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Back to Weber!

Dylan Riley

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and also the ongoing activities of autogestion, democratic self-activity that can distribute more resources, and more power, to workers and “everyday people” in the United States. If socialism is not evolving, Bernstein-like, quite as much as he suggests, he is nevertheless to be thanked for pointing out how much power still remains in the hands of the people.

Back to Weber!

DYLAN RILEY

University of California, Berkeley
riley@berkeley.edu

Richard Biernacki’s book has been controversial since before its publication. As has already been widely discussed on the blogs, Jeff Elman, the dean of Social Sciences at the University of California, San Diego sent Biernacki a letter in June of 2009 ordering him not to publish his manuscript or present findings from it at professional conferences. The letter also threatened Biernacki with censure, salary reduction, or dismissal if he continued. The controversy has continued after publication. Andrew Perrin on the blog “Scatterplot” rejected Biernacki’s argument as pompous, muddled, overstated, and mean spirited. On its face, these reactions seem compelling evidence in favor of Biernacki’s central thesis that quantitative cultural sociologists are engaged primarily in a religious exercise: ritual. A clear, if implicit, implication of this analysis is that critics of the method should be treated as heretical outsiders to be banished from the community; and this seems to have been Biernacki’s experience to some extent. In any case, the superheated polemics surrounding *Reinventing in Social Inquiry* have not been conducive to a cool analytic assessment of its central theses—such will be the focus of these remarks.

Biernacki’s central thesis is that “coding procedures in contemporary sociology” are not methods for empirically documenting meaning or changes in meaning, but rather are analogous to “the rites by which religious believers relabel portions of the universe in a sacred arena for deep play” (p. 3). In the face of this situation, he calls

Reference

Alperovitz, Gar. 1994 [1965]. *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power*, 2nd ed. London, UK: Pluto Press.

Reinventing Evidence in Social Inquiry: Decoding Facts and Variables, by **Richard Biernacki**. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 199pp. \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781137007278.

for a return to “humanist interpretation” that “better fulfills the consecrated standards social ‘scientists’ ostensibly ascribe [namely the natural sciences]” (pp. 2–3). To substantiate his thesis, Biernacki carefully examines the relationship between the primary sources and coding results of three exemplary texts in the sociology of culture. These are Peter Bearman and Katherine Stovel’s article “Becoming a Nazi” which appeared in the journal *Poetics* in 2000, John Evans’ book *Playing God?*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2002, and Wendy Griswold’s “The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1987.

Two Sorts of Critique

Biernacki presents a set of devastating critiques of the empirical procedures of his three exemplars. First, Bearman and Stovel’s article claimed to show that National Socialists became National Socialists by progressively abandoning non-party forms of identity. Their main evidence for this claim was a single story from a 1934 collection of stories

written by party members. The authors constructed a network model of this story which they argued showed that “the new Nazi self emerges from the elision of social relations” (Bearman and Stovel 2000: 85) an idea with obvious roots in the neo-Tocquevillian tradition growing out of Arendt.

Biernacki shows that Bearman and Stovel failed to consult the original autobiography for their research, instead relying on a “condensation published in an appendix to Abel’s book in 1938” (p. 29). Using the original biography, he then shows that Abel’s appendix excised precisely evidence of the rich social ties that Stovel and Bearman found to be “absent” from the period of being a Nazi in the story they selected (p. 31). As Biernacki summarizes his demonstration, “It is bewildering that Bearman and Stovel report ‘facts’ about what is missing in Herr D.’s account” (p. 31).

Second, Biernacki argues that John Evans’ book, *Playing God* creates the illusion of a trend toward increasing instrumental rationality in the debate on the ethics of human genetic engineering (HGE). While Evans’ selection of texts from the period between 1959 and 1973 was relatively broad, in part because in this period there was no official bioethical debate on HGE, he sharply restricted his sample for the period from 1973 to 1995. In particular, says Biernacki, he excluded “cloning” as a key word. To further demonstrate the problem Biernacki reproduces Evans’ search by using the same terms that *Playing God* did, but specifying them as keywords rather than primary topics. Biernacki’s search reveals hundreds of items discussing HGE in substantively rational terms, and thus flatly contradicting Evans’ central thesis (pp. 63–66).

