

Double Critique of Public Presentation: Peter Loewen on
Behavioural Economics and Voting Behaviour

Milan Ilnyckyj

2014-02-04

Preamble

In the course of trying to complete this assignment, I attended three talks at the University of Toronto: one on January 21st by Harvard professor David Keith on geoengineering, one on February 3rd by Citizen Lab director Ron Diebert on cybersecurity and surveillance, and one on February 4th by Marcelo Ebrard, the former mayor of Mexico city, on the past, present, and future of NAFTA.¹²³ Dr. Keith's presentation described how a program of deliberate modification of the climate could be deployed over a two-century timescale, in order to counteract the warming effect of greenhouse gasses. While his work had a scientific basis — including in the form of climate modelling done to evaluate the probable effects of geoengineering via solar radiation management via high-altitude sulphate aerosols — his presentation did not include discussion of this, but rather focused on normative issues of governance not easily evaluated from a positivist/interpretivist perspective.⁴ Dr. Diebert's talk was similarly normative: focused on what has been revealed about the capabilities and activities of governments in the field of electronic surveillance, and the democratic and ethical issues raised.⁵ While Mr. Ebrard did cite a handful of statistics in support of his claim that Mexico has invested insufficiently in tertiary education, there likewise wasn't enough of an emphasis on making an empirical case for the talk to be usable for this project.⁶ Unfortunately, none of the presentations was especially strong from either a positivist or an interpretivist perspective. None of the talks provided the raw material necessary for completing this assignment successfully. Each scholar largely presented their research anecdotally and informally, with little reference to the methodology used to produce their results. As a result, it was not feasible to write a detailed critique of any of these presentations from a positivist or interpretivist perspective.

With insufficient time to attend a fourth talk in person before the due date of the assignment, I found a video of University of Toronto Political Science professor Peter Loewen talking about behavioural economics

¹Keith, *A Case for Climate Engineering*.

²Diebert, *Discussing "Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace"*.

³Ebrard, *NAFTA Past – Present – Future: The 20th Anniversary of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the recent approved constitutional reforms in Mexico - education, energy and fiscal reforms*.

⁴I have detailed hand-written notes from the presentation which I can provide if desired.

⁵My notes from the talk are accessible at: <http://www.sindark.com/phd/QUAL-2014-02-03-Ron-Diebert.txt>
A recording can be downloaded at: <http://www.sindark.com/phd/QUAL-2014-02-03-Ron-Diebert.mp3>

⁶My notes from the talk are accessible at: <http://www.sindark.com/phd/QUAL-2014-02-04-NAFTA.txt> A recording can be downloaded at: <http://www.sindark.com/phd/QUAL-2014-02-04-NAFTA-talk.mp3>

and voting behaviour on December 19th, 2013.⁷⁸ I have taken a course with Dr. Loewen and engaged extensively with him one-on-one and in group settings, discussing academic work.⁹ Hopefully, this satisfies the intent of having this assignment be based on a talk attended in person.

1 | Introduction and summary

Loewen's key concern was to address the 'paradox of participation' in democratic societies. Given the minute probability that a single vote will create or break a tie, the chance that voting will have some impact on real-world outcomes is similarly miniscule. If voting is somewhat costly, in terms of time invested in considering the options and actually voting, then why should rational individuals with no expectation of benefit engage in it?¹⁰ Loewen provides two main answers to this question: people vote because they care about the welfare of others as well as themselves, and people vote because they have cognitive limitations that encourage the behaviour.

Methodologically, Loewen seeks to apply insights and approaches from behavioural economics to the analysis of voting behaviour. Experiments are central to this approach: controlled trials in which participants are given various treatments, with the objective of uncovering important information about their preferences and modes of behaviour. To a considerable degree, then, the method here is to apply methods from the natural sciences to political circumstances. Loewen's specific approach involves deviating from assumptions of perfect rationality that are embedded in some positivist interpretations of politics, but maintains a commitment to empirical observation and statistical interpretation as means of identifying causal relationships in the world.¹¹ Behavioural economists have identified several such 'anomalies' where actual behaviour deviates from ideally rational behaviour, and Loewen goes on to explain why some of these have relevance for voting behaviour.

⁷Loewen, *Even the Greatest Ruffian: Behavioural Economics and Politics Around the World*.

⁸My notes from the talk are accessible at: <http://www.sindark.com/phd/QUAL-2013-12-19-Loewen.txt> The video of the talk is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0oqAbLXLZs>

⁹A more elaborate discussion of many of the points Loewen makes can be found in: Loewen, "Affinity, Antipathy and Political Participation: How Our Concern For Others Makes Us Vote", p. 661–87.

