

Epistemology

ARTICLE

- 2** What Are We Doing When We Research Misinformation?
Joseph E. Uscinski
- 14** States and the Ideas that Drive Them: Ideational Change and the European Postwar
François Godard
- 24** Interpretive Political Science: Philosophy, Methods, Ethics
Mark Bevir

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 34** Calls for Papers and Nominations
- 34** Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Awards to Date

From the Editor

I am pleased to introduce the second issue of *Political Epistemology*, published by the Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics section of the American Political Science Association.

I have long maintained that political epistemology, or the study of the ideas—the normative and empirical knowledge claims—of political actors, should be the central preoccupation of political scientists and political theorists. Clearly it is not, but the past year has offered ample illustrations of why it should be.

Vladimir Putin managed to devastate an entire country, killing tens of thousands and ruining the lives of millions more, primarily because the Russian media persuaded a substantial majority of Russians that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis who, in league with NATO, are obsessed with destroying Russia. Putin's ability to withstand military defeat and economic sanctions has rested almost entirely on the media's ability to persuade enormous numbers of people of the existence of imaginary threats to their country; and to spread an ideology of Russian greatness and persecution that, like so many ideologies, hardens its adherents against human sympathy for the lives of the ideologically identified enemy. The war in Ukraine sets in chilling relief not only the fallibility of human ideas but the immense power of ideas—even ideas that are partly or entirely wrong—to determine people's understanding of the world and, therefore, their actions within and upon it.

But we don't need to reach for such extreme examples of the power of fallible ideas. This power is also on display in the politics of mass democracies, as has been noticed in recent years by those who point to the spread of misinformation—i.e., the spread of fallible ideas. Misinformation, however, is itself a fallible idea that needs to be operationalized carefully, lest it become a partisan tool for delegitimizing ideas with which a given observer of politics disagrees. This is one of the messages of Joseph E. Uscinski's lead article, "What Are We Doing When We Research Misinformation?" which challenges extant methods of researching misinformation. Uscinski points out that the premise of misinformation research is that in attempting to understand why people believe inaccurate factual claims, it matters whether or not the claims are inaccurate. But the objective accuracy of a given claim has no magical power to persuade people subjectively—as suggested by the success of Russian propaganda, or by fact that the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived have held inaccurate beliefs about nature (inaccurate when judged according to the standard of what we believe about nature) and inaccurate religious and ideological beliefs as well (insofar as religions and ideologies contradict one another, entailing that at least half of them are incorrect). In light of these facts, it seems reasonable for Uscinski to advise that misinformation research stop confusing the *normative contention* that people should not believe in (what misinformation researchers deem to be) false claims with the *empirical analysis* of why they do in fact believe in (what misinformation researchers deem to be) false claims. For as Uscinski points out, it seems to be clear that those who believe in misinformation do not agree with the researchers that the claims in which they believe are, in fact, false; if they agreed, they would not be able to sustain their belief in these claims. If we want to understand why they believe in false claims, then, we are driven toward understanding why anyone believes in any claim (political, religious, or scientific), a subjective phenomenon that is independent of the objective truth of the claims in which people believe.

François Godard's article, "States and the Ideas that Drive Them: Ideational Change and the European Postwar," examines the comparative political economy of postwar France and Germany, focusing on a different aspect of the subjective/objective dichoto-

Political Epistemology

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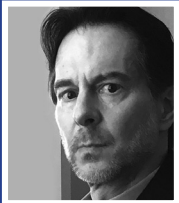
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my: the role of subjective ideas, rather than objective interests, in the creation of political institutions and economic policies. Godard argues that in postwar France and Germany, policies of economic reform were enacted not because of a grand bargain between social groups (labor and capital) that were attempting to advance their objective interests, but because the reforms matched the subjective and fallible ideas of state elites. Godard's premises are that the ideas that determine conscious political action need not stem from or even concern their objective interests; and that even when social groups attempt to advance their objective interests, they have no choice but to do so in accordance with their fallible perceptions of what these interests are and how best to achieve them. Thus, Godard argues that French and German state elites were able to use the media and culture to shape the "preferences" of social groups to conform to their own.

Finally, Mark Bevir, in "Interpretive Political Science: Philosophy, Methods, Ethics," makes a case for the antagonism between interpretivism and "naturalistic" political science, i.e., political science that patterns itself after natural science. Interpretivism is a way of cashing out the ideational side of political epistemology if one accepts that people's actions are determined by ideas that constitute their interpretations of what they should do in a given set of circumstances. It follows that if we want to understand human behavior, we need to investigate people's interpretations. Bevir attempts to ground this view in philosophy rather than methodology, raising the question of whether, as many interpretivists believe, quantitative and rational-choice methods are incompatible with interpretivism. Bevir also asks whether the naturalistic alternative to interpretivism is inconsistent with certain ethical precepts.

Future issues of *Political Epistemology* would benefit from readers' ideas about how to improve it and their proposals for future articles, dialogues, and other contributions. We'd particularly like to publish replies to articles in previous issues, and new articles on feminist epistemology, post-structuralism, and Marxist approaches to ideology. We hope you will not hesitate to propose these and other possibilities. ■

—Jeffrey Friedman



Jeffrey Friedman
1959 – 2022

NOTE: This editorial was written in November 2022, shortly before the sudden death of Jeffrey Friedman, the co-founder—along with H el ene Landemore—of the "Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics" (IKP) section of APSA in 2013; the President of the section from 2018 forward; and the editor of the first two editions of section's newsletter, *Political Epistemology*. Friedman's vacancy has been filled by Nick Clark, and the IKP Council is planning future editions of the newsletter. Ideas for future articles can be sent to clark@susqu.edu.

What Are We Doing When We Research Misinformation?

Joseph E. Uscinski

ABSTRACT: *Researchers, journalists, and policymakers have recently expressed the worry that because our epistemic environment has been overrun with false claims, rumors, and conspiracy theories, our citizenry believes too much "misinformation." The influence of misinformation on collective choices is certainly an important concern for scholars of democratic societies, but recent attempts to research it rely on definitions of misinformation that amount to little more than "ideas with which I, the researcher, personally disagree." Further, the often-employed "I-know-it-when-I-see-it" epistemology operationalizes misinformation as claims that are objectively untrue, which presumes that researchers' subjective beliefs about what is objectively untrue are self-validating, such that only irrational, gullible, or otherwise epistemologically debilitated citizens could disagree with these beliefs. This assumption, however, is deeply problematic. It builds researchers' political biases into their research, transforming research into little more than partisan combat by another name; it has implications that are both elitist and authoritarian; and it is orthogonal to explaining why people believe in misinformation, as belief is a subjective phenomenon that is unaffected by the objective status of the referent of a given belief.*

While specialists in public opinion have long known that average citizens lack basic political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), are politically ignorant (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Converse 1964; Bartels 1996), disagree about facts (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008), and hold many beliefs that contradict the prevailing evidence (Flynn et al. 2017), widespread journalistic, popular, and scholarly alarm about these matters is very recent, stimulated by incredulity at the fact that majorities or near-majorities could have supported Brexit in 2015 and Donald Trump in 2016. This incredulity has led to justified anxieties about the quality of our information environment (e.g., MacCarthy 2021; Traber et al. 2022; Wood and Brumfiel 2021), which have solidified into a vibrant and growing research agenda concerning misinformation (e.g., Roozenbeek et al. 2020; Vraga and Bode 2021; McCright and Dunlap 2017; Flynn et al. 2017; Del Vicario et al. 2016). It is safe to say, as of the beginning of 2023, that misinformation will be a major subject of empirical scholarship for years to come. It is therefore important to take stock of the current course of this research and its roots in recent political events.

Regardless of how one felt about the Brexit vote or the election of Donald Trump, one must recognize that such feelings are *partisan* in the neutral (non-derogatory) sense in that they involved taking sides in partisan conflicts. This does not mean that reacting with alarm to mass support for either Brexit or Trump was unwarranted; far from it. But it is important to bear in mind if, as I will contend, misinformation researchers have not transcended the partisan origins of the misinformation discourse to develop an unbiased and reliable procedure for separating misinformation from true information. As a result, I will argue, the research has an inadvertent tendency to take sides in the polarized political debates it attempts to study—debates that often concern precisely the question of which claims are true and which claims qualify as “misinformation.” One must therefore ask whether there is a way to conduct research about misinformation, or even to think about it, that does not merely repeat the observer’s own convictions about which political claims are true and which ones are false. If this cannot be done, then misinformation researchers will be doomed to employ a double standard according to which their own political views escape the epistemic scrutiny that they apply to the views of their political adversaries, whose first-order disagreement with researchers’ views prompts the researchers to label their fellow citizens’ beliefs as “misinformation.”

Underlying the collapse of scholarship about politics into politics itself, which I will analyze, is an untenable assumption: that unique forces of some kind must be driving the spread of, interaction with, and belief in misinformation, and that these forces are different from those that drive the spread of, interaction with, and belief in true ideas.

Thus, misinformation researchers typically assume that misinformation attracts or affects people differently than true information, as if there is something about misinformation that *flags itself as misinformation* rather than as true information. By this I mean the assumption that misinformation has intrinsic characteristics that flag it as such not just to misinformation researchers themselves, in their role as citizens with opinions about which claims in political debate are true (e.g., Will Brexit be an economic disaster? Is there really a crisis at the border that demands “a wall”? Was the election rigged?), but characteristics that flag misinformation to the citizens whose acceptance of it is seen as raising questions

beyond the question with which public-opinion research has long dealt: How does anyone come to adopt any idea as a belief? When misinformation researchers attempt to single out factors such as social media, affective polarization, or various psychological propensities as causes of *misinformation* rather than as causes of *belief formation* (a neutral concept, not a partisan one), they imply that (1) there is something about these causal factors that asymmetrically inclines certain people to accept misinformation, such that (2) in the absence of these factors, people would tend to default to accepting information (truth claims that are valid) rather than misinformation (truth claims that are invalid). The asymmetry assumption is nicely captured in the title of a brief paper published by a group of eminent misinformation researchers in 2018: “The Science of Fake News” (Lazer et al. 2018). The question is, can there be such a science?

The presupposition of such a science is that misinformation has special properties that justify asymmetrical explanations for people’s acceptance of fake news, or misinformation, in comparison to their acceptance of true news, or information. Before spending the rest of this article going into these problems, let me state an alternative view: that there is no reason to assume that the acceptance of misinformation cannot be accounted for by the same factors—priors such as partisanship, ideology, personality, worldviews, and background knowledge and cognitive factors such as confirmation bias—that drive people’s interpretations of, and interactions with, *all* “information,” regardless of whether it is true or false. This alternative view is based on the epistemological claim that there is no way for most citizens to *know* whether the claims they encounter in political debate are, in fact, true. Thus, most citizens have no objectively reliable way to distinguish between “information” and “misinformation,” certainly upon initial encounter, and certainly without some set of priors that guide how they interpret it. Therefore, their acceptance of a given claim that is deemed by a scholarly (or journalistic) observer to be objectively false does not demand a scientific explanation that would be asymmetrical to the explanation of why someone might subjectively accept a given claim that is deemed by an observer to be objectively true. I will call this alternative, epistemological perspective the causal symmetry paradigm.

According to the causal symmetry paradigm, misinformation research is misguided in treating the distinction between true and false information as having subjective as well as objective significance. That is, misinformation researchers err when they assume that in explaining belief formation, it *matters* whether the beliefs are objectively true or objectively false. By definition, all beliefs are subjective. Everyone *thinks* that their (subjective) beliefs are (objectively) true, so when researchers assume that a group of citizens is, in a given case, asymmetrically prone to being objectively misinformed, they create a pseudo-puzzle: how can this group possibly believe what is *obviously (identifiably) false*, in an objective sense? This is a non-issue if the objective falseness of a given belief is not evident to those who believe it—as it cannot be, as a matter of logic, or they would not believe it. Moreover, this non-issue reflects partisanship in a couple of ways. First, in the neutral sense, researchers, like the citizens they research, cannot possibly agree with the claims that their research deems misinformation, so they will exclusively use the misinformation label for political claims with which they disagree. In addition, the fact that people believe objectively false information becomes a puzzle

only when researchers treat their own opinions as if they are reflections of the *self-evident* objective truth—which therefore *should* be believed by everyone, including their political opponents. The asymmetry paradigm, then, is grounded in a double standard: by privileging their own political beliefs as in some sense manifestly well informed, scholars treat citizens who hold contrary beliefs as the victims of what can only be misinformation. To put it differently, such researchers effectively assume there could be no rational grounds for subjective political disagreement, such that if the causal factors responsible for misinformation could be removed or suppressed (e.g., through aggressive social media moderation), everyone would agree with the self-evident political truths recognized by misinformation researchers but, puzzlingly, obscured from the view of their political adversaries.

In this contribution, I will reflect on the problem of how to research misinformation without falling into this type of double standard and discuss potential solutions and their limitations. These include, for example, appealing to science as the source of reliable information, focusing on the sources of misinformation rather than on particular claims that one labels “misinformation,” or coming up with a clear definition of “misinformation” that would allow us to avoid inconsistencies and incoherencies introduced by partisan bias.

Disagreement, Epistemology, and Partisanship

The Brexit and Trump campaigns of 2016 were often characterized by observers as inordinately and obviously reliant on various forms of “misinformation” (Swire et al. 2017; Renwick et al. 2018). After the triumph of Brexit and Trump, journalists and scholars across the West began worrying that misinformation had been so widely accepted that we had entered a “post-truth” age in which certain political leaders and their followers no longer cared about whether their beliefs were true—because they believed claims that seem self-evidently untrue (e.g., d’Ancona 2017; Baker and Oreskes 2017; Flatscher and Seitz 2020; Hyvönen 2018; Lichtenberg 2021; McIntyre 2018; Mirowski 2020; Newman 2021; Prozorov 2018; Wang 2016).

To say that these concerns were partisan, as they clearly were (or to say that they were ideological, as they exclusively targeted the beliefs of those on the political right), is not to suggest that they were unwarranted or to minimize the problems that arise if people accept false claims. On the contrary, it is crucial for political scientists, in particular, to recognize that people can and do believe many false claims. Moreover, the symmetry suggested by the symmetry thesis—which holds that information and misinformation cannot be immediately and unproblematically distinguished from each other, so that there is no reason to think that an asymmetry of causal factors is responsible for belief in false rather than truth claims—does not entail a partisan or ideological symmetry, whereby those on the right, left, or center subscribe, on balance, to the same proportion of true and false claims. Thus, there is no reason, in principle, to think that those on any given end of the partisan or ideological spectrum may, at any given point in time, asymmetrically hold false beliefs.

In contrast to partisan symmetry, the symmetry I am defending is epistemological. The complexity, invisibility, and ambiguity of the matters that we are called upon to form opinions about in

modern societies are preconditions of false belief and disagreement, leaving people vulnerable to believing false as well as true claims (Friedman 2021). It may be that ideologies of the left or the right, or of some other persuasion, offer a better way to sort out these claims than do other positions. Whether this is the case is precisely what is debated by political ideologists. But if we take disagreement seriously, we have to acknowledge that those on both sides of a given disagreement (whether ideological disagreement, partisan disagreement, or disagreement of any other kind) subjectively believe that the claims they accept are true. The misinformation discourse has quickly gone from partisan disbelief that anyone could believe the things that many people on the right believe, because these things are so *obviously* false, to a scholarly consensus that there must be some special causal explanation for these beliefs. This consensus rests on the implicit and unjustifiable assumption that misinformed beliefs are so obviously false that some special explanation for their acceptance is called for.

For example, misinformation is often attributed to the special properties of social-media platforms (Dow et al. 2021), which allow ideas to travel farther and faster than ever before, but without strong editorial controls (Bak-Coleman et al. 2021). Therefore, numerous academics, journalists, and policy makers have called for stricter regulation of social media platforms to prevent the spread of misinformation (e.g., MacCarthy 2021; Romer and Jamieson 2021; Roose 2021; Sunstein 2021) and regulatory schemes that typically call for the censoring, removal, or downgrading of misinformation by online platforms, often with serious penalties for noncompliance (e.g., Ghaffary and Heilweil 2021). Such proposals, like the research itself, beg the question of which ideas count as misinformation—which usually pans out as: Who is to decide what counts as misinformation? In the void created by the failure to address this question, the research tends to conjure into existence occult qualities that make misinformation somehow stickier or more fleet-footed than information. Thus, a paper that claims to be about “The Spread of True and False News Online” (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018) is actually about the asymmetrical spread of *novel claims* online. To connect novelty to falseness, the authors defer to a consensus of fact checkers. So, what the paper really shows is that in the period covered by the paper, a sample of claims with which fact checkers subjectively disagreed had more online velocity than claims with which they agreed.

The philosophical question of what counts, objectively, as misinformation is equivalent to the subjective, political question of who decides what counts as information because, at present, the categorization of a claim as “misinformation” is usually based on an “I-know-it-when-I-see-it” epistemology that depends on the observer’s first-order views about what constitutes misinformation in each specific case, rather than on some second-order criterion of truth that would bracket what a given researcher takes to be the truth. In the Vosoughi et al. paper, it was fact-checkers who made the call; below, I will discuss the fact that they use precisely the I-know-it-when-I-see-it epistemology. Similarly, the emerging “post-truth” discourse does not acknowledge that those with whom we disagree have cognitive *reasons* (subjective reasons that they think are objectively true) for believing things that we (subjectively) consider to be not only objectively false but *obviously* false. When others believe what seems to us as so self-evidently false, it may seem not merely as if they disagree with us, but as if they have rejected the very concept of truth. The post-truth view,

then, assumes away genuine political disagreements about what is true. This approach neglects the difficulties of establishing what is true in the complex world of politics, government, and society. Thus, the post-truth paradigm dovetails operationally with the I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard for distinguishing information and truth from the misinformation, lies, and bullshitting that post-truth scholars see as reflecting an irrational repudiation of expertise, science, or truth itself.

The I-know-it-when-I-see-it understanding of misinformation counts as “naïvely realistic” in the classic sense defined by Ross and Ward (1996, 111). The naïve realist assumes “that I see things as they are, that is, that my beliefs, preferences, and resulting responses follow from an essentially unmediated perception of relevant stimuli and incorporation of relevant evidence.” Naïve political realists fail to ask the epistemological questions that should always be asked about any truth claim in politics—*How do I know what is true? Where do I get my beliefs? Where do others get theirs?*—because naïve political realists take it for granted that their beliefs are self-evidently true, and that since this is self-evident, everyone would agree with them if only certain people (their political opponents) were not impeded from seeing the self-evident truth by the irrationality, the lies, or the propaganda of nefarious others.