Biernacki’s third exemplar is Griswold’s “Fabrication of Meaning,” a text arguing that the ambiguity of cultural products in part produces their cultural power. To substantiate her point, Griswold coded reviews of George Lamming’s novels. She found that reviews which mentioned ambiguity were more likely to be positive than those which did not. But, Biernacki indicates, Griswold elides two sharply different meanings of the term ambiguity: as a topic in the novels and as a reaction of the reviewer to the

novels. Only the second sense of ambiguity is compatible with Griswold’s theory. But Biernacki shows that many of the positive reviews which “explicitly mention ambiguity” often treat it as a topic in the novel, while the reviewers themselves are quite clear about the novel’s meaning. Therefore Griswold’s criterion for coding a review, an explicit mention of “ambiguity,” is itself ambiguous (p. 100).

These three critiques, trenchant as they are, primarily focus on flawed research practices. But Biernacki’s goal in his text is more ambitious. He ascribes the problems of this work to the method of coding, not to the authors’ personal weaknesses. Indeed, in this sense Biernacki is extremely generous to Bearman, Stovel, Evans, and Griswold. His work is *not* a polemic.

Instead, Biernacki’s claim is that the various failures he documents are manifestations of a basically misconceived research strategy. Whereas natural scientists use coding to uncover patterns that are hidden from direct perception, cultural sociologists use coding to obscure meanings, which are explicitly built into texts as cultural products (p. 29). To make this point as plainly as possible, Biernacki considers coding a poor substitute for reading. As he writes in a mordant aside, “to assess the plot of *The Three Little Pigs*, no child would count the number of times the wolf blew down a house and the network ties of those mentions versus the number of times a house remained standing to decide which action was more central” (p. 51). If coding undermines rather than illuminates cultural products, why do scholars engage in it? It is in answering that question, that Biernacki deploys the concept of ritual.

During an initial “phase of separation” coding procedures convert pieces of text into “unit facts” (pp. 34, 62, 100). In the subsequent phase of “liminal rearrangement” the unit facts are projected onto a set of ambiguous symbols, such as network diagrams or line graphs, which are then interpreted. Finally in the stage of reintegration some normatively laden conclusion about the academic profession is reaffirmed (pp. 12–13). In sum, for Biernacki the primary function of “formal” cultural sociology is to reaffirm the particular professional identities of social scientists.

Assessment

How should *Reinventing* be assessed? Two main issues might be raised about it. First there is some tension between Biernacki's specific critiques of his three examples, and his broader claims about coding. For many of Biernacki's strongest arguments refer not to coding per se, but to the selection of the documents to be coded. If, for example, Bearman and Stovel had used Herr D.'s original biography and found evidence of dense social ties throughout the story, thereby challenging the received wisdom of neo-Tocquevillian analyses, would Biernacki accept this as a legitimate piece of research? Or similarly, if Evans had included the group of texts that Biernacki identifies and concluded there was in fact little change in the debate over HGE, would this count as good research practice? I doubt it for the author of *Reinventing*. But the very power of Biernacki's critiques along these lines raises questions about his broader claims. To clinch the thesis it would be best to find a case in which the evidence had been correctly collected and the coding scheme transparently discussed. It seems to be Biernacki's view that this is an impossibility, but given the fact that Biernacki did replicate the studies, and to the extent that his evidence allowed, discussed coding issues, it seems that this is not an impossibility.

The second issue that Biernacki's book raises is the status of interpretation. As an alternative to coding, Biernacki calls for a return to Weber's ideal types. The strategy he proposes is the intensive interpretation of particular cultural objects. Types in this sense are not summaries of the characteristics

that a class of objects shares, but rather examples that highlight specific features of the phenomenon of interest. For example for Weber, Richard Baxter's work "compacts the theological predicaments of Puritans' everyday life" (p. 147). Such cultural exemplars can be intensively studied in their cultural context. Meanings are therefore preserved and explicated rather than effaced as with coding. However, Biernacki says relatively little about procedures of interpretation. Of course a whole tradition of analysis going back to Dilthey and very well expressed by Collingwood suggests that cultural artifacts are more or less transparently accessible to interpreters because human beings create them with the intent to impart a meaning. But it is surprising to see a call for a direct return to this sort of procedure after the problems raised by the structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. Biernacki's treatment of Foucault displays the problem. *Reinventing* assimilates Foucault to Weber, arguing that Jeremy Bentham's ideal for the panoptic prison is an ideal type. But Foucault never used the term ideal type, and was quite hostile to the notion of interpretation. For him meaning was not directly available in cultural products. This suggests that Biernacki needs to develop a more explicit set of procedures for cultural sociology than that which he develops in *Reinventing*.

Biernacki's book, in sum, is an extremely serious, thorough and often brilliant dissection of contemporary positivist cultural sociology. By dismissing and attacking the work, Biernacki's critics confirm his central thesis. One hopes that a more serious and sustained engagement is imminent.