

SPOTLIGHT

Grain of Sand Award of 2009 Presented to Professors Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph

The Interpretive Methodologies and Methods Conference Group of the American Political Science Association is proud to announce the creation of the “Grain of Sand” Award to honor a political scientist whose contributions to interpretive studies of the political, and, indeed, to the discipline itself, its ideas, and its persons, have been longstanding and merit special recognition.

The award draws its name from the combined inspiration of the opening lines of William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” and Wislawa Szymborska’s “View with a Grain of Sand.” It is intended to honor a scholar whose contributions demonstrate creative and sustained engagement with questions of enduring political importance from an interpretive perspective. Echoing Szymborska’s “We call it a grain of sand,” the award underscores the centrality of meaning-making in both the constitution and study of the political. Drawing on Blake’s “To see a world in a grain of sand,” the award honors the capacity of interpretive scholarship to embody and inspire imaginative theorizing, the intentional cultivation of new lines of sight through an expansion of literary and experiential resources, and the nourishing of a playfulness of mind that is so necessary to the vitality of social science.

We are honored that Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph have accepted the Grain of Sand award for 2010, the first one to be given. In the view of members of the award committee, they embody the attributes described above both personally and in terms of their work. Emeriti at the University of Chicago, they began their political science careers as graduate students at Harvard. Susanne is a past president of APSA (2003–2004), as well as of the Association of Asian Studies. Their shared interest in comparative politics led them to fieldwork in India, an engagement that has continued over 40 years. Among their

many publications, solo and joint, are several that engage themes close to the heart of this Conference Group.

But more than these, it was a passage in their co-authored “Writing India: A career overview” (*India Review* vol. 7, no. 4: 266–94), which I was recently rereading, that caught my eye as symbolic of the contributions Lloyd and Susanne have made to “the interpretive.” They reflect there at one point on a comment of Vicky Hattam’s deploring the “‘deep and enduring’ split between theory and empirical research in political science” (270), noting that that split left “‘no space for the kind of work I aspire to’” (271). They experienced the same split, they write,

but not the disempowerment she experienced. Our teachers and, subsequently, colleagues at Harvard . . . used theory to frame and analyze historical and empirical questions. We learned too . . . that theory, social and psychological as well as political, helped to identify and answer questions.



. . . At the University of Chicago, theory mattered. . . . Like M. Jourdain in Moliere’s *Bourgeois Gentleman* who was surprised to learn that he was speaking prose, we were surprised to find that we were speaking theory. (271)

It is this eclecticism—this willingness to draw on research-relevant theoretical ideas from whatever discipline and to bring those theories to bear on “the

political” in their empirical material—that we applaud in recognizing Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph with this award: they have seen political worlds in grains of sand and, moreover, have held these up for scrutiny in ways that have enabled all of us to see how it is our touch, our gaze, our narrative, that creates both grain and sand in what we study.

Dvora Yanow, for the 2009 Grain of Sand Award committee

SUSANNE HOEBER RUDOLPH: REMARKS ON RECEIVING THE “GRAIN OF SAND” AWARD

I’m happy to be the recipient of an award recognizing the work of scholars who deploy literary and experiential resources in pursuit of meaning. And I am delighted that there is a conference-related group institutionalizing this honor. On this auspicious occasion, I thought I would offer a few remarks about my current work.

During each of the 11 years Lloyd and I have spent in India, I wrote home weekly letters addressed to “Dear All”—about ten letters per research year, each five or six pages long—about six hundred pages in all. I’m in the process of editing these letters.

What can I say in justification of this enterprise? What kind of communication is a “letter”? How does it fit into the work of a comparative political scientist? What is its methodological implication?

A letter is first of all a personal document, its form shaped by the persona of the writer. That was even more true before the day of the typewriter, when the persona was symbolically present in the hand-script of the writer. A personal document expresses first-person knowledge, what “I know” by virtue of my experience, frankly tinged by the subjectivity of the writer.

A personal document is not disciplined by the conventions of academic writing—documents, graphs, footnotes, which are in the service of objectivity. No amount of strategic devices used by social scientists to obscure the subjectivity of the author can hide the “I” who writes.

The accounts in the letters I am editing take a number of different forms. There is the anthropology of everyday life, as when I use Indian traffic patterns—the propensity to straddle the center line, the reluctance to come to a full stop, the pervasive game of chicken—to cast light on political negotiation, to cast light on what Lloyd I. Rudolph called the continually negotiated order. The traffic becomes my grain of sand. Some letters employ the microsubjectivity of the letter writer to give meaning to macropolitics, as when I describe the impact on everyday life, including our life, of Indira Gandhi’s emergency government in 1975. The letters permit me to experiment with generalizations whose truth will have to be explored in a wider arena than my letter-life—as when I try out a theory of the old and the new Indian federalism and ideas of sharing sovereignty more generally.