¹⁰Loewen identifies how there are historical and contemporary examples of voting systems where people are given material benefits in exchange for casting a ballot, ranging from cash to alcohol to jobs. In such situations, which have largely become absent in Canada between 1950 and 1980, the immediate payoff may well provide sufficient motivation to justify voting.

¹¹For a summary of perspectives on individual rationality within political science, see: John, *Analyzing Public Policy*, p. 100–121.

In particular, Loewen identifies a causal connection between the varying levels of aversion to ambiguity demonstrated by experimental subjects and their voting behaviour. Faced with an option that is likely to produce a better outcome when evaluated mathematically, but which involves more uncertainty for the subject, those who are averse to ambiguity will favour the simpler possibility with a worse expected utility. Based on an experiment conducted with “a large number of Swedish adults”, and using data on the actual voting history of the subjects, Loewen found that the ambiguity averse vote more: “They make their vote count because they can’t count”. In another experimental setting, the degree to which subjects discounted benefits in the future was measured, and it was determined that people who are strong discounters of future utility are less likely to vote, being only about 80% as likely as their contemporaries who discount future utility less aggressively. This is consistent with the idea that a voter with a preference for one party or individual winning an election would derive utility from successfully electing them, and that this utility would be spread out across time. If you care little about benefits that are years away, accepting a cost today for securing them is less appealing.

Finally, Loewen investigated the possibility that those with more concern about the welfare of others would be more willing to vote. The hypothesis here is predicated on the idea that politics largely functions through groups. Political parties strive to make themselves appealing to societal groups (union members, suburban families, etc), people self-identify as members of groups, and people care about the experiences of groups toward which they feel antipathy or affinity.¹² Using ‘dictator games’, in which a sum of real money is given to one participant to divide arbitrarily between themselves and another subject, Loewen investigated the degree to which subjects demonstrated concern for the welfare of others at a cost to themselves. This data could then be incorporated into econometric analyses to estimate the likelihood of participating in voting. The experimental results support the notion that those who are more other-regarding are more likely to vote. Loewen explains this result partly in terms of the paradox of participation. While the chances that your vote will change the outcome of an election are tiny, the group of people who would be affected by such a change is large. If you care about their welfare as well as your own, it may well create sufficient psychological justification

¹²This group affinity involves several other tendencies toward incorrect estimation, with people guessing that groups in which they are members are larger than they really are, as well as attributing positive characteristics to them that they do not attribute to groups in which they do not belong.

to take part in voting.¹³ This tendency was found to hold across the political spectrum, though those on the political left were found to be more generous on average when arbitrarily assigning shares of real money to themselves and strangers.

2 | **Positivist critique and possibilities for further work**

Briefly put, positivism in the social sciences refers to a set of methods which aim to use the observation of phenomena to identify empirically verifiable causal claims. Often, the mechanisms employed toward this end are statistical, with the perspective that larger datasets and more sophisticated statistical techniques yield more credible and robust conclusions. Loewen’s approach falls very much within this tradition. It is concerned with externally observable behaviours — not with the subjective mental states of the subjects. It embraces experiments and statistical analysis as tools for interpretation, for the evaluation of causal claims, and for the generation of predictions. An important elaboration of the “quantitative template” that is central to this approach can be found in King, Keohane, and Verba’s *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*, and extensive discussion and criticism of it can be found in Brady and Collier’s *Rethinking Social Inquiry*.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶

Loewen’s brief response to an audience question is illustrative of his methodology and some of its benefits. Asked about whether low levels of voting by young people are offset by alternative forms of political participation, he quickly explains that there is “no consolation” to be found in such accounts because statistical analyses show that grassroots political behaviours aside from voting do not substitute for voting in the population studied. Those who engage in one tend to engage more in the other, and not the other way around. Provided the data on which this claim is based were properly collected and interpreted, this aside provides insight into what is powerful and convincing about positivist accounts of social and political behaviours. They allow such

¹³People are also psychologically sensitive to the opinions of their peers. In the United States, data is publicly available on whether or not any particular voter actually cast a ballot in every election where they have been eligible. While informing voters that researchers were monitoring this data produced a small increase in participation, threatening to share the data with their neighbours produced a much larger one.

¹⁴King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*.

¹⁵Brady and Collier, *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. Second edition.

¹⁶See also: Wedeen, “Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise”, p. 77–84.

questions to be settled in a way that is reproducible and which arguably does not depend much on subjective interpretation by researchers.

