global order have a fundamental class content. Most recently, however, feminist theorists have shown how these intersubjective meanings—and the social practices they constitute—are also inherently *gendered* in nature. See, for example, Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, & Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London, 1989, as well as Sandra Whitworth, 'Gender in the Inter-Paradigm Debate', *Millennium*, 18, no. 2 (1989), pp. 265–72.

[75] Of course, while the possibility of fundamental change may serve as an antidote to positivist/realist-inspired pessimism about the possibility of progress—a pessimism grounded in the assumption of the essentially unchanging (and unchangeable) nature of international politics—it is not sufficient, in and of itself, to dispel all forms of pessimism. For example, it is quite possible to accept the potential for changing existing social practices while maintaining that efforts to effect progress through change of social practices inevitably make things worse. Similarly, one can argue that the recognition of the possibility of change does not, on its own, necessarily lead to emancipation, in that the latter also requires an independent, normative judgement about the way the world should be. For these two points I am indebted to Ruth Abbey and Nicholas Onuf respectively.

[76] Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1971), p. 310.

[77] 'International Institutions', p. 381.

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reflection. Similarity, it becomes possible to see traditional positivist-inspired IR theory not as a neutral body of knowledge, but as a form of 'traditional theory' having the function of facilitating the 'adaptation' of human beings to their basic circumstances, no matter how violence-prone or inequitable.[78] In short, positivist-inspired mainstream IR theory can be seen as a major social force contributing to the maintenance of the 'ideologically frozen relations of dependence', an effect it accomplishes through the 'reification' of the global order, i.e., by presenting that order as a 'thing' standing apart from and independently of human will or action.

Indeed, not only does the notion of 'substantive rationality' appear in a new light, but so do the efforts to supplement the traditional, realist/positivist-inspired approach to the study of international relations noted above. For while it is true that the efforts of mainstream interpretive theorists such as Ruggie, Kratochwil, Hollis and Smith help to de-reify the international institutions which regulate the global order(s), their failure to recognize that an interpretive analysis can be extended beyond a study of regulatory international institutions to include the global orders in which those institutions are 'nested' has an important consequence. Ultimately, that failure serves to reinforce the notion that the global order is natural and fixed; a reality to be accommodated and even accepted. Consequently, not only can traditional, positivist-inspired theorizing be seen as a form of 'traditional theory', but so can much of interpretively oriented theorizing about international politics as well.[79]

It is this perspective on traditional, positivist-inspired theorizing—as well as on recent efforts to supplement that theorizing with an interpretively-derived analysis of regulative international institutions—that gives the effort to develop a critical theory of international relations its distinctive character. For it is a central tenet of critical international relations theory that an interpretive analysis of regulative international institutions cannot be conducted independently of an interpretive analysis of the global order itself, and that the latter cannot be effectuated successfully without attention being paid to the 'ideological' component of the reproduction of that order.[80] In short,

[78] On the distinction between 'traditional' and 'critical' theory, see Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York, 1989), pp. 188–243.

[79] It is ironic, in this regard, that one of the most insightful analyses of the way intersubjective meanings constitute not only regulatory institutions within the global order but the global order itself is to be found in Ruggie's discussion of the shift from the medieval to the modern world system. See John Gerard Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Toward a Neorealist Synthesis', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics*, pp. 131–57. It is not clear how Ruggie reconciles his historicist sensitivity with the reification of the state/inter-state system that his realism would seem to require, and that his meta-theoretical pronouncements on the appropriate subject matter of interpretively oriented analysis reinforce.

[80] This concern can be seen quite clearly, for example, in Cox's Gramscian-inspired efforts to develop an historicist approach which focuses on the intersubjective meanings which predominate in a given context, and how changes in those meanings give rise to changes in global order. Although a full discussion of Cox's conception of hegemony in international politics is beyond the scope of this study, it is significant that what distinguishes it from the positivist-inspired neo-realist conception of hegemony is that Cox's Gramscian notion of hegemony 'joins an ideological and intersubjective element to the brute power relationship'. ('Postscript', in Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, p. 246). See also Cox, 'Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method', *Millennium*, 12, no. 2 (1983), pp. 162–75.

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from this perspective, change in the global order is dependent upon mounting a challenge to the 'ideologically frozen relations of dependence' which sustain it.[81]

Of course, effecting change at the level of the global order by means of an 'educative' form of practice[82] will no doubt be a slow and difficult process. The risks inherent in and limitations of the present order, however, make efforts to effect such change no less than imperative.

Conclusion

Let us now summarize the implications of the rise of an interpretive approach for the study of international politics. What an interpretive approach to the study of international politics does is underscore the fact that the behaviour observed in the international realm is—like behaviour in all other realms—a form of social practice which is constituted by and simultaneously instantiates a 'web of meaning'. What an interpretive approach to the study of international politics does is enable us to recognize that the realm of international politics—like all political and social realms—is a realm which is not 'given' but 'made'; that it is, therefore, capable of being 'remade'. What an interpretive approach to international politics does is allow us to theorize change both within the 'forms of life' (i.e., the institutions which regulate the global order) as well as of the 'forms of life' (the global order itself).

In conclusion, despite the continued predominance of positivist approaches to the study of international relations, there is clear evidence that the alternative provided by interpretive social science is increasingly being given serious attention within the discipline of international relations. And despite the objections that have been raised—and continue to be raised[83]—the combination of the interest in and need for interpretive approaches suggests that they will not be easily dislodged from contemporary international relations theory.

[81] It can also be seen in R. B. J. Walker's call for analysis of the global order which engages in a critique of the reification of that order. See R. B. J. Walker, 'History and Structure in the Theory of International Studies', *Millennium*, 18, no. 2 (1989), pp. 163–83.

It is important to recognize, moreover, that the change in intersubjective meanings which is the product of the on-going process of collective self-interpretation and self-definition cannot be equated with a change in subjective 'preferences', as is suggested by Keohane. Subjective preferences may indeed change, but such a change would not result in a fundamental change as would be the case of change in intersubjective meanings of which subjective preferences are derivative. As such, Keohane's formulation of intersubjectivity as 'preferences' indicates again the difficulties experienced by mainstream, positivist-inspired theorists in comprehending the nature of the interpretivist challenge. See Keohane, 'International Institutions', p. 391.

[82] As opposed to the 'instrumental' form of practice associated with 'traditional' theory. For a good discussion of the distinction between the two forms, see Brian Fay, *Critical Social Science: Liberation and Its Limits* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 5.

[83] For example, Robert Keohane, operating from a Lakatosian positivist position, faults interpretive approaches for their failure to develop an adequate 'research program that could be employed by students of world politics'.

For an 'interpretivist' response to and criticism of Keohane's positivistically informed discussion of interpretive approaches to international politics, see Walker, 'History and Structure'.

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The conflict between positivist and interpretive approaches, however, should not cause us to overlook the fact that within the interpretive camp important divisions exist as well. Here the question is not the positivist-inspired one of whether an interpretive approach can offer anything substantive to the discipline, but rather whether interpretive approaches will serve as an adjunct to traditional theorizing with its attendant objective of servicing the status quo, or whether they will be developed as a critical alternative informing an emancipatory practice. It is this latter question which lamentably—and some might argue, predictably—has not received adequate attention within the IR scholarly community.

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