The form of my letters was shaped by the audience and by the definition of the epistolary situation. The audience was not readers of the *APSR*, not graduate students in an afternoon seminar. Rather, they were readers of the *New York Times*, intelligent nonacademics, friends and siblings and parents and colleagues, with a good admixture of Ph.D.s and public intellectuals. The definition of the situation was not a demand for “contributions to knowledge,” as in an academic publisher’s inquiry, available especially to seekers of knowledge, but the expressive transferral of experience to soulmates. It’s an audience with standards, but permissive, leaving room for me to try out new ideas, to be playful without having to pay the penalties that a professional readership can extract. It was an audience that had no special knowledge of India, forcing me to privilege description and to specify the obvious rather than assume shared experience.

The letters provided a vehicle to evolve the sort of method and style characteristic of area scholarship. Area scholars are Burkians, not Lockians. They are practitioners of specificity and contextualized knowledge, starting with the presumption that “my” people are particular. They

reject liberal universalism, reject the doctrine that all humanity is the same.¹

What many area scholars had in common with Burke was their respect for the dignity, worth, and meaning of the other. That respect could not be enacted except via recognition of the distinctiveness of the other. Conveying the feel and texture of a place and of its human relationships required the specificity that is achieved by entering into the life of the other, under some circumstances “becoming” the other—as when we speak their language. The narrative form of the “letter” favors particularity over generality, and made me resist treating local thought and practice as instances of some abstract universal. The ideal letter, which I did not achieve, would aim to portray (*pace* Isaiah Berlin) “the differences, the contrasts, the collisions of persons and things and situations, each apprehended in its absolute uniqueness and conveyed with a degree of directness and a precision of concrete imagery”² not found in other modes of communication.

To conclude, the narrative form that I am now editing has implications that are congenial to my and your [the IMM Conference Group] methodological preferences.

NOTES:

1. Udai Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in 19th Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
2. Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Nicholas Kristof, “On Isaiah Berlin,” *New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2010, 27.

THE MANY SEATS AT THE ROUND TABLE OF KNOWLEDGE: LLOYD I. RUDOLPH REMARKS ON RECEIVING THE GRAIN OF SAND AWARD

The many years Susanne Rudolph and I spent editing and interpreting Amar Singh’s diary for our book, *Reversing the Gaze*, led us to reflect on the multiplicity of forms of knowledge, starting with Amar Singh’s first-person, subjective knowledge and extending to the situational truths of Gandhi’s *satyagrahas*.

I start with a story familiar to anthropologists. A Cree hunter is asked by a Canadian court to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about his people’s way life. “I’m not sure I can tell the truth,” he says, “I can only tell what I

know.”¹

Amar Singh, like the Cree hunter, tells what *he* knows about what he has experienced. Like the Cree hunter, his knowledge is situated and contextual; his voice is located in time, place, and circumstance. The epistemology of subjective knowledge stands in marked contrast with the epistemology of objective knowledge—i.e., knowledge based on a view from nowhere, generated by unmarked and unencumbered observers.

James Clifford glossed the Cree hunter’s concept of truth as “rigorous partiality.” Clifford reverses the conventional valuation of partial and impartial, treating partiality as the more desirable and impartiality as the less desirable state. Rigorous partiality recognizes and validates the situated, inflected nature of truth. Rather than denying or repressing the existential character of the sociology of knowledge, rigorous partiality self-consciously acknowledges that place, time, and circumstance shape why and how knowledge is acquired and what it is taken to mean.

Clifford’s second signification for partiality refers to that which is not whole, complete, or capable of being carried to completion. “Rigorous partiality” makes the epistemological claim that knowing the whole truth is a capacity not given to mortals. The best they can do is to strive for partial truths.

Early on in our work with the Amar Singh diary, we recognized that subjective knowledge posed a challenge to the monopolistic claims of science to objective knowledge. But we are not arguing in reply to such monopoly claims for objective knowledge that subjective knowledge is the only form of knowledge, or even that it should be taken to be the best or a better form of knowledge. We think there is room at the round table of knowledge for the imaginative truths found in literature, myth, and memory; for the archival truths of history; for the spiritual truths found in religions and religious experience; and for the aesthetic truths of the visual and performing arts.

We have been re-enforced in our tendency toward pluralism in forms of knowledge and ways of knowing by Max Weber’s embrace of it on the last page of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

It is not our aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of cul-