The theory of rationality expressed by Loewen can be seen as an attempt to address the demonstrable failure of people to behave in a perfectly utility-maximizing way without abandoning the idea that something can be objectively rational or irrational. He stresses that he isn't evaluating rationality in terms of substantive choice — Party X or Party Y, Candidate A or Candidate B — but in terms of coherence between what an individual would have chosen in a “state of reflection” and what they actually chose. Most directly, this description incorporates the limited amount of time in which people need to make most choices. Indirectly, it also addresses some of the emotional and heuristic modes of reasoning that may make themselves manifest in some circumstances. Under such a view, much human ‘irrationality’ can be quantified and evaluated within a positivist framework. What is necessary is simply an experimental program in which various treatments are used to independently manipulate the variables that contribute to failures of rationality, yielding usable predictions about how human decision-making is likely to work under different conditions.¹⁷

From a positivist perspective, the main opportunities for further work are in more tightly constraining the independent variables that differ between experimental treatment groups, allowing for more fine-grained understanding; the development and execution of larger experiments, which would be expected to yield more robust results; and empirical analysis on the degree to which the behaviour of subjects in experiments accords well with how they behave in real-world circumstances. While answering questions posed by the audience, Loewen identified an interesting endogeneity problem, in which simply telling one group of students about the paradox of participation decreases their willingness to vote when compared with a control. This result demonstrates some of the importance of context, and the challenge of effectively distancing experimenter from subject. People who are made to vote once for whatever reason are also significantly more likely to vote again in the future, arguably showing a kind of path dependence or socialization effect. These matters would be given an even higher measure of importance in an interpretivist criticism of Loewen's research.

¹⁷For a classic example of this type of research, see: Darley and Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior”, p. 100–8.

3 | Interpretivist critique and possibilities for further work

Interpretivism rejects the aspiration toward objectivity that is central to positivism. While a positivist's observations could theoretically have been made by anyone, the interpretivist tradition highlights interaction and intersubjectivity between observer and observed. Sometimes described as 'antipositivism', interpretivism holds that the methods of natural science are inapplicable to the social world, with adherents favouring methods like ethnographic fieldwork and non-statistical discourse analysis over experiments and surveys. Terence Ball identifies how "political reality is itself interpretively constituted" and that many political disputes are actually "hermeneutical disputes about meaning", requiring "interpretive decoding" of a kind that may not easily be achieved through objective experimentation.^{18,19} Similarly, Clifford Geertz argues that analysis of culture is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning". and that cultural theory derives generality from "the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions".²⁰ "Interpretivists", Lisa Wedeen argues, "view knowledge, including scientific knowledge, as historically situated and entangled in power relationships".²¹ While the main positivist project is arguably the formulation of 'grand theories', the ambitions of many interpretivists are more modest in this regard, with skepticism about the degree to which sound generalizations can be made about political life.²² At the same time, antipositivist methods aspire to a deeper level of understanding of social and political phenomena which incorporates insights into the subjective experiences of the participants.

The value of immersion-focused interpretivist scholarship is highlighted in *Political Ethnography*, a collection of essays edited by Edward Schatz.²³ A key element of antipositivism discussed in the volume is the focus on subjective experience — "the meanings people attribute to the world they inhabit" — which is easily distinguishable from an experimental methodology that doesn't speculate about or ascribe importance to the internal mental state of the subjects.²⁴ Methodologically, interpretivism often involves long-term and dynamic

¹⁸Ball, "Deadly Hermeneutics; or SINN and the Social Scientist", p. 95, 108.

¹⁹See also: Schatz, "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics", p. 13.

²⁰Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 5, 25.

²¹Wedeen, "Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise", p. 80.

²²Schatz, "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics", p. 3.

²³Schatz, *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*.

²⁴Schatz, "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics", p. 6.

contact between researchers and their subjects, sometimes producing memorable accounts such as Geertz's famous discussion of cockfighting in Bali or Timothy Pachirat's description of work in a slaughterhouse.²⁵²⁶ Such approaches add context to political analysis, but they also highlight difficult issues of subjectivity and the nature of truth claims. While such questions may legitimately be asked of positivistic approaches, the actual work of interpretivist political science may be the most effective means of raising them to a sufficient level in the awareness of researchers for them to be debated and understood.

The main interpretivist criticism of Loewen's work would likely focus on his assumption that controlled experiments conducted with real money yield especially good information about the participants. He interprets evidence from ambiguity aversion and time preference experiments to be indicative of the decision-making styles of the subjects generally. This criticism can be expressed in a positivist way — questioning whether empirical observation of behaviour in other settings would confirm these experimental results — but it can also be expressed within the interpretivist tradition.²⁷²⁸ A criticism that largely falls within a positivistic approach might focus on the possibility that people in artificial experimental circumstances will respond in ways that map poorly to their behaviour in real-world electoral circumstances, the remedy for which would be the design of new experiments that yield behaviour that matches more closely to that in real-life circumstances. Beyond this, an interpretivist critique may also raise the question of whether experimental subjects are acting as 'performers' — working to cultivate certain perceptions in their observers, whether deliberately or not.²⁹ If so, the ideal of objectivity on which much of positivism relies may be illusory. Some interpretivists may also suggest that true insight into voting behaviour is likely to emerge from "flashes of insight" rather than from "following any elaborated system of rules" and that theory-building actually constitutes interpretations of the social world, rather than simply mirroring it from outside.³⁰ Such criticisms cannot be directly addressed through changes in experimental design, but require a shift in the researcher's understanding of the ontology

²⁵ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 412–53.