Because the I-know-it-when-I-see-it understanding of misinformation treats the truth as self-evident, it treats the determination of what counts as misinformation as an easy matter. This naïvely realistic stance leads post-truth scholars to treat disagreement over the truth as phony or contrived (e.g., Lichtenberg 2021; McIntyre 2018). Truths that are evident to one and all could not be the object of genuine disagreement, so post-truth scholars assume that what *appears* to be disagreement must be the product of delusion, of “merchants of doubt” who undermine acceptance of the truth (which would otherwise command unanimous assent), or of an abandonment of the very concept of truth.

The discourses about misinformation and post-truth, therefore, duplicate the epistemology that is often at work in partisan politics: Partisans frequently treat the truths in which they believe as self-evident. Therefore, they find it difficult to believe that their political opponents genuinely disagree with their own beliefs: how, after all, could anyone disagree with the self-evident truth? Partisans often answer this question by understanding the leaders of the political opposition as liars, crooks, and criminals (whether they are, or aren't) and their followers as dupes and crazies. This prevents sound discourse and honest negotiation with our rivals. And by blaming “misinformation” for others' viewpoints, partisans make disagreement intractable: in assuming that their detractors would agree with them completely but for the presence of misinformation, they delegitimize any point of view other than their own. However, it is not clear that people's beliefs in, or exposure to, misinformation (Guess et al. 2020), or conversely, having their beliefs in misinformation “corrected,” does much to change their broader views and intentions (Wu et al. 2022).

The parallels between political disagreement and the discourses of misinformation and post-truth suggest the difficulty of escaping the subjectivity and double standards of those discourses. If there were some way of transcending subjective, first-order political conflict over what is true, it would require us either to have escaped from the ambiguities and interpretive failures that give rise to political disagreement in complex societies; or to have accepted the fact that these failures may afflict anyone, so that no-

body should treat their beliefs as self-evidently true. If we could recognize that *our own* beliefs are mere fallible interpretations of a complex reality, we could allow that the same is true of others' beliefs, so that the acceptance of faulty information is an ever-present possibility inherent in the human condition, not a strange phenomenon bespeaking our political adversaries' irrationality or evil.

The Unfortunate Irrelevance of Science

These reflections are *epistemological* concerns about the partisan double standards currently plaguing misinformation research. However, a *methodological* concern about misinformation researchers might appeal beyond politics to science in order to operationalize true information and thus, conversely, misinformation. Thus, one might equate information with “the science” and define misinformation as claims that contradict it, rather than defining misinformation as claims with which one happens to disagree. This is an especially appealing approach because of the high political salience of two recent areas of scientific discussion: climate change and Covid-19.

Yet even if “the science” offered pristine solutions to political disagreements, these solutions could not be made known to most political actors without interpretive mediation—for example, by retailing particular scientific claims through the mass media or social media. Therefore, it is implausible to think that the beliefs of citizens (including political scientists, misinformation researchers, and scholars of post-truth) about “the science,” i.e., their opinions about which scientific claims are true, or about which scientists should be trusted, stem from science itself rather than from whatever social processes mediate “the science” to us. Therefore, in attempting to understand why some people in a given political dispute take the side of the science and others oppose it, political scientists would be in the very same position as when they try to understand why some people favor or oppose Brexit, Trump, abortion, raising the debt ceiling, imposing a windfall profits tax, or any other non-scientific issue.

Even if a given political scientist concludes that the science justifies a certain factual claim or policy position, this is a conclusion that was likely reached by reading or hearing someone else's subjective interpretation of what “the science” justifies in this particular case. By the same token, political scientists' general inclination to take the opinions of scientists as definitive of the truth will depend on what we have learned over the course of our lives about the reliability of science. The same is true of those citizens who agree with us about the dictates and the trustworthiness of “the science.” Neither particular scientific conclusions nor the general trustworthiness of science are self-evident, so they will have to be mediated to citizens and political scientists alike by other citizens, such as journalists, politicians, parents, colleagues, and high school teachers.

Crucially, however, the same holds, symmetrically, for those who do *not* know or care about what “the science” dictates in a given case; those who disagree with these conclusions; those who do not accept that certain sciences, such as climatology, are sufficiently scientific; and those who distrust all scientists, particular types of scientists, or individual scientists as partisans, as ideologues, or agents of “big pharma” or some other nefarious interest. These “anti-science” positions—which one might be tempted to call “misinformation” if one disagrees with them—do not stem from

some asymmetrical blindness to the self-evident truth, any more than political scientists' own "pro-science" positions stem from an asymmetrical recognition of the self-evident truth. Instead, like all political opinions, opinions about scientific questions depend on the way the world has been mediated to us, which will differ from person to person (Friedman 2020).

Therefore, the fact that we as political scientists might think that any given claim X is objectively true, or likely to be true, because it is a claim that is consistent with "the science" is *irrelevant* to the question of why some people in the political arena subjectively agree with us about X and others disagree. In general terms, whatever factors affect opinion formation about non-scientific issues will affect opinion formation about scientific issues; to assume otherwise is, naïvely, to attribute to one's own opinions about science, and about "the science" of a given issue, an unmediated self-evidence that asymmetrically liberates us, and those who agree with us, from whatever empirical processes of mediation circulate both information and misinformation.

Thus, we cannot explain people's political opinions by testing them against "the science." Even if one "trusts the science" oneself, and even if (as I believe) one *should* trust the science, this does not explain where one's own opinions about the science or one's own trust in it originates, and it does not explain the opinions of citizens who disagree with one's own scientific opinions. Labeling the latter opinions "unscientific" might have descriptive value, but no explanatory value. Like labeling them "misinformation," it simply becomes a device for delegitimizing opinions with which one disagrees. Put another way, asking why others disagree with the science is little different than asking why they disagree with our own opinions, but the former comes with added disdain. To put the shoe on the other foot, we should not assume that people's opinions which *are* congruent to "the science" have anything to do with the science. For example, the millions of Americans who believe that climate change is real have likely never sat down to examine the evidence, read the scholarly journals, or talked to the climatologists who engage in "the science." Their opinions, therefore, likely did not come from the science, but from communications from their own set of opinion leaders laid over their own set of dispositions. Thus, unscientific or anti-scientific opinions are, in many cases, borne of processes similar to those of opinions that are in line with the prevailing science.

Naïve Charges of Misinformation

Most political issues, however, do not have any salient scientific dimension. Thus, observers attempting to use the "misinformation" label to understand these disputes tend to do so with, at best, a fig-leaf of empirical investigation to establish that there is some sense in which they are entitled to treat misinformation as a subjective causal factor rather than as a delegitimizing label for views with which they disagree.

We can see evidence of this in the behavior of the many journalists who see their role as identifying and suppressing misinformation. Consider the *New York Post* story from October 2020, which contended that emails on a laptop left in a Delaware computer shop by Hunter Biden suggested that he was involved in influence peddling (Morris and Fonrouge 2020). Traditional and social media

companies, fact checkers, and mainstream journalists attempted to scuttle the story by labeling it as mis- or disinformation. Such labels allowed them to refuse to cover the story and even to disallow sharing it online; Twitter went so far as to block access to the *Post's* account (Smith 2022; King 2020). Thus, the story itself received far less mainstream coverage than did a statement about the story by more than 50 former intelligence officials, who had no access to the laptop, but who opined that the story had all the earmarks of Russian disinformation (Bertrand 2020). One has to wonder why journalists were so eager to publicize this speculation rather than the story itself, and why they preferred to quote unverified claims about it rather than investigating whether the story was true. Only after the election did the mainstream media reverse themselves and acknowledge that the laptop was real and the emails were not a product of some Russian disinformation campaign (Garger 2022). That journalists eventually accepted the laptop as legitimate doesn't necessarily give any credence to the various claims that Biden's detractors levied about corruption. But nonetheless, the story should not have been stifled on grounds that it was misinformation.

A very similar scenario played out in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The fact that an unprecedented contagion had originated in the very city that contained a high-level bat-virus research center, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was a coincidence that soon enough attracted speculative attention. This speculation was immediately denounced as misinformation by scientists, government officials, and the media—none of which, however, had had the opportunity to investigate the matter. We now know that behind the scenes, leading virologists were alarmed by the fact that a scientist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology had recently published a paper describing research that could have produced the Covid virus; and by the fact that several features of the virus made it look as if it might have been genetically engineered (Dilanian, Perrette, and Chow 2021). Unaware of this backdrop, without looking into the matter on their own, and under the false impression created by some of the same virologists (whose public position differed from their privately expressed concerns) that "the science" indicated that the lab-leak theory could not possibly be true (Young 2022), the media reacted to the theory when it was first voiced with a blizzard of fact-checks that ridiculed it as either misinformation or a "conspiracy theory" (e.g., Taylor 2020). When Republican Sen. Tom Cotton discussed the theory in February 2020, he was denounced for promoting a "Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins," in the words of the *New York Times* (Stevenson 2020)—or, in the words of the *Washington Post*, a "Coronavirus Conspiracy Theory That Was Already Debunked" (Firozi 2020).¹ The World Health Organization then announced that the lab-leak theory was part of an "infodemic" of misinformation (Zaracostas 2020; Simon and Camargo 2021; Kraus, Freiling, and Scheufele 2022). CNN (Andrew 2020), NPR (Brumfiel 2020a and 2020b), Vox (Barclay 2020), Slate (Evans 2020), the Associated Press (Seitz and Dupuy 2020), Politifact (Funke 2020), and the *Guardian* (Singh, Davidson, and Borger 2020) were among many other mainstream media that denounced the lab-leak hypothesis as misinformation. In May 2021, however, more than a year after Cotton was ridiculed for suggesting the theory, the same media outlets that had universally labeled it "misinformation" suddenly acknowledged that

1 The *Post* headline was changed, 15 months later (with an editor's note), to read "A Coronavirus Fringe Theory That Scientists Have Disputed."

there was persuasive circumstantial evidence in its favor, and that the question of the virus's origins should be reopened (e.g., Shear et al. 2021). If this new open-mindedness was warranted, then journalists' use of the I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard of misinformation to kill the story had been a colossal error.²

The media coverage of the laptop and lab-leak stories are two examples of how the “misinformation” tag (and its cousins, “conspiracy theory” and “disinformation”) can be weaponized. This is not to say that the journalists who weaponized it knew that in reality, by suggesting that the laptop was Russian disinformation or that the virus could not possibly have had non-zoonotic origins, *they* might be the ones peddling misinformation. There is no evidence of that. Instead, what seems to have happened in both cases is that unspoken preconceptions, upon which human beings inevitably rely—Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1997) famously called them “stereotypes”—inadvertently biased the journalists' determination of what must have been true and, therefore, what *must* have been misinformation. In a way, however, this is more troubling than if journalists had deliberately spread disinformation about “misinformation,” because it suggests that the problem infects all journalism to some degree because it is unavoidable.

If the problem is journalists' inadvertent use of their preconceptions to understand the world, rather than their deliberate attempts to distort the world for their audiences, it would indicate that consequential media bias might be a real and pervasive or even universal problem, regardless of journalists' good-faith efforts to check their preconceptions at the newsroom door. An important example of how this can play out is in the contradictory and partisan manner in which the fact-checking subset of journalism identifies misinformation (Uscinski 2015). Outfits such as *PolitiFact* and *The Washington Post's* Fact Checker have been institutionalizing this form of journalism for nearly two decades, and numerous other organizations have joined in (Spangler 2021). Yet fact checkers have not developed a consistent methodology for determining what is true and what is misinformation (Uscinski and Butler 2013; Uscinski 2015; Nieminen and Sankari 2021), they often disagree with each other (Lim 2018; Marietta et al. 2015), and they frequently make subjective judgments about how many “Pinocchios” to award to claims that they find to be false. The confusion, bias, and arbitrariness displayed by fact checkers suggests that the truth is far from objectively self-evident, even when it seems obvious (to them).

Moreover, fact checkers are simply journalists doing the same thing other journalists do: using their own seat-of-the-pants, I-know-misinformation-when-I-see-it judgments to decide which claims to look into and how to evaluate them. The decisions made by fact checkers—most importantly, decisions about which factual claims are worth checking, because they seem fishy (Uscinski and Butler 2013); but also decisions about which experts should be consulted about the truth of the matter, which context should be supplied in order to vindicate a claim or call it into doubt, and so on—exemplify the decisions that all journalists make when deciding which stories to cover, how to narrate them, whom to quote, how to interpret the quotations, etc. Insofar as these are judgment calls, they will inevitably rely on journalists' priors, which is why Lippmann, a working journalist, viewed media bias as unavoidable. He was not saying that truth does not exist or that journalists (or human beings in general) cannot, in some circumstances, separate

fact from fiction: sometimes a given preconception will be confirmed. But he was describing how difficult it is to know what is true in a society in which so much of what we would like to know occurs “out of sight, out of reach, out of mind.” In such a world, “the pictures inside people's heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside” (Lippmann [1922] 1977, 18, 19). The problem with journalists' attempts to call out “misinformation,” in this view, is that they presuppose that the pictures in their own heads—that is, journalists' own biases—tend to be accurate reflections of reality. This may be what happened in our two cases: the lab-leak theory and the laptop seemed to be *inherently* incredible, so rather than investigating them, journalists simply branded them “misinformation.”

However, what appears to be inherently absurd, outlandish, or obviously false to any given person will depend on a whole array of factors that vary from person to person; these are the same factors that produce political disagreement. Thus, attempts by journalists and fact checkers to haphazardly denote some claims as misinformation do not so much illuminate political disagreements as participate in them by pejoratively labeling as misinformation views the journalist finds unbelievable—a labeling that is the stock in trade of the advocates of different sides in everyday partisan politics.

Can political scientists investigating misinformation avoid the same syndrome?

Can Definitions Help?

Words have usages rather than inherent meanings. Thus, the same word can refer to many different things. When the speaker and listener agree on what their key terms refer to, communication is more precise—i.e., meanings can be more clearly transmitted with particular words. This may seem like an obvious point, but it must be emphasized since many observers are beginning to question whether misinformation researchers, like fact checkers, can define their key terms (e.g., Smith 2021); and since people inevitably use “misinformation” selectively, to refer to ideas with which they disagree.

It seems possible that the problem of subjectivity in the use of the term *misinformation* could be avoided, at least among scholars, if we consistently used a clear definition of the term rather than case-by-case political judgments about what does and does not constitute misinformation. For it is clear that, just as the fact-checking industry has failed over the last two decades to produce a consistent or coherent methodology for assessing statements of fact, scholars seeking to address “misinformation” have also failed to answer key questions about what they mean by that term.

When asked what misinformation is, Joan Donovan, the Research Director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School, objected to the “suggestion that the term lacks a precise meaning,” and defined it as “false information that's being spread.” However, this definition is only helpful if we know what is false in a given case, and Donovan admits that “the field needs to get better at figuring out what's true or false” (Smith 2021). If we are unable to figure out what is true and false, then her definition of “misinformation” is little more than a

2 This paragraph draws on Friedman 2021, 26. On the separate question of what actually caused the Wuhan outbreak, see Kormann 2021.

tautology: misinformation is defined as false information and false information is defined as misinformation. Further, this definition does not get around the problem of subjectivity—that researchers treat misinformation not as any claim that is false, but as any claim that *seems* false to them, i.e., any claim with which they disagree.

Would a more precise definition of “misinformation” avoid this problem of subjectivity?

To take this route, a definition of misinformation should include a formal aspect identifying what type of thing counts as misinformation, as well as an epistemological aspect identifying how we can know what counts as misinformation. Formally, while scholars use the term “misinformation” to refer to beliefs or perceptions, they also generally see it as a type of information (Vraga and Bode 2020). The prefix *mis* modifies the term *information* so as to suggest, according to some scholars, that claims labeled as misinformation are “unambiguously false” (Jerit and Zhao 2020; see also Kuklinski et al. 2000). Yet people cannot possibly accept as true claims they view as unambiguously false, so no “unambiguously false” claim would be believed by anyone, as its falseness would be unambiguously apparent to everyone. But people do believe the claims that researchers categorize as misinformation, suggesting that these claims are not unambiguously false.

The standard of “unambiguous” falseness is a formalization of the I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard of what is true or false. In the guise of rigorously specifying misinformation as the type of thing that is unambiguously false, the definition smuggles in a naïve epistemology that assumes that the false and the true are (at least sometimes) self-evident. But what appears to be self-evidently true or false to any given person is likely to have more to do with their priors than with their direct observation of reality, which is exceedingly rare, especially in politics. In assessing claims about election fraud, the provenance of a laptop, vaccine effectiveness, how a pandemic began, the state of the economy, whether or not there is a crime wave, foreign policy, or anything else, one is unlikely to be witnessing the underlying reality itself, which is generally too vast and complex to be synoptically surveyed by any single individual. One may, on occasion, be directly exposed to aspects of the underlying reality, but knowing whether those aspects are representative of the phenomenon as a whole is something that can be answered only by directly knowing the whole itself or by indirectly inferring the nature of the whole—an inductive process that is always subject to error. Thus, claims about an underlying social and political reality are inevitably grounded in fallible and biased interpretations (which may or may not be accurate), including those communicated to us from fallible and biased sources, who themselves are often reporting information second or third hand from other fallible and biased sources.

Since such claims are not unambiguously or self-evidently true, categorizing them as misinformation rather marks scholars’ personal assessment of whether the claims *seem* self-evident to them. Defining misinformation as that which is unambiguously false, then, does not eliminate the problem of subjectivity.

An alternative definition of misinformation expands the category to include not just false claims, but those that are true but misleading (e.g., Lazer et al. 2018)—such as when someone derives a false conclusion from a true claim. Yet if, as we saw in discussing the first definition, it is problematic to treat the veracity of a claim as equivalent to a researchers’ subjective interpretation of its veracity, it is even more problematic to determine which conclu-

sions people draw from a true claim are true or false. A true claim, especially in isolation, can lead to many divergent conclusions. It is likely that researchers might end up conflating the set of “valid conclusions to draw from claim X” with the set of conclusions that the *researchers* think are valid to draw from claim X. Hence, the problem of subjectivity remains unaddressed.

Whereas useful definitions explain the unknown by means of the known, the definitions of misinformation used by researchers explain the unknown (which political claims constitute misinformation?) with an equally unknown synonym (which political claims are false or might be interpreted in a way that leads to a false conclusion?). There is something circular about this method: if misinformation is a “false” claim, we need to know how, in a particular case, to determine which claims are, in fact, false—or “untrue” or “incorrect” or “misleading.” But what is untrue, incorrect, or misleading? Misinformation.

Breaking this circle requires distinguishing misinformation from information. If “misinformation” and “information” refer, respectively, to false and true representations of reality, we need to know what the true representation is in a particular case. So how can we distinguish between the true and the false? Political epistemology, as a subset of epistemology, has not found, in the past two thousand years in which this question has been asked, a decisive way to answer it. No wonder, then, that any answer to the question, especially in the context of political disagreement, will itself be contestable (it is, after all, contested), ideological, or otherwise subjective, putting the scholar of “misinformation” in the position of a political partisan.

One might argue that since this is unavoidable, it is not problematic, or even that it is desirable. Perhaps we, the scholarly community, can and should make our scholarship an extension of our politics in order to lend our authority to the side of “the truth.” Yet we in the scholarly community are not necessarily better qualified to determine what the truth is, in politics, than are those whose truth-claims we presume to judge. (If we were, we would be entitled to rule, at least according to some political theorists.) Learning quantitative, qualitative, or experimental methods as part of our graduate training, and becoming masters of the output of others who are similarly trained, does not give us better insight than other political actors into the provenance of Hunter Biden’s laptop or the Covid virus. And as we have seen in the case of Covid, even experts can be wrong.

Developing appropriate definitions, then, does not solve the substantive epistemological problem—the influence of partisan and ideological priors on judgments—especially since they cannot determine how such definitions—even if we could fit on a perfect one—should best be applied. Take, for example, a definition of misinformation as a claim that contradicts “definitive evidence” or “expert opinion.” It is not clear how such a definition circumvents the problem of subjectivity—the problem that researchers’ prior political and theoretical lenses determine which evidence they consider at all, which evidence they consider “definitive,” which experts are worth listening to, and how to interpret expert opinions and supposedly definitive evidence.

However, even if we could come up with an objective definition of information and misinformation, we would not be any closer to understanding why people sometimes accept one but not the other. Only if those who believed in what we objectively define as misinformation subjectively *agreed* with this definition, and

agreed with its application to the particular factual claims that they believe, could the definition offer any insight into why they believe it. For we could then justify the asymmetry assumption by concluding that some pathology—such as an abandonment of the very concept of truth—is keeping them from disbelieving *what they believe to be* misinformation. However, even those who believe in the validity of the category of misinformation do not agree that it applies to what *they* believe—or else they would not believe it. The nature of a belief is to believe that what one believes is true; nobody can believe what they think is false—without abandoning it and therefore no longer believing in it. Thus, even a definition of misinformation that tracked the objective truth about which information is false would not contribute to answering the question empirical researchers ask, which is not the question of what people *should* believe, but the question of why they *do* believe whatever they believe—whether it is true or false. A normative argument (people should not believe X because it is, objectively, misinformation) is of no assistance in answering an empirical question (why do people subjectively believe X?).

Kicking the Epistemological Can Down the Road

Some scholars have developed strategies for sidestepping the problem of subjectivity by not answering the question of what defines misinformation. For example, some of the researchers who study how misinformation traverses online networks have proposed eschewing consideration of the validity of the specific claims being shared across online accounts, and instead focusing on the general trustworthiness of the news outlets from which the claims originate. Thus, David Lazer et al. (2018) favor “focusing on the original sources—the publishers—rather than individual stories, because we view the defining element . . . to be the intent and processes of the publisher . . . [which] also allows us to avoid the morass of trying to evaluate the accuracy of every single news story.”

Paradoxically, if we took this approach, it would mean considering people guilty of spreading misinformation if they shared a true story that emanates from source deemed by researchers as unreliable. Indeed, this could have been a way to justify suppressing the Hunter Biden story, because it first appeared in the *New York Post*, which many people consider unreliable. Conversely, false stories may emanate from sources deemed trustworthy. Numerous stories from mainstream news outlets have turned out to be false or at least highly questionable, even on issues that were important and highly salient (Greenwald 2019), as we have seen in the cases of the lab-leak hypothesis as well as the laptop story. A recent exposé (Rindsberg 2021) documents how *New York Times* reporters botched some of the most consequential stories of the twentieth century, burying news of the Holocaust, denying the existence of the Holodomor, actively encouraging the coup against South Vietnamese president Diem, and exaggerating the evidence about Iraqi WMD, among many other examples. The world that journalists report about is complex and ambiguous, the truth about it is difficult to determine particularly on a deadline, so error is commonplace. In the face of these problems, there is no reason to assume that news stories from an outlet that scholars identify as “reliable” always produces stories free of misinformation.

A deeper problem with treating the source of a story as a heu-

ristic for its truth or falsity is that it equates the trustworthiness of a news source with its “intent and processes” (as Lazer et al. put it). But in a messy, complex world, it begs the question to treat the intent to tell the truth (a motivational problem) as sufficient or even necessary to get to the truth (an epistemological problem). Epistemological problems arise from the opacity of reality, not from failure to want to know the truth about it. As for “processes,” it would certainly be valuable for political scientists to examine various media sources’ methods of determining what they should publish, rather than simply assuming that the processes of the sources we trust are better than those of the sources we distrust. But while it is true that procedures that require double-checking stories, soliciting responses from those implicated in a story, and so on, might entitle us, as a rule of thumb, to place more trust in a given source than in other sources, this greater degree of trust is never so decisive that we can simply equate stories from “untrustworthy” sources with “misinformation,” or stories from “trustworthy” sources with “truth.” The media outlets that trashed the lab-leak hypothesis and the laptop story were the ones that probably would have passed a process test, while the ones that presumably would have flunked such a test were the ones that may have managed to identify the truth (as we think we now know it). Of course, the truth of this matter still remains to be sussed out. This suggests that the truth is not so easily discerned that the right intent or processes will automatically reveal it.

It is possible that news sources with the right intent and good processes *tend* to reveal the truth, even if they fail in specific cases. Yet it is hard to imagine how such a tendency could be demonstrated without reverting to scholars’ subjective perceptions, drawn from a lifetime of news consumption, that certain outlets (such as the *New York Times*) get at the truth more often than others (such as the *New York Post*). Such impressions are likely to be circular and unfalsifiable. Those of us whose lifetime experience of reading the *New York Times* has led us to trust it, as a rule of thumb, are drawing on a self-confirming sample that may create the false impression of accuracy. Only if readers could reach beyond the thousands of news reports they have read in order to directly gauge their accuracy could they test their impressions of accuracy. But if this were possible—if investigative journalists could be directly investigated and fact checkers directly fact checked by their readers—we would not need journalists to begin with. As Lippmann recognized, journalists, like experts, function as interpreters (mediators) of a complex reality, but interpretation (and thus the media) would not be necessary if reality were self-disclosing. Our trust in journalists and experts, then, probably can be neither escaped nor vindicated.

Lazer and his colleagues rightly recognize that it is difficult for researchers to evaluate the accuracy of every single news story either in large studies or in real time. But treating the evaluation of what counts as misinformation as not truth but the reliability of a news source retains, albeit at a remove, the problem of subjectivity: researchers must rely on their priors to evaluate manageable samples of stories emanating from an outlet to estimate its trustworthiness, or to evaluate the editorial processes and intent of the outlet. The need for and difficulties of these types of evaluation, however, reflect the fact that true information is not self-evidently distinguishable from misinformation. This is further confirmed by the very existence of the dependent variable that Lazer et al. seek to investigate: people who share (or presumably believe) information stemming from sources that a scholarly process of evaluation

might deem untrustworthy. If they distrusted these sources, they would not believe the information emanating from them. Thus, the unwitting purpose served by constructing indices of the objective reliability of sources is normative, not empirical—these indices might justify the advice that people should trust the *New York Times*, not the *New York Post*, but they do not *explain* why some select citizens (those who believe what we consider to be misinformation) trust the latter but not the former.

From Naïve Epistemology to Suppressing Dissent

If there were an easy or scientific way to make reliable judgments about misinformation, there would be no reason to allow political disagreement about factual matters to continue. (One might want to allow disagreement about normative matters if one treats them as having no scientific or easy answer.) The presence of disagreement indicates that at the very least, the answers are not easy, if they are obtainable at all. The contrary assumption logically leads toward the criminalization of disagreement.

In the aftermath of the January 6 riot, which seemed plausibly to have been connected, at least in part, to the circulation of numerous conspiracy theories regarding election fraud, the *New York Times's* Kevin Roose argued that we are experiencing a “national reality crisis” to which “something like a reality czar” might be an appropriate response (Roose 2021). A few months later, Senator Amy Klobuchar proposed legislation that would punish social-media companies for allowing health misinformation on their platforms. The proposal defined “misinformation” as anything the Secretary of Health and Human Services defines as such (Ghafary and Heilweil 2021). Were the legislation to pass, it seems likely that what would count as misinformation would be dependent, at least in part, on the political biases and political motives of revolving administrations. Thus, what would be legally penalized as misinformation would change from administration to administration. Determinations of the truth, by this method, would remain dependent on politics, but backed by legal force. The method of determining truth is glossed over, leaving the determination of what is misinformation subjective, but instead of these subjective determinations coexisting with one another, in the form of political disagreements and public disputation, the side deemed “misinformed” would be crushed by the law.

There is in this sense an inescapably authoritarian edge to the current campaign aimed at censoring, criminalizing, or deplatforming misinformation. Unfortunately, research on the subject may be participating in this campaign, perhaps unintentionally, because it contributes to the asymmetrical pathologization of what we, the researchers, consider to be false beliefs.

Coming to Grips with a Problem that Can't Be Solved

To research “misinformation” *as such* is inherently to put researchers in the position of apotheosizing a subjective definition of the credibility of certain political or media actors, or simply a subjective assessment of whether certain claims count as “misinformation” or not. This subjectivity is obscured by the use of such normative labels as “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “misleading

claims,” “misperceptions,” and “unreliable sources.” These terms transform subjective claims about the truth into putatively scientific definitions of the truth, but none of them can *explain* why there is disagreement about the truth, and thus why political actors accept as information whatever we think of as misinformation. Thus, these terms only obscure the task facing researchers who are attempting to understand the acceptance of what we call misinformation, because the terms distract us from the failure of the citizens in whom we are interested to agree that what they believe actually does constitute “misinformation.”

They, like us, can be compared to color-blind but intelligent creatures who have just arrived on Earth in the middle of the night, having never heard anything about the planet. If we were to tell such a creature that the Earth's sky normally appears bright green to us during the day, the creature would have no way of knowing (yet) that we had shared a piece of misinformation with them. Thus, our claim that the sky is green to us is no different to them than the claim that it is red, purple, yellow, or blue. Which of these claims is true and which of them is “misinformation” is the very thing that would be subjectively indeterminate, and thus could play no role in determining whether the creature trusted our claim or rejected it. With this in mind, consider the headline claims that are sometimes used in studies to understand how audiences interact with misinformation, such as the headlines that “Sarah Palin called to boycott Mall of America because ‘Santa was always white in the Bible,’” that “Election Night: Hillary was drunk, got physical with Mook and Podesta,” or that the “billionaire founder of Corona beer brewery makes everyone in his village a millionaire in his will” (Pennycook and Rand 2019). The underlying truth of such claims is not directly observable by the overwhelming majority of the people who hear them (i.e., few people are listening to all of Sarah Palin's statements, few people were with Hillary Clinton on election night, and few people have seen the will belonging to the founder of Corona beer). And contrary to the asymmetry thesis, the claims themselves don't inherently indicate anything about their own veracity. This leaves the evaluation of these claims to audiences' prior knowledge or predispositions—just as if the audiences were evaluating true claims. Thus, the instances of misinformation in such studies could likely be replaced with true but equally obscure claims without making much difference. Consider, for example, trading “Sarah Palin calls to boycott Mall of America because ‘Santa was always white in the Bible’” (did not happen) with “Sarah Palin says we've got to stand with our North Korean allies—we're bound to by treaty” (did happen). While one is true and the other is not, there is no self-evident difference in the truth of the claims that would mark out belief in the first claim as requiring a distinctive causal vector compared to belief in the second. If the objective truth or falseness of a claim is not self-evident, then its believability will come down to its subjective *plausibility* to a specific person.

Thus, beliefs deemed misinformation by researchers can and should be studied as other beliefs are studied, but they should be studied in terms of their believability to specific audiences. Only if we lose sight of the mediation of our own beliefs to us, and thus the fact that they are not self-evident truths, does it seem to pose a puzzle when someone shows signs of disagreeing with them, and call for investigations into the special channels by means of which “misinformation” comes to be accepted. To this point, misinformation can be about any topic and be wrong in any number of ways, meaning that there is unlikely to be any one factor that pre-

dicts belief in all of it. For example, Republicans might be prone to believing misinformation claiming that the Trump economy was better than it was while Democrats might be prone to believing it was worse than it was. In both cases, different political biases drive the beliefs, with perhaps the only factor undergirding *both* beliefs is that the people holding them believe something other than the Trump economy's true metrics because their false view matches what they already (differentially) believe about the world. But, another person who believes that eating spicy foods cures COVID-19, a belief not supported by mainstream health organizations, might believe this claim not due to any political bias or appeal to group solidarity, but rather because the claim matches what their grandmother convincingly told them long ago about how to cure a cold.

To put this another way, misinformation, as a category of ideas, is different than the other, more specific sets of ideas that also concern researchers, such as “conspiracy theories”: because conspiracy theories share a certain form and specific elements (i.e., they must allege a conspiracy) beyond their allegedly suspect truth value, it *is* reasonable to suspect that some unique factor or factors drives interaction with and belief in conspiracy theories. Further, many researchers of conspiracy theories, myself included, leave at least some room for the possibility that the conspiracy theories they study might turn out to be true. This is not to say that the study of conspiracy theories does not suffer from definitional and epistemological issues as well (Uscinski and Enders forthcoming), but rather that misinformation is not confined to a form or subject matter, and is defined only by a piece of information's deviation from truth, which is often not something that anyone can observe directly and immediately (although we all have opinions about it).

None of the arguments I have made should be taken to suggest that misinformation is unimportant or that researchers have engaged in bad-faith investigations of it. This is a new and emerging field of research, and epistemological problems take time to grapple with. Researchers in this area, myself included, have struggled to develop the definitions of key concepts and to design methods to adjudicate the underlying truth of claims that we call misinformation. Researchers (again, myself included) have used terms such as “misinformation” because they are common, and not necessarily because they add conceptual or epistemological clarity. It is encouraging, therefore, that a growing number of scholars are beginning to take these issues seriously (e.g., Bode and Vraga 2020). The difficulty of these philosophical and methodological issues can have the effect, however, of committing us even further to the

assumption that if we could just come up with an objective or at least consistent definition, it would lend itself to devising the special methodology needed for dealing with this supposedly unusual problem. But the other option is to recognize that the problem of false beliefs is not so unusual after all, and that neither a definition nor a methodology—while perhaps blunting the effects of the epistemological problems to some degree—will get the research to fully overcome them.

The *research* problem is that of understanding people with whom we disagree, which is always difficult but is one of the most important tasks of rigorous social science. This task requires rejecting the assumption that, in effect, those who seem to disagree with us actually do not, because they know or sense that we are really right or that they really should be reading what we read (or that they would know or sense these things if only they were not victims of irrationality, social media, or bad actors). Only if we accept this asymmetry assumption would people's strange attraction to “misinformation” require a special investigation and, in turn, a clear definition of that to which they are attracted. Without this naïvely realistic starting point, we could simply investigate the circulation of ideas or belief acquisition—even the circulation of and belief in ideas with which we disagree—without relying on charged or poorly defined terms that presuppose that the information or beliefs are inherently wrong.

For example, we could define or operationalize misinformation as “ideas that conflict with scientific consensus,” “ideas that conflict with the accounts of official government reports,” “ideas that conflict with the conclusions of health organizations,” or “ideas that have yet to be the subject of a strong consensus of experts,” while fully acknowledging that the consensus, reports, conclusions, sources, and experts could be wrong and eventually overturned, meaning that the misinformation in question might not be false, or “misinformation” at all. Researchers would have to specify how they operationalize any of these (e.g., what counts as a consensus), but at least they would have begun to move away from the subjective epistemology of naïve realism, and toward achieving a more neutral perspective. Another option—beyond qualifying the label—would be for researchers to abandon using the “misinformation” label altogether. This strategy would deprive us of the attention-getting buzz that comes from being able to say that one political group or another is more susceptible to misinformation, or that certain news outlets, social media platforms, or politicians are founts of “misinformation.” But the loss in publicity would be more than made up for by the gain in objectivity. ■

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States and the Ideas that Drive Them: Ideational Change and the European Postwar

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ABSTRACT: *Materialist accounts of economic policy and politics necessarily slight the possibility that ideas, untethered from individual or group interests, may play an important causal role in the determination of outcomes. At the same time, materialist accounts tend to abstract away from states as centers of power that are not under the control of social groups pursuing their interests. These two lacunae work together, as it is difficult to conceptualize the possibility of state autonomy if one cannot allow that state personnel may have ideas that are independent of material interests. Thus, in orthodox accounts of the European postwar recovery, it is frequently assumed that conflicts between social classes or interest groups led to a Fordist “settlement” between labor and capital, one that exchanged high wages for steady consumer demand and labor peace, thus enabling the egalitarian economic boom now looked back upon as the Trente Glorieuses. But while the notion of a class settlement is a neat story, it is quite difficult to reconcile with the historical record of the two leading European economies, Germany and France, both of which experienced “big bang” constitutional and policy reforms (in 1948–49 and 1958, respectively) engineered by autonomous states that had to face down the opposition of labor and business alike, along with other significant social groups. After the autonomy conferred on German technocrats by the postwar Allied occupation, and on French technocrats by the installation of an emergency government ten years later, these state actors enacted neoliberal policy agendas and steered recalcitrant social groups in their direction by redefining these groups’ interests. In both countries, a new consensus favoring international trade and low inflation was constructed around the benefits that all would enjoy (it was argued) from a high-productivity economy. This development cannot be properly understood without acknowledging the role played by the ideas of state personnel who were autonomous from societal interests.*

As the twentieth century unfolded, the Marxism that had once been popular among social scientists was displaced by rational-choice and quantitative research. Yet an underlying assumption remained unchanged: that material interests are the driving force in social and political behavior. This assumption is conspicuous in comparative political economy, such as in the widely accepted view that the *Trente Glorieuses* were produced by a settlement between labor and capital that grounded the postwar West European political economy—a view that replays the class struggle, but with a bloodless denouement.

It is not a surprise that materialistic perspectives downplay any role for ideas as independent variables, and any role for state actors that does not reduce them to the agents of material interests. That state personnel, like other political agents, might be motivated by their subjective convictions about what is best for their societies—or even by their variable, subjective interpretations of what is objectively best for their own classes or social groups—is not a possibility that sits easily with paradigms that emphasize the primacy of objective interests *per se*.

This leads to certain anomalies. For example, in the case of

the *Trente Glorieuses*, it means that we must ignore the power of nation-states that had mobilized their entire societies to fight a world war—after which, apparently, these states politely deferred to the demands of social groups. Perhaps, one might think, this approach makes sense in light of the postwar adoption of democratic constitutions. Yet materialistic analyses of the postwar tend to ignore the actual institutional changes created by those constitutions and the autonomous sources of these changes, even as they treat democratic politics as a sideshow in comparison to the ethereal negotiation of postwar settlements whose signatories, precise terms, and dates are never named.

To be sure, there is a fine counter-tradition of political theory and analysis seeking to “put the state back in” (Skocpol 1986). More recently, fueled by the failure of transition economies such as Russia, a growing current of scholarship has attended to state “capacity” (e.g. Acemoglu 2005; Fukuyama 2014). But most of this research tends not to question the materialist premises that animate hegemonic society-centric paradigms of research. Not unrelatedly, the ideas held by state actors tend to be overlooked. In *Democracy and Prosperity* (2019), Torben Iversen and David Soskice contradict the consensus view that national governments are impotent in the face of such tectonic economic forces as globalization and technological innovation. They put the regulatory state in the driver’s seat of “geographically embedded” advanced capitalism, thanks to an alliance between skilled labor and political leadership. Promisingly, this is an alliance concluded not through unpalatable settlements between groups, but by means of electoral politics. However, Iversen and Soskice’s state-centric approach tends to take materialistic premises for granted, failing to notice the role that subjective interpretation must play in the articulation of objective interests.

Mark Blyth’s *Great Transformations* (2002) provides insightful theoretical criticisms of materialist models and calls for the explicit use of ideas as causal factors in their own right (see also Friedman 2020). An important work that explored how the ideas of autonomous state personnel can act to reframe social groups’ preferences was Eric A. Nordlinger’s *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State* (1982). “Realist” scholars in international relations have sometimes, similarly, been sensitive to ideational considerations (e.g., Krasner 1983; Goldstein and Keohane 1993), and there has been a great deal of ideational scholarship in comparative politics. Hugh Hecló (1974, 321) provided decisive insights into the epistemological dimension of technocracy by pointing out that “social policy was not created by the bumping together of impenetrable billiard balls of power, but by men who could learn and whose viewpoints could change.” Peter Hall (1993) built on Hecló’s work by introducing the concept of “social learning,” which he used to explain Britain’s embrace of monetarism in the 1970s—as the outcome of reflections upon recent policy failures by state personnel. The work of Kathleen R. McNamara (2017) on the European Union’s cultivation of its own legitimacy is compatible with the possibility that social learning starts through a selection of narratives that define the predicament politics is expected to address in a given time and place. This is an approach that is similar to my own, as is Vivien Schmidt’s “discursive institutionalism” (Schmidt 2008). She observes that explanatory models built around institutions are often static and struggle to explain change; and that even when institutionalist analyses attempt to give a central role to ideas, the effect of ideas on policies is usually left unclear. To remedy these

deficiencies, Schmidt calls for a focus on discourse, or the performance of ideas. She distinguishes “communicative” from “coordinative” discourse, the first taking place in the public arena and the second among policy-making peers. I would only add that sometimes a discourse can address both audiences.

My theoretical position, then, is that when “states” are disaggregated into the human beings who lead government institutions—the people who conceive policies and the people who implement them—the role of these people’s ideas becomes evident. Taking account of the ideas of state personnel, therefore, might renew research in political science generally and comparative political economy in particular. This would not constitute a haphazard empiricist reaction against monocausal materialism, where states and ideas would be added to a list of other factors that generate political-economy changes. The ambition would be more paradigmatic, starting with a recognition that states and ideas are two sides of the same political coin, and seeking to probe the foundational power of ideas in human behavior and the variable but often considerable autonomy of states in transforming ideas into institutions and policies.

The Intersection of Ideational State Theory and Technocracy

I turned in the ideational direction when, as a doctoral student absorbed in the comparative political economy of postwar European development, I stumbled across profound and previously unremarked similarities between the founding episodes of the German Federal Republic in 1948–49 and the French Fifth Republic in 1958. In both cases, a set of (roughly speaking) neoliberal ideas about political economy seemed to have led state personnel to attempt to increase the capacity and stability of the executive branch by making it electorally accountable, which would enhance its legitimacy; and by empowering technocratic agencies and experts who could make a clean break with the inflationary and protectionist policies that had marked the Weimar republic and the Fourth French Republic. In both countries, too, the technocrats who embarked on these institutional programs appeared to recognize that, just as they themselves were being driven by ideas, so, too, was society itself. Therefore, the German and the French governments deployed sophisticated ideational efforts, supported by the public-relations activities of non-partisan “experts,” that aimed to enlist the masses in their neoliberal program (or at least neutralize their opposition) by redefining the preferences of the societal groups, such as unions and peasant organizations, that had been able to veto economic policies in the previous peacetime regimes of the two countries. After noticing these parallels, I was led to question the received wisdom about a postwar settlement among opposing societal interests, which both reduced ideas to material epiphenomena and ignored the independent role of states. In reality, I contended, the ideas of technocrats were implemented through the power of states over society (Godard 2020).

In my work, “technocracy” is an empirical category that is neither a normative ideal (e.g., Brennan 2016) nor a normative threat (e.g., Habermas [1968] 1970). Instead, it is a peculiarly modern phenomenon that needs to be understood on its own terms—that is, in terms of the ideas of its proponents and practitioners (e.g., Foucault 2004; Friedman 2020). Instead of starting from

the materialist assumption that politics is determined by conflicting objective interests, this approach starts from the reality that in advanced capitalist societies, democratic politics is both constrained and enabled by the power over policy exerted by state personnel and the intellectual authority sometimes exerted over the masses by “experts”—even as the power and authority of experts is constrained by democratic politics. Autonomous expertise is thought—by technocrats and by many other political actors—to be necessary to govern modern states, even though these states are mass democracies in which political leaders are to some extent hemmed in by democratic accountability. The German and French cases illustrate this tension.

In an effort to exemplify the illumination that can be derived from ideational research, therefore, I will devote the rest of this paper to the German and French cases. First I will review the dominant materialist accounts of the German and French postwar. I will then look at the leading ideas that inspired German and French reformers after the war, focusing on how they analyzed the failures of the dark 1930s and the policy conclusions they drew from this analysis. In the immediate postwar years, two orientations competed with each other, one seeking collective control over the economy as a panacea, the other focused on how precisely to use collective control to spread prosperity to all. This second orientation inspired the (roughly speaking) neoliberal reform agendas of German ordoliberal experts and French Gaullist experts. A new form of governance, rooted in a balance between expertise and democracy, arose from these two constitutional-cum-reformist starting points. ---

Materialist Accounts of the Postwar

It is no exaggeration to say that all major accounts of the European post-bellum political economy rely on materialist models. The hegemonic explanatory model assumes that collective actors had unambiguous objective interests of which they were subjectively conscious and which they actively pursued. The now-prevalent version of this model has two major social groups, labor and capital, reaching some form of bargain: the “postwar settlement.” Even as Marxism has faded from the explicit scholarly conversation, then, its influence remains pervasive. It is found underneath three successive narratives of the postwar: those concerning the capitalist restoration, the social settlement, and its displacement by neoliberalism—such that neoliberalism took effect in the 1970s, not, as I will suggest, in the 1940s and 1950s.

The identification of the neoliberal turn with the 1970s is not accidental. Until the 1970s, the first narrative had regarded the postwar period as one in which capitalism was rehabilitated after its legitimacy was tarnished by the Depression. In this analysis, postwar unions and socialist parties were repeatedly defeated in their attempt to obtain control of workers over individual firms and the commanding heights of the economy. By the early 1950s, forces opposed to the workers, emboldened by the onset of the Cold War, took state leadership everywhere and set the terms of the political economy to favor capital and its owners (Markowitz 1986; Van Hook 2004).

Starting in the 1970s, however, a more hopeful retrospective view of the labor movement emerged—assisted, I would venture, by the end of the *Trente glorieuses*—which prompted attempts to understand what seemed, in retrospect, to be a golden era of egalitarian

growth. Filtered through the contrast between a conflictual, economically troubled Britain and a much more consensual and prosperous West Germany, the idea of a postwar settlement became dominant. Thus, the most widely accepted narratives centered on industrial relations. These accounts contrasted the corporatist countries of German-speaking and Scandinavian Europe against their liberal peers, such as Britain and the United States. The success of Germany was seen as having been generated by an “exoskeleton” (Streeck 1997) of rules ensuring that unions encompassing a wide stretch of labor interests negotiated deals with similarly broad employers’ organizations. This ensured a tacit “neo-corporatist bargain” (Eichengreen 2007) featuring wages that rose in alignment with productivity growth and in which the welfare state constantly expanded. In a similar if fuzzier vein, French Marxists, building on Gramsci ([1948-51] 2014), told the story of a Fordist mutation of capitalism, in which capital was able to use mass consumption to escape the otherwise iron law of diminishing returns to investment (Aglietta 1997; Coriat 1994). This theory has spread to the Anglo-American world in the form of narratives of “wage-led growth” (e.g., Baccaro, Blyth, and Pontusson 2022).

During the twenty-first century, the settlement idea has remained central to postwar scholarship. Increasingly, however, a third narrative has reconceived the postwar settlement as the mirror image of a neoliberalism that is understood to have undermined the settlement from the 1970s forward. Until the seventies, wages and income equality increased; afterwards, under neoliberal influence, they declined. From this reversal, many scholars have worked backward to infer the relative postwar strength of the classes, under the assumptions of (1) an identity of interests among capital owners or top earners and (2) an increasing gap between their interests and those of everyone else. Since it is thought that the immediate postwar increase in economic equality *must* have reflected a stronger bargaining position of the working or middle classes, this position *must* have been eroded by a stronger position for capital later on, at the end of the *Trente Glorieuses*. Thus, the story of neoliberalism, which might otherwise be taken to exemplify the independent role of ideas in politics and public policy, is folded into the materialist story by equating neoliberalism with the interests of the upper classes, and by making class the determining factor in the rise of neoliberalism toward the end, not in the middle, of the twentieth century.

For Wolfgang Streeck (2017), then, a key to capitalism’s dynamism resides in entrepreneurs’ willingness to challenge social norms regardless of consequences—a disposition that calls, à la Polanyi, for a collective stabilizing response. In the immediate postwar decades, accordingly, society curtailed capitalism, creating a new equilibrium that started to wobble in the 1970s, when capital retook the initiative. For Thomas Piketty (2019), similarly, the labor movement and affiliated interests emerged from the war determined to impose highly progressive tax rates on capital owners, along with such measures as industrial nationalizations, all of which significantly reduced inequality. This was ensured by the ideological victory of left forces against previously dominant “proprietary” dogmas, a win that was made possible by the upheaval of two world wars and the Depression. In Piketty’s view, this victory consisted in the substitution of the manipulative, self-justifying ideology of the economic elite (prewar liberalism) by a worldview consistent with the interests of those on the lower reaches of the wealth scale and the extended middle class. But all of this was undone by the subse-

quent ideational and policy victory of the 1 Percent.

In sum, looking at the same postwar developments, a first wave of scholarly observers believed that they witnessed a revival of capitalism. A second wave focused on the virtues of the Continental industrial-relations arrangements and then worked backward to infer that they stemmed from a settlement between labor and capital. A third wave lamented the displacement of this settlement by neoliberalism. Despite the large differences in these analyses, all of them take for granted the alignment of group preferences (ideas) with (objective) group interests. Notwithstanding its matter-of-fact quality, however—can there be a more commonsensical, “realistic” explanation of human behavior than one that assumes that people act in their own interests?—the social-class schema accounts for little if we get granular about the postwar.

The first question we need to ask is: Who exactly fought to set the terms of the postwar? The dominant narratives do identify important actors on the left side of the struggle, including labor movements and allied parties. But the details are nebulous. To take the most obvious example, it is difficult to imagine Streeck’s “society” negotiating a settlement with an entity outside of itself. And the other side of the settlement is much more difficult to identify explicitly. Implicitly, it seems that Team Capital, playing on behalf of economic elites, is *the state*, although the modality of Team Capital’s control over the state, and therefore the degree of state autonomy or the lack of it, are left unclear.

Consequently, the mechanics of the postwar distributional shift remain a black box in most settlement accounts. Corporatist stories run on a vague “social” stage, featuring industrial relations and policy battles between capital and labor; the implication is that this is the terrain on which fundamentals were “settled.” In fact, however, throughout the 1950s, rather than seeking an enlightened compromise, most of Continental Europe’s labor parties and unions were in radical opposition to the social, political and economic choices made by their governments. And they lost this battle: in Germany, the postwar left’s goal of socialization was not achieved, and in France and Italy the leading communist unions were politically marginalized. If postwar societies became notably more egalitarian, justifying the positive normative gloss that began to be applied to the *Trente Glorieuses* once these three decades had passed, it was not because the left had dragged capital to the bargaining table.

World War II might seem to offer a better explanation for a postwar settlement. Mancur Olson (1982) suggests that the war destroyed narrow, growth-hostile interest groups and coalitions on the Continent, and that the new groups that replaced them encompassed wider interests that were better aligned with collective well-being by stabilizing prices and liberalizing trade. Other economists, such as Brad DeLong and Barry Eichengreen (1991), think that the Marshall Plan provided extrinsic resources that lubricated deals among social groups that were facing postwar decline. However, neither of these economic explanations identifies the processes by means of which the interests that were allegedly party to the settlement were translated into actual policies, whether those that stabilized prices and liberalized trade or those that kept both wages and the welfare state growing. The assumption seems to be that social groups, forced by their adversaries to compromise their claims, stumbled upon the low-inflation, high-wage, egalitarian path. The positive outcome, then (from a normative perspective), was essentially down to sheer luck.

In a contingent world good luck is always possible, but the economists’ story ignores electoral politics as assiduously as the corporatist story does. If society or labor had divergent interests from capital, one might think that the former would easily prevail over the latter, as the former would have had far more votes. However, while casting the state as the agent of capital may fit electoral politics in Europe circa 1848, a hundred years later, under universal suffrage, formidable communist, socialist, and social democratic parties somehow failed to achieve their core objectives. And by the early 1950s, elections had reduced the left’s influence over major European governments to a minimum.

Finally, even though “Fordism” has caught on as a loose descriptor of the fundamentals of postwar prosperity, there seems to be no consensus on the underlying facts. Did capitalists sign up for social democracy because they recognized its superior accumulation prospects? In that case, there was no need for capital to make a settlement with anyone else. Assuming that higher wages suited the owners of capital, both to spur sufficient demand for their collective products and to finance the welfare state (both of which would keep the masses happy), what is it that capital would have given up in a supposed deal?

Instead of a struggle between classes, I propose to recast the postwar in Germany and France as a battle of ideas in which the state played the leading role, but under the constraints imposed by the need for democratic legitimation. I will suggest that the winning side took two distinct but interlocking steps by first interpreting the recent past, and then by implementing an institutional and policy program that sought to learn appropriate lessons from this interpretation of the past. Neither of these steps displayed an alignment with established interest groups, for the simple reason that those groups did not have much power in comparison to the institutional and ideational power amassed by state agents—given the highly unusual and often overlooked circumstances of Germany in the immediate postwar years and of France a decade later.

The Postwar Battle of Interpretations

By the time the war ended, there was a consensus view about its cause: the failure of unbridled interwar capitalism, which enabled the rise of totalitarian regimes. This consensus underpinned wide agreement on the need for collective control over the economy, an agreement that inspired the 1944 French national unity government, the 1945 British Labour administration, and even the agendas of conservative parties such as Germany’s Christian Democratic Union in its 1947 program. This collectivist vision, however, contained only sketchy notions of *how* collectivized resources should be managed, as seen in the vague governance projects for nationalized French and British industries and the ambitious but impressionistic German plans for the “socialization” of the economy. For the most part, it was assumed that a *democratization* of the economy (that is, the *demos* taking control over it) would necessarily bring about the evenly shared prosperity that had been lacking before the war. Thus, collective control over the economy would, *ipso facto*, translate into its management in the interests of all.

Two conservative writers can be taken as witnesses to the epoch’s embrace of collectivism. Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1943) expected large-scale economic organizations to inexorably become monopolies, leading in turn to their nationalization, although Schumpeter did not exclude the

possibility of a form of decentralized, democratic socialism that was not inconsistent with, say, the program of the German left. Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) sounded an alarm against the risks if the planning habits created by the war economy spilled into the postwar, which could easily lead to centralized, authoritarian socialism. Both Hayek and Schumpeter located the rise of collectivism solidly in the intellectual rather than material realm. For both, the 1930s were an episode in the rise of socialist governance (of which Nazi Germany was a mere variant) powered by the spread of collectivist ideas. Hayek's analysis, in particular, galvanized the reactionary camp in the United States and Britain, catalyzing a "neoliberal" rejection of the idea that democracy could manage capitalism. However, this variant of neoliberalism was confined to the Anglosphere and gained no elite or mass purchase there until the 1970s.

A very different interpretation of the interwar slippery slope, and thus another version of neoliberalism, emerged in Germany. This alternative story was focused on the Depression-era erosion of state capacity, so it pointed in a different direction from Hayek's free-market thrust. German "ordoliberal" took mass democracy for granted: not as a goal to be achieved but as a real-world state of affairs to which institutions and policies had to adjust. The key problem faced by the reconstructing nations was neither to give power to the people nor to prevent this, but to make collective decision-making effective and steer it away from populist disasters such as fascism.¹ Marcel Gauchet (2017) contends that this alternative neoliberalism (he does not call it that) learned from totalitarianism by favoring a strong state that would create the economic security that liberalism had failed to deliver—but in a sustainable and democratic form.

This created a potential conflict not only between ordoliberal neoliberalism and libertarian neoliberalism, but between ordoliberals and Continental left-wing advocates of collectivization, who were often wary of executive power and pushed for parliamentary supremacy in the constitutions of postwar France, Germany, and Italy. French and Italian communists proved particularly loyal to the ideal of parliamentary primacy that they inherited from the French Revolution, eschewing Leninist precepts about control of the executive power of the state. The parliamentary ideal was dramatically magnified, in French and Italian eyes, by the experience of fascism and Nazism, which were seen as victories of centralized power over elected people's representatives (Rosanvallon 2015). The non-Anglosphere democratic left, then, was stuck in a tension between the aspiration to planning and a strong suspicion of state authority.

While ordoliberals may have borrowed the idea of a strong state from fascism, they attempted not only to democratize the state but to erect a political-economy model that starkly repudiated Nazism. In contrast with Weimar, a robust democracy would leave no political space for enemies of liberalism. On the economic side, institutional decentralization and business competition were

to replace centralized economic power; law-bound regulation would replace authoritarianism; and rules-based economics, as exemplified by the gold standard and market pricing, would prevent the state's manipulation of money and prices. However, unlike the more libertarian neoliberals (Godard 2013), the ordoliberals worried about stable institutions, favored robust welfare provisions, and were particularly intent on strong antitrust regulation. To ordoliberals such as the economist Wilhelm Röpke, neither the market nor democracy were natural offshoots of civil society. Both were fragile institutions in need of strong tutoring by the state (Commun 2016).

These differences did not keep the ordoliberals and the free-market neoliberals from recognizing an intellectual common ground in opposition to socialism. This drew both groups to the Mont Pèlerin Society, an organization, founded by Hayek in 1947, that sponsored annual gatherings of neoliberals of both descriptions. Virtually all of the figures who led the postwar technocracies in Germany and France were Mont Pèlerin officers or members. But while it is understandably easy to overestimate the importance of the organization itself, which had virtually no effect on the world, it is just as easy to underestimate the impact of those of its members who were of the ordoliberal rather than free-market persuasion.²

According to the ordoliberals, protectionism, inflation, and deflation had all contributed to the Great Depression and the attendant political turmoil, which eventuated in the Third Reich; and protectionism, inflation, and deflation were all consequences of democratic governance of economic policy. The democratic imperative, which the ordoliberals accepted in general terms, had gone too far by extending into the economy, where the *demos* had proved itself incompetent. The key juncture of democratic overreach had been the end of the gold standard in 1914, which liberated democratic influence over economic policy from all constraint, at the same time that the question of integration into the international capitalist economy had also become subject to democratic control. In both trade and money, the ordoliberals thought, the people had gotten the policies wrong, favoring an easily understood, nationalistic protectionism as obviously desirable (to shield the economic interests of "our" industries and workers), and favoring sectorial spending so extensive that it could only be financed by printing too much money. Given this analysis, it should not be surprising that the ordoliberals sought to insulate postwar economic policy from direct democratic control, leaving it in the hands of "expert" economists such as themselves. In that sense, the ordoliberals' arguments for science-based policy, for legalism (versus arbitrariness), and for the depoliticization of key economic issues laid the seeds of what would become the European regulatory state, but they never argued explicitly for such an outcome and would likely have been wary of it (Plehwe, Slobodian, and Mirowski 2020; Slobodian 2018; Commun 2016; Bilger 1964).

Ludwig Erhard, the main political architect of the postwar

1 The ordoliberals included the members of "Freiburg School," led by economist Walter Eucken and the jurist Frank Böhm, alongside the economists Alexander Rüstow, Wilhelm Röpke, and Alfred Müller-Armack (a former Nazi who coined the term *soziale Marktwirtschaft*). The term "ordoliberal" emerged in the early 1950s (Commun 2016; Glossner 2010).

2 Too much is made of the Mont Pèlerin Society in the recent literature on neoliberalism (e.g., Mirowski and Plehwe 2009) by conflating the influence of some of its members with influence exerted by the organization per se. The truth is that MPS had no political impact in its own right, befitting its members' recognition that they were a tiny and beleaguered minority on the intellectual scene—only some of whom, those who were not of the free-market persuasion, would come to hold significant political power in Germany and France. (Thus, MPS is not mentioned in the Van Hook 2004 account of postwar German neoliberalism, only twice *en passant* in Glossner 2010, and only once, in footnotes, in Bilger 1964 and Commun 2016.)

German economic “miracle,” became ordoliberalism’s most important public face. An economist who had received his doctorate prior to the rise of Hitler, he became, as we will see, the chief author of economic policy under the immediate postwar occupation. Next, Erhard became the Minister for Economic Affairs of the new Federal Republic at its onset in 1949. He served in this role under the first chancellor of the new West German state, Konrad Adenauer, until 1963, followed, finally, by three years as chancellor in his own right.

Erhard had earned his Ph.D. at Frankfurt under Franz Oppenheimer, an ardent opponent of monopoly, and through his father he had been introduced to the skeptical view of interest groups propagated by the journalist Eugene Richter. Erhard argued that the Nazi régime, rather than being an excrescence of capitalism, was an archetype of state monopoly, of which Allies-imposed postwar rationing and price controls were a continuation (Godard 2020, 3.1.1). His liberalization and reconstruction program, dubbed the *soziale Marktwirtschaft*, heralded the restoration of individual freedoms lost in the 1930s, including “the important democratic rights—free choice of job and free choice for the consumer” (Erhard 1958, 109). He stressed that the Third Reich’s employment policies had amounted to slavery, as the unemployed had no freedom to refuse a job offer. Erhard repeatedly defended his program in prime-time radio speeches and press articles, positioning himself as a “specialist” (Erhard 1962, 82) as much as an official. He was joined in these public-relations efforts by Röpke, the best-known ordoliberal thinker, who published numerous opinion pieces in newspapers,³ was occasionally quoted by the president of the central bank, and, in 1950, was commissioned to write a public report on the German economy by Adenauer (Van Hook 2004).

In a period when the focus was on rebuilding industry and the social debate turned around the rights of workers as producers, Erhard boldly attempted to redefine citizens as consumers. This was politically astute, as rationing fatigue was growing and the residents of occupied Germany were desperate for a return to plentiful supplies of everyday goods. It also proved a very strong legitimation mechanism for the *soziale Marktwirtschaft*, as Foucault (2004) would point out. The flood of goods into shops that took place after Erhard’s economic reforms were adopted became an ongoing confirmation of their legitimacy and the legitimacy of the new state. Moreover, as consumers, Germans were not-so-subtly encouraged to resist the policies advocated by producers’ groups, pre-eminently the trade unions and employers’ federations of the heavy industries. These policy proposals show that Erhard’s program did not emanate from capitalists, who were disgraced by their association with the Nazi régime—but who might have regained power in a producer-oriented polity. On the other hand, Erhard’s ideas were not initially adopted because they found favor with the people as a whole any more than because they were supported by capitalists or trade unions. Legally and in fact, Erhard’s power was (at first) almost entirely a function of his appointment by the Allied occupying authorities, to which he was solely responsible. In 1947 Erhard was named by these authorities to preside

over a group of experts charged with designing a major monetary reform. In early 1948, the Allies’ economic directorate appointed an advisory committee on which Erhard and many other prominent economists sat. In March 1948, he was elected by a proto-parliament, the economic council, to direct the economy of the joint British and American occupation zone, ultimately under the Allies’ supervision. Three months later he supervised the freeing of prices from state control, even as the new Allied-created central bank, the Bank deutscher Länder (BdL), introduced the deutsche mark. He enacted the radical measures accompanying the introduction of the deutsche mark under a blank-check mandate from the council and handled, in this extra-constitutional position, almost all economic management until the September 1949 activation of the new Federal Republic of Germany (Godard 2020, 3.1.1).

The ordoliberal current provided Erhard and then the first governments of the Federal Republic with an ideational toolkit.⁴ But even more importantly, ordoliberal economists supplied a source of “scientific” legitimacy to neoliberal policy and to the newly emerging German state itself. Perhaps the best emblem of this dual ideational-governing role is taken by the advisory groups assisting Erhard’s economic directorate, which were prototypes of the technocratic governance that would later emerge, notably with the 1963 Council of Economic Experts. It was in his capacity as an economist rather than a politician that Erhard rose to power, and his public-relations efforts as an “expert” soon garnered public legitimacy for his policies.

Not only neoliberal policies but the new German state itself were formed in isolation from social groups. The German Basic Law, approved by the Allies in 1949, was written by a committee of regional parliamentarians who met without media presence or public input. Subsequent elections to the new Bundestag provided only indirect democratic endorsement of the Federal Republic’s constitution. Similarly, in 1948, the Allies not only created the BdL but appointed leaders who were committed to conservative (or neoliberal) monetary policy. From its early days, however, the bank seized autonomy from its military overlords, declining to pursue their policy recommendations (Godard 2020, ch. 3). (The BdL passed into German authority in 1951 and became the Bundesbank in 1957.)

To gain control over the democratic element of the new order, the BdL actively pushed forward its own legitimating narrative, painting the period spanning Weimar, the Third Reich, and the immediate postwar years as a time of monetary manipulation leading to hyperinflation, disorder, and poverty (Mee 1976). This characterization resonated with the recent collapse of the old reichsmark’s value, which had produced a chaotic barter economy and mass unemployment reminiscent of Weimar. The BdL portrayed its role in the new Germany as subjecting monetary policy to expert control so as to avoid repeating previous economic and political disasters.

The BdL ensured the wide and authoritative reach of its policy views by setting up extensive data-gathering operations that were the basis of respected monthly economic reports starting in

3 In 1947, at a time when occupied Germany hosted only a few authorized newspapers, articles by Walter Eucken and Wilhelm Röpke in Switzerland’s *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* are credited with a large influence on the German elite. Exports of the paper to Germany boomed from 3,000 to 17,200 copies daily, and future chancellor Konrad Adenauer was a regular reader (Commun 2016, citing Riedl 1992).

4 Ordoliberals had much more success as policy advisers than academics, as the neoclassical synthesis was prevalent in 1950s German universities (Nützenadel 2005). The journal *Ordo* launched in May 1948, one month before the big bang currency reform and price liberalization.

August 1948, a mere five months after the bank's creation, and at the height of political contestation over Erhard's reforms.⁵ Without these and Erhard's efforts to win over public opinion, it is unlikely that the new order would have survived the withdrawal of Allied control. Erhard faced a general strike four months into the new policy regime. Holders of reichsmark-denominated financial assets, the value of which was destroyed by the conversion to deutschemarks, fiercely contested the new program. At the same time, the Social Democratic Party opposed the lifting of price controls, which it saw as a gift to business owners. Even the Christian Democratic Union, which Erhard would later lead, signed on to his economics, and invited him to join the party, only after very positive economic results were recorded from late 1948—the beginning of the “German miracle.” Soon enough, however, the apparent success of the new policies cemented the ideational premise of the new Germany as the state's solid refusal of the economic instability that had plagued its predecessors—a refusal that was made possible by the experts at the BdL and Erhard's executive agencies. The stamp of expert approval, as well as the defense of the new monetary orthodoxy, became a prerequisite of future German economic policy initiatives (Godard 2020, ch. 3).

While this technocratic regime did serve the interests of capital, it also served the interests of labor, if the latter are defined as workers' interest not in revolution, but in earning wages under capitalism that are high but sustainable. This was a major part of the “miracle” that German workers experienced during the 1950s and 1960s. If one begins with this end result and works backward to what “must” have caused it, one might well be tempted to attribute it to a bargain between capital and labor, both of whom profited from the soziale Marktwirtschaft. But while such a bargain might have made sense if either employers or unions had been able to forecast the results of it in advance, there is no evidence that they did and, in the political record, every evidence that they did not. Nor is there any evidence of a bargain—except, one might say, implicitly, over time, as labor and capital alike increasingly bought into the political economy that Erhard and the BdL had created.

The origins of this order did not lie with industrialists or unions but with neoliberal technocrats. There was a profound political asymmetry between organized social groups, which expected a significant adverse impact from neoliberal policies, and the diffuse mass public who, as consumers and workers, would benefit from lower prices, better products, and higher wages if they occurred, as Erhard promised that they would. The initial support of these policies was weak because the promised benefits were speculative and diffuse, while opposition from organized groups was strong. Each social interest had something to be furious about. Contrary to the wishes of the labor movement, workplace and investment authority were retained in the hands of employers. Contrary to the wishes of employers, industry could expect to face foreign competition under trade liberalization, and it would need to invest in physical and human capital or redeploy resources to gain competitive advantages in foreign trade.

In the face of these challenges, Erhard and the central bank labored relentlessly to redefine the ideational framework of public

policy during the first decade of the Federal Republic. Erhard repeatedly argued in terms that transcended special interests by appealing to the interests of all consumers—promising the benefits of stable or decreasing retail prices due to higher productivity, the lifting of import restrictions, and antitrust to keep a lid on retail prices (Erhard 1958). He also cultivated the support of unions by emphasizing the positive impact of trade liberalization on workers' real buying power, as opposed to their nominal wages. The central bank backed these arguments with data showing increases in purchasing power in constant prices rather than gross wage levels.⁶ The bank's independence from the government, as testified by famous incidents in which it raised interest rates despite Adenauer's opposition, gained it a reputation for being above politics, as well as at least passive agreement with its view that wages should rise only in line with gains in productivity.⁷

This ideational framing came as a crucial support to the restructuring of industrial relations. In 1952, in response to a long-standing union demand for codetermination of industry, the government sponsored a law mandating “works councils” in all companies with twenty or more employees, and the placement of employee representatives on each firm's supervisory board. However, the councils were to be elected by each firm's workforce, not appointed by unions, and their mandate was responsibility “for the welfare of the company” rather than responsiveness to national political agendas. In reaction to the law, the national labour confederation, DGB, took two initiatives. First, it filed its own lists of members in local factory elections, and these candidates went on to win over 80 percent of council seats across the country. Still, these representatives tended to be more sensitive to shop-floor considerations than political militancy, which eventually skewed national leadership towards the “realist” wing of the movement (against the “activists”). The DGB also made a push for wage negotiations to be held nationally, a move that was received positively by employers with a history of associative life (often bordering on cartelization). This was indeed a “settlement” of a sort between social groups—an alignment of their interests consciously embraced by both sides—but it would not have happened without the push given to it by the state. Combined, the two measures brought the federation to shift its worldview towards that of cooperative trade unionism, sensitive to the social-market themes of productivity-linked wage increases and trade-led production growth (Thelen 1991; Markovits 1986).

This exoskeleton of Germany's non-inflationary industrial relations was at first seen by scholars as the basis of the restoration of capitalism, and later as the main pillar of the European social-democratic settlement. Yet it is too simplistic to see it as an agreement of opposed interest groups or classes. Rather, it was a process by which the state tamed the radical wing of the labor movement. This culminated in the endorsement of the social-market program by the Social-Democratic Party in its 1959 Bad Godesberg congress, and by the DGB in its 1962 Dusseldorf congress.

5 Bank Deutscher Länder. Monthly Reports, 1948. <https://www.bundesbank.de/action/en/885720/bbksearch?tf=815144%3A252584%7C%7C>.

6 See <https://www.bundesbank.de/resource/blob/704476/e8f9d431cd9a53d673525bc42306903c/mL/1952-01-02-monthly-report-data.pdf>

7 Two weeks after winning an interest-rate policy battle against Adenauer, BdL president Wilhelm Vocke featured on the cover of *Der Spiegel* as “Kanzler der Deutschen Mark” (*Der Spiegel* 1956, 23).

The New French State, Much Like the New German State

Across the Rhine, the leader of the postwar national unity government, General Charles de Gaulle, viewed constitutional reform as the necessary first step toward a French renaissance. For him, the France that had collapsed in the face of the Nazis, and had all too easily morphed into the Vichy dictatorship, was analogous to the Weimar Republic and 1920s pre-fascist Italy, where popular disaffection toward institutions left the people open to authoritarian adventures. To the general, then, anchoring democracy with a powerful executive president was the absolute priority (de Gaulle [1954-59] 2000).

However, there was no occupying army to impose a new constitution on France, and De Gaulle's constitutional ideas were rejected. The 1946 constituent assembly only lightly reformed prewar institutions, creating a Fourth Republic without a strong executive branch. This left unstable governments at the mercy of an all-powerful but fragmented parliament. Only in 1958 did De Gaulle get his way when, under the threat of a coup d'état from military units fighting the colonial war in Algeria, parliament granted him extraordinary powers. De Gaulle then had a new constitution drafted and ratified by referendum before being elected president of the new Fifth Republic.⁸

Perhaps due to the ten-year gap between them, the new constitutions and policy agendas of postwar Germany and the Fifth Republic are seldom looked at side by side. Yet both countries underwent a radical reform of democracy for which state autonomy was the necessary precondition. Like the German Basic Law, the constitution of the Fifth Republic was drafted by a committee behind closed doors and ratified ex post (in this case, by referendum). Both constitutions established the superiority of the executive power over parliament, shifting the terrain of democratic control from the election of legislators to the direct popular legitimation of the head of government. The two constitutions also centralized decision-making, with French presidentialism running along similar lines to German *Kanzlerdemokratie*. New rules made it more difficult for either country's parliament to cashier the cabinet, which prevented a return to the revolving-door follies of the Weimar and Fourth Republic governments. Both constitutions also empowered the president or chancellor to dissolve parliament (and threaten to do so to discipline MPs), a power also enjoyed by the British prime minister. In a highly consequential institutional import from the United States, Germany and France both introduced constitutional courts that curtail parliament's freedom to legislate. As a result, the idea of judicial review was placed on the agenda of Europe-wide governance. German and French courts laid the ground for the emergence and development of supranational courts such as the Court of Justice of the European Coal and Steel Communities, the ancestor of today's Court of Justice of the European Union. The implementation of the international treaties establishing the Common Market, and then the Single Market, also relied heavily on the courts.

The French Technocracy

The centralization of French political power in the executive allowed the adoption of economic policy initiatives that were similar to those undertaken in Germany, including price and trade liberalizations that were designed by a secret committee and enacted by a cabinet enjoying constitutional autonomy. The de facto leader of the French committee was Jacques Rueff, a neoliberal upper civil servant who was a consistent critic of the inflationary policies of the Fourth Republic, and whose public stance and authority echoed that of Röpke in Germany. The reform package included implementation of the Common Market trade liberalization (during the 1950s, France had repeatedly ditched such commitments), the liberalization of retail prices, measures against price and wage indexation on inflation rates, and measures to stop monetary financing of the deficit (Godard 2020, 5.1.2).

Like the ordoliberals, French neoliberals maintained that, after World War I, monetary policy and foreign trade had become objects of a distributional politics that ended in disaster. Their institutional responses converged on expert governance and its entailment: the depoliticization of money and trade by withdrawing them from day-to-day political debate, as these were the two domains best suited to generating political opposition to sound economic policy. Unsurprisingly, De Gaulle had to overrule both his own party and opposition from his nominal business allies to push through the committee's recommendations. France's main employer organizations were both afraid of the competition their members would face from the implementation of the Common Market and the lifting of trade barriers; France's tariffs were the highest in Europe (European Payments Union 1958). Meanwhile unions were opposed to deindexing wages, and powerful farmer associations were fighting deindexing wholesale food prices. Having survived the political opposition of essentially all organized societal interests, however, the reforms created new facts on the ground that everyone had to accommodate.

High-profile figures that took a leading role in defining policy at the time included François Bloch-Lainé, director of the treasury in 1947-1952 and president of the state-owned Caisse des dépôts et consignations in 1952-1967; and Claude Gruson, head of a finance ministry think tank starting in 1949, and director general of the National Statistical Institute INSEE from 1961 to 1967. Unlike the German case, however, their theoretical output was generally ex post, fed by their interpretations of recent experience, rather than by a school of thought such as ordoliberalism. Ideas justifying the productivist policies that would characterize the Fifth Republic, including business consolidation, labor-saving innovations, and the expansion of banking, emerged gradually during the 1960s and very much reflected a consensus that had built up in the upper civil service during the first two postwar decades. The French mandarinate was produced by a handful of *grandes écoles* (from Polytechnique to the École Nationale d'Administration) where teaching was largely provided by senior civil servants, resulting in a thought collective constantly updated by feedback from hands-on technocrats. The path from ideas to policies in postwar France can most often be traced to institutions like the *grandes écoles*, the statistical office, or the plan commission, which served as idea laboratories. Thus, tracing the ideas presiding over 1960s French

⁸ In 1958 the president was elected by parliament and a selection of local elected officials. In a decisive 1962 constitutional reform, popular election was introduced, consolidating the ascendancy of the president over the prime minister.

governance is more difficult than it is with the German social market program of the late 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, we know that the ideas were “there,” as the output was a coherent program of economic modernization that was only retroactively embraced by societal groups.

The Fourth Republic had run up repeatedly against the de facto veto power of the populist bloc, which included a still-enormous farm sector and an oversized class of small shopkeepers and artisans. Their opposition to economic reform had doomed it in 1945. The Banque de France had thereafter supported a narrow “accounting” view of policy to please this petit-bourgeois constituency, whose savings were hoarded in gold-indexed bonds. Later, in reaction to a more inquisitive tax service, the populist movement founded by Pierre Poujade (the owner of a stationery store) was instrumental in blocking the introduction of a value-added tax in 1955, and it emerged as the third force in parliament in the 1956 elections. Under the Fifth Republic, the French government did not fight these right-wing interest groups so much as it subverted them in order to “rationalize” the French economy. The government found allies among young members of the national farmers organization, who assented to the government’s push for farm consolidation in the name of productivity. Assisted by multiform government support, the young farmers eventually took over leadership of the national farmer organization (Tavernier 1962). Similarly, small trade and retail organizations were courted and modernization was encouraged and financed, with obstacles to the expansion and alteration of local shops lifted. Eventually, the value added tax was extended to all transactions without political backlash (Cleary 1989). The French retail sector was restructured rapidly, giving birth to the world’s first hypermarkets. At the same time, the state promoted industrial restructuring through fiscal, credit, and industrial policy. To meet an intensifying demand from the state for the expert leadership of industry, the peak business association of France encouraged a new generation of managers, often educated in the elite public-service schools, to take the reins from large-business owners. In turn, this new group of managers steered the business lobby. This led to a shift from posturing about the sacrosanct rights of private property to a pro-modernization program predicated on a high minimum wage, robust international trade, and business consolidation (Garrigues 2011; Weber 1986).

However, there was no French transformation of industrial relations to parallel the codetermination enacted in West Germany. No Fifth Republic government would allow the Moscow-aligned main French trade union to gain even partial control of the work-

place. In place of anything so institutionally dramatic as codetermination, then, French elites encouraged a cultural commitment to modernization and high technology. The high-profile achievements of French industry from the late 1960s, often disparaged as Concorde-type projects, included a large number of ultimately successful breakthroughs in the aerospace, telecoms, nuclear, and transport sectors (such as the TGV and the Paris metro’s introduction of automated ticketing in 1969), and even a revolution in building construction via the use of reinforced concrete. The restructuring of industries along productivist lines was a state-led initiative that unions and employers embraced. When barriers to imports were lifted, local producers were forced to regroup and upgrade, while foreign sales drove the growth of the consolidating industrial and service leaders. As in Germany, the French “settlement” was figurative at best—a matter of adjusting to a state-imposed outcome (Godard 2020, 5.3).

Reverberations and Lessons

The epochal changes in governance marked by these two episodes profoundly influenced the architecture of later European democracy, technocracy, and capitalism. Grounds were laid for depoliticizing money and trade, with authority ultimately handed off to the technocratic European Commission. The creation of the European high-productivity economy, supported by a globally influential regulatory state with a deep sectorial reach and a judicial arm, would have been inconceivable without the policy and institutional impulses provided by the German and French postwar reforms.

Thus, if we seek to understand the origins of contemporary Europe, we have to understand what motivated those reforms and made their adoption and persistence possible. In this effort, however, we can only be misled by imposing a materialist schema *a priori*, leading us into a fruitless search for a deal between labor and capital that never took place. This search blinds us to the actual sequence of events, to the political status of social interests when the events took place, and to the central importance of autonomous states and state building in precipitating the events. To look in these directions, however, leads us inexorably to the ideas of those states’ personnel.

At least in the case of Europe, then, bringing the state back in seems to require bringing ideas back in; and by doing both, we attain a much more fine-grained, realistic understanding of historical change. ■

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Interpretive Political Science: Philosophy, Methods, Ethics

Mark Bevir

ABSTRACT: *At the heart of an interpretive political science is opposition to social-scientific naturalism. Interpretive political scientists reject the idea that social explanations should model themselves on the natural sciences; they focus, instead, on the peculiarly human aspects of human behavior: the meanings and intentions of human actors and, therefore, the historical contingency of human actions. However, this approach does not require us to reject generally accepted research methods, although it does dramatically change the way we think about methods, encouraging us to learn from the humanities and to blur genres. An interpretive approach also prompts us to remember the ethical implications of the fact that we are studying human agents, not passive objects.*

After each election, the APSA's *PS: Political Science and Politics* publishes a symposium in which political scientists plug the new electoral returns, poll results, and "real factors" (such as GDP growth) into various models that purport to explain past electoral

outcomes and predict future outcomes. The fact that these models often fail, and that those that come close to succeeding in any given election must continually be tweaked at the next election, never seems to cause worries about the entire enterprise of treat-

ing citizens as if they are assembly lines of independent variables that they combine predictably into end products: votes. Yet those of us who are voters, or who know voters personally, will recognize the strangeness of this enterprise. We know from personal experience that voters who care about the economy do so because they *interpret* government as responsible for economic performance. We know from personal experience that in deciding whether to vote against the incumbent for economic malfeasance, people rely upon mediated *interpretations* of how the economy is doing and what its prospects might be under in-party and out-party stewardship. These interpretations can vary across individuals and historical eras. We also know, or can infer, that people sometimes change their minds about who to vote for; we can also infer that people may be reluctant to share with an anonymous pollster their true feelings. All of this can invalidate poll results. Nevertheless, political scientists routinely treat human beings as if they were inhuman machines whose behavior can be predicted or retrodicted without understanding the *reasons* behind the behavior.

In contrast, *interpretive* political scientists suggest that we lose much if we become fixated on quantitative analyses and formal explanations that “rationalize” political behavior rather than observing the historically contingent meanings of *human* behavior that we encounter in our everyday lives. Because interpretive political scientists typically emphasize the complexity of the patterns of belief, meaning, and culture found in everyday practices, they argue that qualitative and ethnographic methods may provide unique advantages in accessing such beliefs and cultural meanings. And they sometimes tie their concern with the rich texture of people’s beliefs and actions to a more compassionate or caring stance toward those very people.

In what follows, I explore the interrelationship of the philosophical, methodological, and ethical claims associated with interpretive political science. Although I will begin by revisiting the philosophical arguments that lead interpretive political scientists to reject “positivism” or, as I will call it, “naturalism,” I will not be trying to say anything particularly new about this philosophy. Instead I will address previously discussed interpretivist arguments (e.g., Bevir 1999; Bevir and Blakely 2018) to political epistemologists, who will, I hope, be receptive to these arguments because of their orientation toward the ideational. The main aim of this paper will be to ask what those philosophical arguments do and do not imply about methods and ethics. I will suggest, first, that interpretive philosophy changes the way we think about methods—the language we use to discuss methods—without requiring us to use or reject any particular method. And, second, interpretive philosophy prompts us to keep in mind that as political scientists, we are studying human agents, not passive objects.

I should note, however, that some interpretive political scientists might object to my assumption that philosophy rather than methodology is the basis of interpretive political science. Instead they might aspire to ground interpretive political science on a commitment to ethnography or qualitative methods more generally. I have little faith in any such ambition. To begin with, I am skeptical about the prospects of providing an intellectually coherent, as opposed to rhetorically effective, account of interpretive political science by beginning with methodology. Surely one must appeal to philosophical arguments to *justify* methodological preferences, so philosophy will inevitably end up being the logical basis of one’s methodological position. In any case, even if one did

somehow manage to make methods themselves into the logical basis of an interpretive political science, that would be a different type of interpretivism than the type I will be discussing, which is grounded in philosophy, not methodology: we might use the same words—“interpretive political science”—but we would mean something different by those words. I do not see how we could debate the respective adequacy of those different things apart from their respective philosophical commitments.

The Philosophical Backdrop to Interpretivism

A long philosophical history lies behind the recent growth of interpretive political science, dating back at least to the philosophical and empirical work of scholars such as Michel Foucault (1991), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1979), Clifford Geertz (1973), Stuart Hall, and Charles Taylor (1971). All of these diverse scholars, like many others in the latter half of the twentieth century, reacted against the behavioral revolution and the broader drift towards formalism and scientism that had come to dominate research in the social sciences. Although political scientists looked to history for *data*, these scholars argued that the *explanations* of data, too, had to be cultural and historical, rather than appealing to formal models, mechanisms, and the like. These scholars wanted the study of human life and society to be sensitive to meanings, culture, and history.

Some of these scholars, notably Taylor, described the dominant outlook of social science, with its formal and mechanistic explanations, as “naturalism” (Blakely 2016; Choi 2009). At its most general level, naturalism is a diffuse and influential worldview that imports the concepts, methods, and explanations of the natural sciences into the study of human life. At a more concrete level, naturalists typically rely on formal explanations: rational choice scholars appeal to models of allegedly rational actions; behaviorists appeal to correlations between behavior and allegedly objective categories such as class; and institutionalists appeal to reified laws, rules, and norms. All of these formal explanations downplay the *contingency, particularity, and contestability* of people’s reasoning and agency. It is no exaggeration to say that the very purpose of naturalism is to eliminate contingency and particularity from their work. Achieving this aspiration requires treating the contingent as noise that can only confuse our search for the underlying signal of invariant causal mechanisms and structures. Even when naturalists introduce beliefs, desires, and other intentional states into their models, therefore, they typically treat them as the subjective effects of objective categories such as socioeconomic status, race, or gender; or as structured by reified institutions or norms; or as fixed by an objective rational calculus. All of these approaches sidestep the need to interpret people’s intentionality in attempting to explain their behavior.

As my readers are likely to be political scientists, they will surely recognize my brief description of naturalism. If they are not political scientists, they might need a more detailed description. In ordinary life, we treat people as agents who do things for reasons—agents whose reasons loosely fit together, agents who can change their minds and challenge given norms. We also treat people’s motivations as complex and possibly opaque even to themselves, not as stemming from a predictably rational calculus, let alone one that is reducible to self-interest. Thus, the philosophi-

cal assumptions of naturalist political science fly in the face of our everyday understanding of each other's behavior. Naturalism, in other words, is not a matter of common sense.

It is worth specifying just how devastating this claim is to naturalism. In our daily lives, we think and act in ways that *commit us* to belief in an anti-naturalist ontology. Even those of us who then go to offices in a social science department where we adopt naturalism as a stylized scholarly language for professional purposes continue to act, outside the office, in ways that show that we do not properly believe in naturalism. Everyone lives their daily lives in violation of naturalism. It is not surprising, then, that naturalist social sciences, in contrast to the natural sciences, have failed to prove themselves by transforming our lives through successful discoveries and practical innovations upon which we now rely. Naturalism's dominance in political science looks suspiciously like it is a matter of historical contingency and perhaps even ideology: the ideology of scientism, which has a powerful hold in modern societies.

When interpretivists reject naturalism, they are trying to reassert a language that all of us actually believe in, for all of us act on it in our daily lives. Thus, the interpretivist philosophers I mentioned earlier treat social reality as a historically contingent text, that is, as a thick web of historical and cultural meanings. This leads many of them to argue that our daily-life concepts of intentionality and action require us to distinguish the social sciences from the natural sciences. When I defend interpretivism, I will rely mainly on my preferred arguments, that is, on an anti-naturalist historicism and humanism that contrasts with the formalism and scientism of mainstream political science. This anti-naturalism treats actions as meaningful and meanings as holistic. Because meanings or beliefs are holistic, their analysis requires something like a hermeneutic circle: individual beliefs are only decipherable within wider social or intersubjective webs of meanings. Thus, satisfactory explanations must have two features. First, they must pass through an account of the beliefs or meanings of the relevant actors. They cannot let intentionality drop out of their story. Second, they must place these beliefs or meanings in wider webs, including their historical and cultural contexts. They cannot atomize meanings or beliefs, let alone reduce them to reified norms or a formal calculus of rationality.

On offer, therefore, are two contrasting approaches to political science. One is naturalist, formal, and broadly institutional. The other is anti-naturalist, interpretive, and broadly historicist. Naturalists seek stable and formal concepts, categories, and typologies. They operationalize these in the form of comparisons, correlations, and models. Frequently they themselves, or people influenced by them, translate these results into putatively scientific pronouncements about issues of public policy. Anti-naturalists seek to recover actors' intentionality. They try to understand beliefs and desires by locating them in webs of belief, intellectual traditions, and cultural contexts. Sometimes they draw on their understanding to engage policymakers and citizens in dialogue.

Positivism and Naturalism

It is important to stress that this contrast is not in any straightforward sense that between positivism and its opposite, let alone that between quantitative and qualitative methods. On the contrary, naturalism has become so dominant that many political scientists

adopt it even when they think they are opposing both positivist theory and quantitative methods.

I will illustrate the contrast between interpretivism and naturalism, therefore, by reference to an institutionalist and mixed-methods scholar, B. Guy Peters. Peters argues that using "governance" as a theoretical concept can bring focus to political science by highlighting the role that "states" play in governance by "steering" and "rowing" society (Peters 2011, 2). He claims that if the literature on governance is to make a meaningful contribution to political science, it needs to coalesce around concepts, categories, and typologies that re-center the role of the state in governing. Re-centering is necessary, in his view, if we are to build a theory that can be mobilized in the study of comparative politics and public policy.

Thus far, Peters seems to be presupposing a naturalist view of political science. He automatically associates theory with formal explanations based on stable concepts that can be operationalized at least within mid-level correlations and classifications. Indeed, he implies that theories and concepts can be useful only if they are centered, that is, defined by something like an essence that applies across cases. Thus, he dismisses anti-essentialist concepts and historicist analyses that foreground the diversity and contingency of political phenomena.

Political scientists should not feel obliged to defend philosophical arguments every time they write something. Nonetheless, it is noticeable just how easy it is for naturalists to take their position for granted and ignore its costs. Peters, for example, defends his institutionalist approach by contending that we should be able to apply any theory of governance "in a wide range of settings" to explain political phenomena (ibid., 5). Reified concepts, typologies, and the like seem to be justified because he takes for granted a naturalist version of theory. The assumption of naturalism means there is no felt need to address the fact that if we define concepts to make them cover a range of settings, we almost necessarily make them less concrete, less applicable to any individual case, less tied to the beliefs of the actors, less congruent with everyday action.

Peters puts institutions, structures, and mechanisms at the heart of political science. He believes that "governance begins with structures and processes rather than the individuals within them" (ibid., 7). In this view, institutions exist over time in a way that transcends the intentionality and actions of individuals. Yet—like most institutionalists—Peters is skeptical of positivist general theories and, to some extent, of an over-reliance on quantitative methods. Instead, he favors mid-level theories that stand somewhere between the general theories once favored by behavioralists and the micro-level assumptions of rational-choice scholars. Mid-level theories explain behavior with reference to institutions and historically contingent structures, not individuals and not universal laws. In reality, of course, structures and institutions are not supra-individual entities with a real existence located between particular individuals and universal laws. Yet Peters treats institutions and structures as if they were real by defining them as if they had core properties such as fixed norms that explain their particularity and their various effects. Far from institutions and structures being patterns of behavior that stem from the contingent and open-ended actions of many individual actors, Peters reduces actors' beliefs, values, and behavior to the allegedly core properties of institutions. He thereby both reifies institutions and structures and effaces the intentionality of individuals, by reducing the latter

to products of institutions and structures.

Like many institutionalists, Peters is aware that his neglect of intentional behavior is problematic. However, this concern stems not from reflection on the paradox of academic work that contradicts the philosophical assumptions we make in our everyday lives, but from the academic challenge posed by the formal theory of rational choice, which differs from institutionalism primarily by replacing contingent intentionality with a universalistic rationality rather than reified structures. Because Peters acknowledges that “structural definitions do tend to provide relatively little place for agency in processes of governance,” he suggests that “developing governance theory therefore requires developing means of bringing together individual level behavior with structures and institutions” (*ibid.*, 8).

Peters struggles to respond to the challenge of rational choice theory precisely because of his unquestioning commitment to naturalism. He assumes that theory should rest on “valid and reliable measures” that “travel well,” promoting formal and ahistorical generalizations (*ibid.*, 9). Consequently, when Peters considers micro-level explanations, he presupposes that they must either be formal and ahistorical, like rational-choice theory, or compatible with institutionalist reification. However, rational-choice theorists have always accepted that rational actions can result in stable institutions. When Peters senses that this is inadequate, his non-contingent, non-interpretivist alternative reifies institutions but fails to ground them in non-rationalist micro-foundations.

Institutionalists’ commitment to naturalism requires them to reify concepts that they treat as conferring predictability on human behavior. To sustain formal explanations of (individual) behavior, they postulate essences that appear in all institutions of a certain type and that explain other features and effects of those institutions. They reify institutions so that they can treat them as causes operating independently of the actors’ beliefs, or else as causes of those beliefs. Thus, despite institutionalists’ opposition to positivism, as exemplified in their interest in history (institutional development, path dependency, and critical junctures), they elide the contingency and diversity of intentional actions that lie at the root of historical change.

Surely, however, as anti-naturalists would insist, institutions are not natural kinds. They do not have fixed boundaries, let alone core properties. They have no essences that have the power to determine the political actions of individuals in a predictable, non-contingent manner. On the contrary, institutions are changeable and contestable practices that consist solely of contingent individual actions. Politics is cultural practice: it is a practice because it is contingent activity; and it is a cultural practice because this activity is meaningful. The study of politics is, therefore, interpretive; it involves relating people’s actions to their intentionality and their intentionality to their cultural and historical inheritances.

Peters might object that an interpretive political science can provide only “incoherent and excessively open” theories (*ibid.*, 4). In a sense, of course, he would be right. Although our interpretations can deploy broad abstract concepts to capture wide-ranging patterns of belief and action, they are neither predictive *ex ante* nor universal *ex post*. The broader they get, however, the more we risk forcing heterogeneous beliefs and actions under monolithic concepts. We should be aware of the costs and benefits of abstracting, in this way, from everyday action.

I have been at pains to characterize interpretive political sci-

ence as arising from an anti-naturalist philosophy. Interpretive political science is inherently hermeneutic: it explains actions by reference to the meanings embedded within them, it explains these meanings by putting them together as larger webs, and it explains these webs by tracing their contingent histories. Naturalist social sciences attempt to tame this hermeneutic investigation by reducing meanings to formal patterns, models, variables, or rules. Even social constructivists often acknowledge the historical construction of a set of meanings—only then to treat that set as a formal pattern that explains contemporary phenomena (e.g., Wendt 1992).

Peters’s arguments could certainly come from a scholar who is committed to qualitative and even exclusively ethnographic methods. However, given that interpretive political science rests on anti-naturalist philosophy, we cannot treat it as equivalent to a commitment to qualitative methods. In addition, my philosophical characterization of interpretive political science suggests that there is more sympathy for it among mainstream empirical researchers than one might suspect. Consider Peters’ arguments again. Peters does not really deny that people are agents who act for reasons embedded in historical webs of meanings. He might accept the anti-naturalist ontology of our everyday language; after all, presumably he, like the rest of us, constantly acts in ways that implicitly commit him to a belief in that ontology. Nonetheless, he clearly believes that if we are to develop good and useful knowledge, we need to make various simplifying assumptions that take us away from this everyday language and towards stylized naturalisms.

Recently, other political scientists have made similar arguments—for example, by describing rational-choice models as mere heuristics or by arguing for an “as-if” institutionalism (Hay 2014). They defend naturalist studies not because they are true but because they are allegedly integral to a useful social science. Clearly, the relevant debate here is not straightforwardly ontological; rather, it is about ethics and the nature of useful knowledge.

The Red Herring of Methods

In this section, I look at the methodological commitments that follow from anti-naturalism. In the next section, I turn to ethics and the nature of useful knowledge.

I have already suggested that we should be dubious of any attempt to reduce debates about interpretive political science to questions about methods. Even if interpretivists are more likely to use ethnography and textual analysis than statistics or field experiments, there is no straightforward correspondence between naturalism and one set of methods or between anti-naturalism and another set of methods.

Most so-called methods are just techniques for gathering data or analyzing patterns within data. A regression, like an interview or participant observation, is a way to figure out how people behave or what they believe. Anti-naturalists have no obvious reason to challenge any widely accepted method. Unless the researcher misunderstands or misapplies the method, an interviewer will report the answers given by real people, an ethnographer will report the behaviour seen, and a statistician will report mathematical relationships among the answers or behaviors of different people, and all of this information might be useful in interpreting their answers or behavior.

Legitimate questions do arise about *how* to interpret the data gathered by these different methods. For example, whereas naturalists imply that we can use statistical patterns to assert causal relationships, anti-naturalists are likely to argue that any viable causal explanation must unpack these patterns so as to relate people's actions to their reasons for action, and thus to their webs of belief and traditions. Certainly, I regret the dominance of quantitative methods because they are so often disconnected from humanist and historicist explanations.

However, because I do not question the validity of quantitative methods as ways of getting data and finding patterns within data, I also regret the division of political science into professional camps based on methodological preferences, and I would include mixed methods as just one more such camp. All too often, political scientists across these various camps view the key issues in political science as if they were methodological, not philosophical. In this view, if you get your methods right, the truth will follow. I would suggest that an anti-naturalist characterization of interpretive political science corrects this view. Interpretivism is a set of philosophical claims about the nature of meaning, action, and political life. It derives from a particular philosophical standpoint, not from canonizing a particular way of doing research. Debates about methods are often a distraction from the core philosophical issues that actually define approaches to political science. The well-intentioned effort to defend qualitative methods against quantitative methods might ironically stall the rise of interpretive political science.

Political scientists ought to be debating philosophy more than method. This view challenges the fashionable stress on methods by so many political scientists. Even many interpretive political scientists either define interpretivism in methodological terms or argue that an interpretivist philosophy requires us to adopt some methods while rejecting others (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Schwartz-Shea 2019).

I do accept that some methods are better suited than others to recovering webs of belief. For example, in-depth interviews are a better way to explore the connections in someone's web of beliefs than are mass surveys. Textual analysis is a better way of recovering the historical connections between peoples' ideas than are studies of formal institutions. It is unsurprising, therefore, that interpretivism is more common among qualitative political scientists than among quantitative researchers or formal modelers.

Nonetheless, I want again to stress that no method is inherently either interpretive or naturalistic. Different philosophical analyses of causation and explanation neither require nor exclude the use of specific methods to collect data or to analyze patterns in data. Methods are largely neutral tools for getting data and finding patterns in data. There are, of course, debates about the formal validity and correct application of all methods. For example, political scientists can ask if a method has been properly applied, and they can use other methods to get more data or to reveal more patterns. However, once we grant that a method is formally valid and correctly applied, then neither naturalists nor interpretivists have any reason to deny the validity of the data and patterns the other camp finds. If participant observation shows that cabinet ministers habitually adopt certain practices, then naturalists have no reason to doubt it. Likewise, if a mass survey shows that 10 percent of San Francisco residents prefer winter to summer, anti-naturalists have no reason to doubt the survey data in themselves, nor to reject the

supposition that 10 percent of all San Franciscans (not just those surveyed) prefer winter to summer. Naturalists and interpretivists would benefit from paying closer attention to one another's data, but even if they do not find one another's data at all interesting, they have no reason to deny its factual adequacy.

Interpretivists and naturalists alike can make careful use of diverse methods. For example, they can use survey data to identify people's shared attitudes and beliefs or even to postulate links between their beliefs. Where interpretivists differ from naturalists is in the types of explanation they provide for such data and patterns. Interpretivists recognize that our everyday ontology is at odds with appeals to law-like generalizations and causal mechanisms.

Worryingly, however, political scientists tend to be insufficiently aware of this distinction between methodology and philosophy. They receive methodological training in a philosophical vacuum. They then confuse the patterns they find in the data with explanations of the data. They leap unreflectively from finding formal patterns to offering formal explanations. As a result, once political scientists are trained in quantitative methods, they all too often carve up social reality into reified chunks for which they offer naturalistic explanations.

Ironically, the fixation on methods by some *interpretivists* reflects, in part, the cultural influence of naturalism. Political scientists of all kinds have an implicitly naturalistic faith that methods can secure the jump from data to explanation. Mainstream empiricists assume that observational or (in recent years) experimental statistics prove causal relationships. Interpretivists sometimes turn to non-statistical methods to save us from the standard type of naturalism, but they, too, have faith that the right method, such as ethnography, by providing purer or thicker data, will validate their interpretations. However, once we accept that there is an ineradicable gap between data and explanation, we can move beyond the obsession with methods. We can say that methods generate data and that philosophy tells us what kinds of explanations to offer of that data.

An unhelpful obsession with methods dominates political science. When interpretivists define their approach in methodological terms, they reinforce this obsession and unnecessarily marginalize themselves. Naturalists might even feel emboldened by the idea that interpretivists want to turn all research into small-scale ethnography and open-ended interviewing. They might say, rightly, that we can answer some factual questions only by using quantitative methods. If interpretivists present themselves as committed exclusively to qualitative methods, they imply they cannot answer such basic questions as: "What percentage of Leave voters in the Brexit referendum had previously voted for the Labour Party?" "What percentage of congressional candidates are women, and how does that number compare with the percentage of members of Congress who are women?" There is no reason to be averse to asking such questions, or to answering them in the only way they can be answered: quantitatively.

If my characterization of interpretivism gives us no reason to reject any accepted method, it nonetheless speaks forcefully to the kinds of explanations political scientists offer. The key lesson of anti-naturalism is that political scientists should look less to causal inferences that supposedly uncover laws or mechanisms and more to people reasoning in historical contexts. Interpretivism thus entails a cultural and historical focus that ties political science more closely to the humanities than to the natural sciences. Interpretiv-

ism thereby opens a vast space for inventive and imaginative uses of what we might call “genres” rather than “methods.” The humanities offer a plethora of strategies for exploring and reporting on people’s actions, reasons, and beliefs, and for locating them in their cultural and historical contexts. These strategies do not purport to close the ineradicable gap between data and explanation. Rather, they provide researchers with ways of engaging the world, ways of getting, checking, and revising information, and ways of presenting, explaining, and narrating that information.

One strategy for bringing genres from the humanities into political science would be to describe them using the language that currently dominates methodological debates. For example, interpretivists could describe ethnography as a way of gathering data, they could describe hunches and insights as hypotheses, and they could describe historical contextualization as a form of explanation. They might even present resemblances and patterns as more or less the same as correlations. I have a lot of sympathy for this strategy, having myself written about the explanatory nature of narratives (Bevir 1999, 221-64). Nonetheless, I increasingly worry that this strategy does not capture fully the implications of the recognition, among philosophers, that there are no theory-free facts (e.g., Kuhn 1970; Rorty 1979; Wittgenstein 1974). If we describe humanities methods using the dominant language, we risk making those methods seem like pale imitators of the apparently more rigorous methods that that language seems to privilege.

Perhaps, therefore, interpretivists might start to adopt an alternative strategy. Instead of describing methods from the humanities in scientific-empiricist language, they might promote an alternative methodological language that highlights the contingency of knowledge, the gap between facts and theories, and the benefits of genres taken from the humanities. Table 1 provides some examples of such alternative language, juxtaposing the familiar methodological concepts of political science with anti-naturalist alternatives.

Table 1: An Alternative Language for Methods

NATURALIST CONCEPT	ANTI-NATURALIST ALTERNATIVE
methods	toolkit
researchers	bricoleurs
hypothesis	plausible conjecture
data	evidence
correlation	pattern/theme
explanation	thick description
theory	narrative

As the table suggests, once we reject a naïve positivist belief in pure facts, we need to be much more modest in our claims about what “methods” can do for us. Methods simply cannot establish uncontested truths. We have a toolkit, and we pick whatever tools seem to us to work best in any specific case. We are bricoleurs who employ this toolkit, leaping over disciplinary boundaries to create a work of imagination. We set out with plausible conjectures that we refashion as our toolkit provides more information and our imagination shapes it (Boudon 1993). This process is an iterative, open-ended, and evolving one of puzzling without having a clear destination. The puzzle changes as we seek to resolve the surprises

uncovered by our empirical investigations. Such puzzling uncovers new insights, forcing us to challenge the familiar. We bring these insights together in, for example, thick descriptions, that is, our interpretations of other people’s interpretations of their worlds (Geertz 1973). We seek to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves.

It is important to add that the stories we thereby tell—the thick descriptions we offer—are not simply idiographic. We can always highlight how our stories speak to overarching phenomena. Similarly, the stories we tell are not simply subjective. Apart from anything else, we can review them with the original actors and against other sources to seek a fusion of horizons. We can always make another round of plausible conjectures that speak to broader social and political phenomena. Finally, because this whole process necessarily involves imagination, we can explore different genres by which to recount or present our conjectures, evidence, patterns, insights, and stories. Here political scientists might draw on the humanities not only to expand their methodological tools but also their modes of presentation. Political scientists might present their research as if it is, for example, a fantasy, a parable, or a drama (Geertz 1983, 19-20). They might take inspiration from playful literary examples, such as Jorge Luis Borges’ presentation of baroque fantasy as deadpan empirical observation, or Carlos Castenada’s presentation of parable as ethnography.

My alternative methodological language leads political scientists away from a naturalist and lukewarm positivism towards an anti-naturalist interpretivism. It stresses the recovery of meaning and it blurs genres. Clifford Geertz (1983, 21) made a similar argument in anthropology. He suggested that anthropologists should turn “away from a laws and instances ideal of explanation towards a cases and interpretations one.” In his view, ethnographers discover weaves of meaning. Their “thick descriptions” are often microscopic interpretations of the flow of social discourse. The task of the anthropologist is to set down the meanings that actions have for social actors and then say what these thick descriptions tell us about the society in which they are found. Geertz also suggests that this task benefits from genre mixing. He suggests that anthropologists might draw on “analogies drawn from the humanities” within which “society is less and less represented as an elaborate machine or quasi-organism and more as a serious game, a sidewalk drama, or a behavioural text.” I see no reason not to apply the same advice to political science.

Is Naturalism a Mere Heuristic?

Let me turn now to the second debate that arises from my characterization of interpretive political science. Many political scientists might well accept both anti-naturalist philosophy and methodological pluralism (although, sadly, few of them seem to want to learn from the humanities and blur genres). These political scientists are, in other words, more or less willing to accept interpretivism as I have characterized it. Nonetheless, when they undertake research, they try to operationalize, essentialize, or at least stabilize their concepts in order to adopt naturalist forms of explanation.

Earlier I suggested that Peters might be an example of someone who accepts anti-naturalistic philosophy but pursues naturalistic political science. My hunch is that the majority of institutionalists, constructivists, and perhaps even behaviorists and

rational-choice theorists adopt naturalism as a research strategy rather than a serious philosophy. Although we could say that they are being inconsistent in using this strategy rather than the strategies they use in everyday life, I think that would be an uncharitable judgment. My guess is that they would justify the move from everyday anti-naturalism to naturalist research practices not by contending that naturalist research actually produces knowledge of the truth, but by arguing that it produces *useful heuristics* for the truth that are accurate enough to enable decision makers to do good in the world.

However, this line of response to anti-naturalist critique would beg important questions. For a start, naturalists would surely need to define what they mean by “useful” and to explain why their “knowledge” is useful. I am unaware of any attempt by any naturalist political scientist to specify what counts as a useful heuristic or to explain why their models or other formal simplifications provide better heuristics than, for example, reading Shakespeare. Naturalists would need to explain why their preferred simplifications are more likely than any other heuristic to generate good ideas and give us insights into particular cases. In addition, they would need to explain why whatever they take to be useful knowledge is good.

If they were still to claim that naturalism is true, they would suggest that it has an intrinsic value, for truth is in some sense the goal of inquiry. In contrast, if they are claiming that their formal simplifications are merely useful, they would need to explain why we should value the uses they serve. After all, ideas can be useful to some people without being good, as, for example, guns might be useful to murderers without it being good that murderers should have guns. There are, therefore, huge gaps in the argument that naturalism generates useful knowledge.

Despite these problems with the “heuristic” reply to anti-naturalism, I think that interpretivists ought to welcome the distance that it would put between political science and naturalism. We also should agree, hypothetically, that naturalist scholarship sometimes may prove to be useful while emphasizing the advantages of expanding our concepts of “useful” and “good” so as to give far more scope to historicist and humanist alternatives.

There is no *a priori* reason to assume that the formal simplifications associated with naturalism can never lead to useful knowledge. As long as political scientists accept that formal models, correlations, and institutional analyses are simplifications based on stylized assumptions, we might allow that they can serve as heuristics that might sometimes enable us better to think creatively about the world. Although a neoclassical analysis of inflation, a statistical analysis of voting patterns, or an ideal type of bureaucracy do not offer the kinds of causal explanations or general laws that naturalists sometimes suggest they do, they all can provide us with tools with which to think about politics.

To say that naturalist research can lead to useful knowledge is, however, very different from saying either that naturalist research has no downsides or that only naturalist research can lead to useful knowledge.

The downsides of naturalist simplifications often come precisely from the fact that they brush aside the creativity and historicity of reasoning and intentionality (Bevir and Blakely 2018; Frazer 2020). One such downside is that policymakers treat formal simplifications as if they were true, not merely heuristically valuable. Thus, policymakers often pay insufficient attention to the ways in which the consequences of a policy are likely to differ

from those suggested by formal simplifications. They take formal simplifications to be more reliable than they are, leading them to cycle from one over-hyped naturalist theory to another, constantly trying to solve the failings of policies based on earlier theories, constantly searching for a panacea that does not exist. One such cycle of policy failure is the stumbling from one public-sector management formula to another, from the new public management to contracting out to joined-up governance to nudge technologies to resilience, and so on. Each reform comes in on a wave of scholarly and political enthusiasm, each one fails to have the promised effects, and each one thereby opens the door to the next one.

Interpretivists can argue that their knowledge is at least as useful as the naturalist simplifications that perpetuate such cycles of policy failure. Interpretivism emphasizes that all forms of organization are products of the contingent actions of the various participants, so there can be no simple set of tools for managing governance: as governance is constructed differently, contingently, and continuously, there can be no toolkit for managing it. Interpretivism thus shifts attention from techniques and strategies of management toward the possibility of learning by telling stories and listening to them. Although statistics, models, and claims to expertise all have a place within stories, policymakers should not be too preoccupied with them. On the contrary, “experts” are actually the authors of narratives or guesses about how people have acted or will react, given their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigor or expertise policymakers bring to a problem, all they can do is tell a story that imagines what the future might bring.

Interpretivism reminds us that the fate of policies depends on the ways in which civil servants and citizens understand them and respond to them from within all sorts of traditions. Even if policymakers kept this firmly in mind, they still would not be able to predict the consequences of their policies. Nonetheless, they might forestall some of the unintended consequences of their policies, or at least be better prepared for such unintended consequences. Policymakers might recognize that their task involves understanding and responding to the beliefs, traditions, and practices of the people they hope to influence (Friedman 2020).

Ethical Implications of Interpretivist Naturalism

Another downside to naturalist simplifications is less about how “useful” they are than how “good” they are. The spread of naturalist ideas has real moral costs. Naturalism encourages us to think and talk about people as if they were objects rather than agents. Even if naturalism sometimes can help to inspire policies that improve society, we have to balance its good effects against the moral costs of its elision of people’s agency. How one balances these things will vary with one’s ethical values.

Although I do not want to argue for a particular ethic, I do want to suggest that the costs of eliding agency should particularly trouble political scientists who value democracy, participation, and deliberation. Deliberative democratic theory provides a good site at which to explore the moral costs of naturalism. On the one hand, although interpretivism does not entail any particular ethic, its focus on agency and its critique of expertise fit well with deliberative theory. Its humanism suggests that people can, and so perhaps should, make laws and policies through collective processes

of reasoning. On the other hand, however, it provides a challenge to any “empirical turn” that attempts to study deliberation in naturalist terms (Ansari, Bevir, and Chan, forthcoming).

Although deliberative theory remains a site of debate, almost all deliberative theories broadly privilege democratic legitimacy insofar as it arises from deliberation. The concept of deliberation typically refers to communicative interactions characterized by specific features. For a start, participants try to persuade one another by reasons rather than by strategic, manipulative, or coercive action. In addition, the preferences of the participants cannot be set prior to deliberation; rather, these preferences must be capable of being transformed by the deliberation itself. Deliberation requires an exchange of reasons, openness to preference change, and the ability to contribute to a binding decision leading to action.

This concept of legitimacy implies a particular conception of the person who deliberates. The deliberating citizen must have a capacity for creative reasoning and agency. If political legitimacy is to derive from the justifications that citizens offer one another, these justifications must be part of an actual deliberative process carried on by citizens themselves. In this process, the citizens must be capable of reasoning and of responding to one another’s arguments in ways that might lead them to change their beliefs. Further, this deliberative process must have at least the potential to result in unexpected outcomes, that is, outcomes that we could not predict even if we had perfect knowledge of the citizens’ antecedent preferences and bargaining strength.

A deliberative concept of legitimacy also implies a particular view of social explanation. As deliberation is meant to have outcomes, deliberative theory must treat reasons as potential causes of action. Deliberation can properly confer legitimacy on a course of action only if the reasons advanced in the deliberation are in part a cause of the resulting action. Deliberation itself must be part of the “causal story” leading to the political decision. Any explanation of the outcome that is consistent with the perspective of the deliberating parties must include their reasoning about the arguments that prevailed in deliberation. If there were no causal connection between deliberation and the outcome—if the outcome were explained by forces extrinsic to deliberation—then the legitimating effect of the decision would rest on false beliefs about the efficacy of deliberation. If the outcome could be explained without reference to the content of the deliberation, the deliberation would be merely epiphenomenal.

Deliberative democracy implies, then, that we must look to contingent intentional phenomena in order to explain human action. If we attribute deliberative capacity to the citizenry, then we are committed to the idea that nearly all citizens have the capacity for creative reasoning and agency. If we are to conceive of deliberation itself as a key part of the causal process leading to a political outcome, then the exchange of reasons must itself be part of the explanation of the outcome. The core claims of deliberative democracy require us, therefore, to attend with special care to the intentional dimensions of social phenomena. They require that we adopt a view of social explanation that is compatible with treating intentionality as a part of the causal story that explains actions and related outcomes. Deliberation requires citizens to be capable of forming, discussing, revising, and acting upon courses of political action. It entails a concept of the citizen as an intentional actor with a capacity for creative reasoning. It entails the same humanism that characterizes interpretivism. This humanism contrasts

with a naturalism that, as we have seen, bypasses the intentionality of agents in search of things like formal models or statistical regularities.

Therefore, deliberative democrats should worry about the extent to which making an “empirical turn” leads them to adopt naturalist forms of explanation. Much of the recent empirical research on deliberative democracy seems to rely on a naturalism at odds with the concepts of subjectivity, reasoning, and agency that are so integral to its ethical theory (e.g., Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Iaryczower, Shi, and Shum 2018; Parkinson, De Laile, and Franco-Guillén 2020). Even when this empirical research studies people’s beliefs, it typically tries to operationalize these beliefs by detaching them from the wider web of beliefs, and thus the reasoning, of the relevant agent. Furthermore, it often tries to explain deliberative outcomes not as products of people’s creative agency but, rather, by reference to factors such as the institutional setting.

Deliberative democrats might hope to play down this tension between their empirical research and their ethical theory. They might argue that the relevant concepts operate in different spaces, so that as long as political scientists are careful not to conflate these spaces, there is no tension between an anti-naturalist ethics and a naturalist social science. This argument would replicate the more general suggestion that naturalist simplifications are justifiable by reference to their usefulness in generating heuristics rather than by their truth. Here the argument would be that the deliberative ethic captures our actual agency and creativity, but that, for the purposes of generating heuristic knowledge of how deliberation works in reality, it can be useful to ignore such agency and creativity.

As I have already indicated, interpretivists should not dismiss this kind of argument out of hand. Stylized simplifications surely do have a role to play. Nonetheless, deliberative democrats cannot elide the tension between their ethic and naturalist inquiries quite so easily. The problem they face is that their ethic requires that participants in deliberative processes treat one another as agents. It is important to them that participants respect one another’s reasoning and agency. Yet by adopting a naturalist stance, they stop treating the participants in deliberative processes as agents. They may think there are strategic gains to their doing so, but they have to recognize that they are thereby undermining the very ideas and culture that they hope to foster. At best, they face an awkward tradeoff. At worst, they are engaging in the kind of strategic moves they think should have little or no place within deliberative practices. ■



In this paper, I have tried to provide a coherent characterization of interpretive political science. Although my starting point is a commitment to anti-naturalism, I have tried to characterize anti-naturalism broadly so that it covers most of what generally goes under the label of interpretive political science.

Anti-naturalism is, in this context, merely a rejection of the attempt to model all social explanations on the kind of causal analysis that prevails in the natural sciences. It insists, first, that we explain human actions in terms of the conscious or unconscious reasons we ascribe to the actors, and that we treat these reasons as interconnected webs arising in particular historical contexts. It insists, second, that the task of recovering reasons, languages, and cultures is inevitably hermeneutic precisely because it requires us

to locate particular beliefs, ideas, and meanings within larger webs or wholes. My purpose in this paper is, however, less to argue for this anti-naturalist philosophy than to use it as a reference point by which to rethink the relationship of interpretivism to methodological and ethical debates.

One of the key conclusions of such a rethinking is that approaches and methods are different. Approaches to political science embed philosophical assumptions about human reason, action, and practice, and so about the nature of valid social explanations. Methods, in contrast, are instrumental tools for generating data and finding patterns among data. Because different philosophical approaches favor different forms of explanation, they might reasonably lead researchers to privilege different kinds of data and thus different methods. Nonetheless, there is no reason why proponents of any particular philosophical approach to the interpretation of human behavior should reject the data generated by any method, although they might question the relevance of a method to a particular topic or the way in which proponents of a method interpret the data it generates. Interpretivism should not be identified, therefore, with qualitative or ethnographic methods. Interpretivism leads, rather, to methodological pluralism and, more controversially, to a conscious attempt to learn from the hu-

manities and to blur genres.

Another of my key points was that political scientists could make other approaches compatible with anti-naturalism by presenting their formal simplifications as pragmatically useful rather than philosophically defensible. This response illustrates the fact that debates between rival social-scientific approaches are often ethical rather than ontological; they are about the nature of useful and good knowledge more than the nature of human action. In this context, interpretivism offers a dual challenge to naturalist simplifications. First, interpretivism undercuts naturalist claims to expertise by suggesting that stylized simplifications might be as unhelpful as they are “useful.” Interpretivism implies that a policy based on stylized simplifications will be effective only insofar as the targets of the policy happen to adopt the beliefs and desires ascribed to them by the experts. A more adequate policy is thus likely to arise from attention to precisely what the stylized simplifications leave out. Second, interpretivism reminds us that people are agents, and that there are moral costs to treating them as if they were objects to be grasped and manipulated using naturalist forms of inquiry. Thus, it encourages us to engage citizens in deliberative democratic processes, the coproduction of knowledge, and collaborative governance.

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Call for Proposed Papers: *Political Epistemology*

Ideas for essays, dialogue/discussion/debates, and other contributions for the next issue of the *Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics* publication should be sent to clark@susqu.edu.

Call for Nominations: Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Best Book Award

This award recognizes the best recent book on empirical or normative aspects of the causal role of ideas or knowledge claims in politics or government. The committee is authorized to go back several years, at its discretion, and to make its own nominations as well as accepting nominations from others, including book authors. Nominated books published in 2022 or previous years should be sent to committee members with a note or email message specifying that the book is being nominated. If only one copy of the book is available, please communicate this to the chair of the committee. Authors are urged to follow up with publishers to be sure that books have been submitted. Publishers are urged to contact committee members for their current mailing addresses. Deadline for nominations: April 15, 2023. Please find committee members' contact information at the IKP website: <https://www.apsanet.org/section46>

Call for Nominations: Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics Best Paper Award

This award will recognize the APSA conference paper by a graduate student or post-doc, presented at an *Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics* panel at the 2023 annual meetings, that best explores the causal role of ideas or knowledge claims in politics or government. Nominations will be solicited from 2023 IKP panel chairs and discussants. The awards committee reserves the right to make no award.

Deadline for nominations: October 1, 2023.

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Critical Review, now concluding its 35th year of publication, places special emphasis on epistemological and ideational research. In addition to publishing work by leading political theorists (Abizadeh, Bevir, Carens, Elster, Garsten, Kymlicka, Fishkin, Gillespie, Landemore, Lane, Lee, Neuhaus, Ober, Patten, Pettit, Rosen, Shapiro, Smith, Stilz, Taylor, Tuck, Tulis, Waldron, Wedeen, Yack, et al.) and empirically oriented political scientists (Achen, Bartels, Berman, Blyth, Carpenter, Converse, Feldman, Fiorina, Green, Huddy, Jervis, Lenz, Mendelberg, Quirk, Schickler, Schmidt, Shapiro, Smith, Stokes, Tetlock, Zaller, et al.), it has served as an early-publication venue for many junior political theorists and political scientists. Please check the journal's website for submission information: <https://www.criticalreview.com/>

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2018

Kevin J. Elliott, Columbia University
"The Division of Epistemic Labor and Democratic Performance"

2019

Naomi Scheinerman, Yale University
"When the Left and Right Make Strange Bedfellows: Vaccinations and Democracy"

2020

Matthew Benjamin Cole, Harvard University
"Georg Lukács, Southwestern Neo-Kantianism, and the Problem of Historical Understanding"

2021

Anke Gruendel, New School for Social Research
"The Politics of Wicked Problems"

2022

Winston Berg, University of Chicago
"The Ideological Origins of 'Deep State' Conspiracy Theories"

Best Book Award

2018

Democratic Reason (Princeton University Press)
by Hélène Landemore, Yale University

2019

An Epistemic Theory of Democracy (Oxford University Press)
ed. Robert E. Goodin, Australian National University, and Kai Spiekermann, London School of Economics

2020

Political Uses of Expert Knowledge: Immigration Policy and Social Research (Cambridge University Press)
by Christina Boswell, University of Edinburgh

2021

Europe's Crisis of Legitimacy: Governing by Rules and Ruling by Numbers in the Eurozone (Oxford University Press)
by Vivien Schmidt, Boston University

2022

Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy (Oxford University Press)
by Jeffrey Friedman, Harvard University

Citation: The winner of the 2022 Ideas, Knowledge, and Politics best book award is Jeffrey Friedman's *Power Without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy*, which combines a masterclass in political epistemology with a highly original critique of contemporary politics.

Friedman's accomplishment lies in the intelligence and insight with which he weaves these two aspects of his book together. The political epistemologist, he shows, must be alert to the fundamental role played by ideas in determining social outcomes (chapters 1-3). Conscious political action is determined by people's interpretations of the social world, which are constructed from their ideas about that world. Friedman emphasizes that in the large-scale, variegated societies in which we now find ourselves, the objects of these interpretations are the actions of other ideationally determined beings. Whether we want to influence or merely understand those around us, we require a fairly accurate understanding of their beliefs. Yet to some variable and indeterminate extent, people will tend to have different beliefs than we ourselves do, and thus will tend to behave in ways that are to some indeterminate extent unpredictable in their heterogeneity.

However, the fact our own beliefs are so often held with certainty tends to insulate us from the recognition that anyone could credibly believe things we do not believe and therefore could behave differently than we would behave. Of those caught in this hermetic illusion, none are more significant in modern politics than the ranks of technocrats—meaning, on Friedman's unique definition, anyone who engages in the project of trying to solve social and economic problems. The problem-solving project of technocracy is inherently epistemological because it requires that technocrats know (or claim to know) which human behaviors are causing a given problem and how these behaviors will change in response to a policy intervention. There is no reason in principle why technocrats could not judiciously restrict their policy interventions to those instances in which there is good reason to expect their target populations to think and act in accordance with their carefully unearthed beliefs. In practice, however, technocrats tend not to take seriously the possibility of heterogeneous ideas and, therefore, unpredictable behavior, so they fail to investigate the beliefs of the objects of their efforts at social control.

Instead, technocratic elites ("epistocrats" in Friedman's terminology) over-rely on models of lawlike, homogeneous behavior grounded, for example, in the theory of rational choice or, at the other end of the spectrum, on models that universalize findings drawn from field experimentation (chapter 4). Moreover, epistocratic expertise rely on filtered paradigms that allow the assimilation of paradigm-confirming information while screening out anomalous information, leading to what Friedman calls a "spiral of conviction" in which epistocrats become dogmatic about their paradigms (chapter 5).

On the other hand, Friedman points out that social and economic problem solving is by no means the exclusive purview of epistocrats, contrary to the usual, elitist understanding of "technocracy." Friedman contends that in reality, ordinary citizens ("citizen-technocrats") are often animated by the attempt to solve social and economic problems; he counterintuitively emphasizes this technocratic dimension of Donald Trump's electoral appeal in 2016. Drawing on six decades of opinion research, Friedman argues that citizen-technocrats have tended to be less beholden to spirals of conviction than have epistocrats, largely because the former are poorly informed in comparison to the latter. This gives them fewer opportunities to accumulate a biased sample of evidence that confirms and reaffirms their priors. While this makes citizen-technocrats less dogmatic than technocratic elites, Friedman holds that citizen-technocrats compensate

(as it were) for their open mindedness by using the problem-solving intentions of a proposed policy as an overly simple heuristic for the problem's actual solution, ignoring the possibility of unintended consequences (chapter 6).

Power Without Knowledge makes several important contributions to debates in political science as well as political theory. Not only does Friedman synthesize a great mass of opinion research to stake out a novel understanding of the relationship between "public ignorance" and the use of heuristics; he also clarifies the role played—and the obstacles faced—by social scientists in crafting and recommending technocratic policies. In societies such as Britain and the United States, policy debate is driven by more or less precise and sophisticated predictions of policies' benefits and costs. Political theorists commonly assume that these expert predictions tend to be accurate, so that the only question posed by technocracy is whether the public can assimilate or mimic experts' knowledge or whether they have a right to rule ignorantly. But as Friedman shows, this approach is both empirically unhelpful, in that it obscures the way in which ordinary citizens feel competent to make technocratic decisions (and are called upon by the electoral system to do so), and theoretically tendentious, since it relies on the uncritical acceptance of experts' own claims to expertise. The effect is to divorce political theory from the realities of technocratic politics at both the mass and elite levels, and furthermore to insulate epistocrats' knowledge claims from scrutiny.

Friedman argues that the very fact that technocracies are replete with policy debate indicates the contentiousness of technocratic knowledge claims. Political theorists, by implication, should not assume that the policy recommendations made by epistocrats tap into unproblematic "expertise." Moreover, Friedman's pivotal chapters on social science (chapters 4-5) emphasize that the homogenizing theoretical paradigms through which experts impose intelligibility on the social world entail an absence of the intellectual charity that is necessary if the people comprising that world are to be understood in all their variability. But this sacrifice of comprehension and accuracy is necessary if social scientists are to make sweeping predictive claims on the basis of universalist theories of "incentives," "power," psychological "needs," or simply the latest "studies."

More should be said about this volume than space allows. Historians of thought, for instance, will find much to engage with in Friedman's innovative discussion of the Lippmann-Dewey debate of the 1920s (chapter 2) and his apotheosis of intellectual history as the model of a judiciously ideational social science (chapter 3), while economists will find his forensic discussion of the neoclassical school and the experimentalist reaction against it both innovative and challenging (chapter 4). But Friedman's central, ground-breaking accomplishment, which alone would warrant wide recognition for *Power Without Knowledge*, is to demonstrate the centrality of fallible, variable human ideas, both in human action and in observers' attempts to understand it, and the requirement that scholars of society account for and interrogate those ideas.

—Paul Gunn, Goldsmith's, University of London,
on behalf of the 2022 awards committee