²⁶ Pachirat, "The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor", p. 143–161.

²⁷ See the discussion of interpretivist versus neopositivist epistemology in: Schatz, "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics", p. 12–14.

²⁸ See also: Wedeen, "Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise", p. 77–84.

²⁹ See: *ibid.*, p. 87–90.

³⁰ Yanow, "Neither Rigorous nor Objective? Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science", p. 71, 75.

of the social world. This shift may also require a reconceptualization of the influence of the researcher on the researched, and the possibility that “[k]nowledge is coproduced in unique, often fleeting, power-laden, and deeply context-dependent relationships”.³¹³²

Part of an interpretivist agenda for further research would largely include much closer contact with the people being studied. If the aim is to understand voter participation in Sweden, an interpretivist scholar might undertake long-term ethnographic research with some target populations, including those that are unusually politically engaged or disengaged, in hopes of producing ‘thick description’ of some of the social and cultural forces at work. In so doing, they may be able to ‘flesh out’ and render more sophisticated the sort of general observations arising from experiments and statistical analysis, as well as identify situations where the results from such tools are misleading.³³ An interpretivist analysis would also be likely to involve greater introspection on the part of the researcher, both about “researcher effects” arising from the interaction with experimental subject and about their own role in constructing the reality that they are seeking to observe.

4 | Conclusions

To a considerable degree, Loewen’s approach is focused on addressing some of the methodological concerns raised by antipositivists about using a positivist framework based on experiments and statistical analyses. While some would argue that the attempt misses the foundational concerns that motivate the antipositivist project, it can be interpreted alternatively as an example of healthy methodological discourse between distinct schools of practitioners, and the type of behaviour that can allow those with a particular background to incorporate insights that have arisen elsewhere. While some harsh critics of positivism may be inclined to reject Loewen’s conclusions wholesale on the basis of flaws in experimental and statistical approaches, others may be appreciative of efforts to overcome some of the limitations of positivist methodologies and willing to contribute additional insight and context through the application of alternative approaches.

Word count (excluding preamble): 2,576

³¹Schatz, “Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics”, p. 15.

³²See also: Allina-Pisano, “How to Tell an Axe Murderer: An Essay on Ethnography, Truth, and Lies”, p. 54–9.

³³For some discussion of ways in which empirical results that initially seem credible may be misleading, see: Lehrer, “The Truth Wears Off: Is there something wrong with the scientific method?”

References

- Allina-Pisano, Jessica. "How to Tell an Axe Murderer: An Essay on Ethnography, Truth, and Lies". In: *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Ed. by Edward Schatz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Ball, Terrence. "Deadly Hermeneutics; or SINN and the Social Scientist". In: *Idioms of Inquiry: Critique and Renewal in Political Science*. Ed. by Terrence Ball. Albany: State University of New York.
- Brady, Henry E. and David Collier. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards. Second edition*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.
- Darley, John M. and C. Daniel Batson. "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior". In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1 1973).
- Diebert, Ron. *Discussing "Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace"*. 2014.
- Ebrard, Marcelo. *NAFTA Past – Present – Future: The 20th Anniversary of the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the recent approved constitutional reforms in Mexico - education, energy and fiscal reforms*. 2014.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- John, Peter. *Analyzing Public Policy*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012.
- Keith, David. *A Case for Climate Engineering*. 2014.
- King, Gary, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Lehrer, Jonah. "The Truth Wears Off: Is there something wrong with the scientific method?" In: *The New Yorker* (Dec. 2010).
- Loewen, Peter. "Affinity, Antipathy and Political Participation: How Our Concern For Others Makes Us Vote". In: *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43 (3 2010). URL: http://journals2.scholarsportal.info/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/details/00084239/v43i0003/661_aaapphcfomuv.xml.
- *Even the Greatest Ruffian: Behavioural Economics and Politics Around the World*. 2013. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0oqAbLXLZs>.
- Pachirat, Timothy. "The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor". In: *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Ed. by Edward Schatz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Schatz, Edward. "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics". In: *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Ed. by Edward Schatz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- ed. *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

- Wedeen, Lisa. "Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise". In: *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Ed. by Edward Schatz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Yanow, Dvora. "Neither Rigorous nor Objective? Interrogating Criteria for Knowledge Claims in Interpretive Science". In: *Interpretation and Method*. Ed. by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe.