



Interpretive Approaches to British Government and Politics

Mark Bevir^a and R.A.W. Rhodes^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950, USA.

E-mail: mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu

^bResearch School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.

E-mail: Rhodes@coombs.anu.edu.au

This paper has two aims. First, in contrast to the modernist empiricism of mainstream political science, we provide brief introductions to several interpretive approaches to the study of political science and British government and politics: idealism, social humanism, post-structuralism, and ideational institutionalism. Second, we identify the distinctive research agendas that arise from this family of approaches: namely, critique, decentring governance, ethnographic studies of British politics, and policy analysis as storytelling.

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Introduction

All political scientists offer us interpretations. Interpretive approaches differ in offering interpretations of interpretations.¹ They concentrate on meanings and beliefs, not laws and rules, correlations between social categories, or deductive models. Of course, the distinction between interpretive approaches and others is fuzzy. Sensible proponents of institutionalism, behaviouralism, and rational choice recognize that typologies, correlations, and models do explanatory work only when unpacked into the beliefs and desires of the actors. Nonetheless, there is a family of interpretive approaches to political science that stand out because of their focus on meanings.

So, an interpretive approach to political science asks ‘what is the meaning of it?’ when ‘it’ refers to British government and politics. There are many ways to provide an introduction to such an approach. For example, we could focus on policy networks and explore how interpretive political science would approach the topic. Here, we essay two tasks. First, we try to give a flavour of the several interpretive approaches to British politics.² We do not compare the strengths and weaknesses of the several approaches because we make the general case for



an interpretive approach, not any one variant (but see Bevir, 2004). Second, we show that it makes a difference. Interpretive approaches ask different questions, use different methods, and provide novel answers. So, we argue the case for critique, decentring governance, ethnographic studies of British politics, and policy analysis as storytelling.

Varieties of Interpretation

For much of the 19th century, British political science was dominated by developmental historicism (see Collini *et al.*, 1983). Developmental historicists as diverse as James Bryce and John Seeley believed knowledge depended on a systematic, impartial, and painstaking collection and sifting of facts. They identified science with just such inductive rigour. Yet they made sense of the facts within developmental narratives, which could exhibit debts to the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment, Whig historiography, organic or evolutionary motifs, accounts of divine providence, and philosophical idealism. These narratives typically interpreted British political development as an unfolding of principles of nationality and freedom. They stressed continuity in the gradual triumph of these principles. The state was an organic unit defined by ethical, functional, and linguistic ties and by a shared past embedded in moral habits and social and political institutions.

The First World War undermined much of the ideas of reason and progress associated with these developmental narratives. While developmental historicism continued to attract many throughout the first half of the 20th century, its exponents had lost confidence in the principles that informed their narratives. Their narratives often became a tad nostalgic. In their place, the 20th century witnessed the gradual triumph of modernist empiricism (Bevir, 2001). Political scientists' research became increasingly atomistic and analytic. They sought explanations based on correlations and classifications rather than narratives. They thought of British politics, for example, as an abstract Westminster model — one possible category in an ahistorical typology — rather than as, say, Whig historiography.

Interpretive approaches to British politics had become rather marginal by the late 20th century. Indeed, they became so marginal they stopped appearing in the ways other political scientists defined the general contours of the discipline. So, when comparing their approach with behavioural and rational choice theories, modernist empiricists claimed they were sensitive to agency, context, and history. They had lost sight of the contrast between their reliance on atomistic and analytic modes of inquiry, and the earlier narratives of the developmental historicists. They had forgotten the extent to which their correlations and typologies represented a rejection of interpretive approaches, which do indeed emphasize agency, context, and history. They defended their



approach against the universal theories and methodological sophistication of behaviouralism and rational choice but, in so doing, showed little awareness that in contrast with an interpretive approach they too were guilty of objectifications and scientism.

From the 1960s onwards, philosophers rejected even the lukewarm positivism found in much social science (see Bernstein, 1976; Fay, 1996). They stressed the meaningful nature of action and the holistic nature of meanings. Indeed, philosophical debate has long since moved on from the triumph of social constructivism to discussions of issues about the nature of interpretation. Such philosophical trends surely undermine large swathes of present-day British political science. The time might be ripe for a revival of interpretive approaches. Yet, such a revival should not return to the complacent developmental perspective of the 19th century. It should develop a more radical historicism highlighting contingency and contest. Its narratives should replace principles of reason, character, and progress, with themes of dispersal, difference, and discontinuity.

Conservative idealism

Some strands of developmental historicism remained impervious to the charms of modernist empiricism let alone positivism. At the end of the 19th century, idealist philosophy provided one common way of thinking about the principles and teleology of developmental historicism. Later, various idealists charged modernist empiricism and positivism alike with neglecting meanings, contexts, and history. Michael Oakeshott (1991 [1962], 59–60, 62–65) argued, for example, that political education required the ‘genuine historical study’ of a ‘tradition of behaviour’. He adopted a conservative analysis of tradition as a resource to which one should typically feel allegiance. Indeed, he almost treated political traditions as ‘natural’, as if particular polities could use them to derive unambiguously correct lessons for their current practices. He did so despite his explicit comments against such an analysis of tradition. Oakeshott thus defined the task of the political scientist as being ‘to understand a tradition’, which is ‘participation in a conversation’, ‘initiation into an inheritance’, and ‘an exploration of its intimations’.

During the 1970s and 1980s, W.H. Greenleaf and Nevil Johnson, two of Oakeshott’s disciples, applied his work explicitly to developments in British political science. Greenleaf made the point bluntly when he argued that although ‘the concept of a genuine social science has had its ups and downs, and it still survives, ... we are as far from its achievement as we were when Spencer (or Bacon for that matter) first put pen to paper’. Indeed, he opines, these ‘continuous attempts ... serve only to demonstrate ... the inherent futility of the enterprise’ (Greenleaf, 1983, 286).



Johnson similarly wrote a book titled *The Limits of Political Science*. He found the study of politics wanting, whether as journalism or as political science. Journalism was ‘naively descriptive and empirical, and too deeply immersed in the ebb and flow of current affairs to permit either accurate description or cool judgement’. Political science was denounced instead for its ‘thoroughgoing positivism’, which displayed a ‘remarkable naivety in the perception of the diversity of human conduct and culture, combined with a readiness to dress up uninteresting conclusions in fancy technical clothes and portentous jargon’. The belief in the utility of the social sciences in general and political science in particular is ‘confused’, ‘vulgar’, and ‘mistaken’ (Johnson, 1989, 55, 81, 104–105). Johnson argued the study of politics should allow, rather, that ‘a political association exists only within specific traditions’. ‘Political association entails institutions to express its form’ since ‘institutions serve as means of communicating and transmitting values’. The aim of the study of politics is to ‘gain a reflective and critical understanding of some of the varieties of human political experience’ (Johnson, 1989, 129, 131, 112). ‘Explanatory work in politics is likely to refer chiefly to institutions and must rely extensively on the methods of historical research’. It should not try ‘to formulate statements of regularity or generalizations claiming to apply universally’. History is ‘the source of experience’ while philosophy is ‘the means of its critical appraisal’ (Johnson, 1989, 117, 122–123).

The conservative analysis of tradition associated with Oakeshott also informed Johnson and Greenleaf’s studies of British politics. These studies elided the differences, discontinuities, and dispersals that we will later find other interpretive approaches have explored. Johnson represented the British constitution as rooted in the ‘extraordinary and basically unbroken continuity of conventional political habits’, even suggesting it ‘*is* these political habits and little else’. The core notion within this inheritance is, he adds, ‘the complete dominance of one particular body of ideas about government, namely what we usually call the idea of parliamentary government’. He even maintained there is ‘no alternative or competing political tradition to fall back on, no different view of the basis on which political authority might rest’ (Johnson, 1977, 30).

Although Greenleaf declared that a tradition of behaviour was ‘a tricky thing to get to know’, he asserted, ‘the British political tradition as it has developed in modern times’ is ‘constituted by a dialectic between the two opposing tendencies’ of libertarianism and collectivism (Greenleaf, 1983, 13 citing Oakeshott, 1991 [1962], 61). In his view, there was no sharp distinction between these two strands of the British tradition. Rather, they were ‘an impressionistic working hypothesis of a historical kind’, which could be used to pull together the diverse practices and ideas of British political life. Libertarianism meant four things: an inalienable title to a realm of self-regarding action; a limited role for government; the dispersion of power; and



the Rule of Law. Collectivism stood in contrast to this individuality; it was concerned with the public good, social justice, positive government, and the concentration of state power (Greenleaf, 1983, 14, 15–20, 20–23). Greenleaf viewed the past century and a half as one of government growth, and so of the triumph of collectivism over individualism. Most of his four volumes is taken up with documenting this claim and answering the question of why a libertarian, individualist society sustaining a limited conception of government had been in so many ways and to such a degree replaced by a positive state pursuing explicit policies of widespread intervention in the name of social justice and the public good. Greenleaf, like Oakeshott and Johnson, implied traditions give us unambiguous answers to problems, and the British tradition tells us we should oppose state action.

It was this opposition to state action that led to Oakeshott becoming a guru in the 1980s, appealing to all shades of Conservatism (see Gilmour 1992, 98; Willetts, 1992, 72–73; Mount, 1993, 74–75). His distinction between the state as a civil and an enterprise association became a mantra for those seeking to justify the minimalist state. An enterprise association is ‘human beings joined in pursuing some common substantive interest, in seeking the satisfaction of some common want or in promoting some common substantive interest’. Persons in a civil association ‘are not joined in any undertaking to promote a common interest ... but in recognition of non-instrumental rules indifferent to any interest’, that is, common rules and a common government in the context of which they pursue diverse purposes. However, while Conservatives favoured civil association and limited state intervention, they rarely invoked the idealist philosophy with which Oakeshott had sustained his argument.

Social humanism

Other strands of idealism fed into a broad social humanism that overlapped with the socialism of the New Left. Indeed, social humanism arose in part as the New Left reworked idealist themes in opposition to positivist philosophy and orthodox Marxism. Philosophers such as Benedetto Croce turned to a radical historicism that contrasts with the developmental perspective. They implied that beliefs, actions, and events are radically contingent in that the moment of choice is open and indeterminate. And they suggested that developmental historicism had elided indeterminacy by locating choices in an apparently stable narrative of progress. Croce was an important influence on other philosophers who opposed modernist empiricism and positivism. R.G. Collingwood remained a rare champion of idealist historicism, indebted to Croce, when logical positivism swept through Oxford (see Collingwood, 1940, 1946, and for commentary see Rubinoff, 1996). Charles Taylor drew on similar idealist, phenomenological, and historicist ideas to challenge behaviouralism.



Taylor, and others such as Alisdair MacIntyre (1985), rejected idealist metaphysics; they moved from the idealist concepts of mind, teleology and unity towards ones of action, contingency, and diversity. Yet these post-idealists still espoused many idealist themes. They continued, in particular, to adopt vitalist analyses of human action as informed by beliefs, intentions, and purposes, and then to situate human agency and freedom within a social context. These idealist themes appeared in their promotion of interpretive alternatives to modernist empiricism and positivism.

Taylor's doctoral thesis was a defence of a vitalist analysis of human behaviour against mechanism (Taylor, 1961, revised as Taylor, 1964). After that he wrote a series of essays explicitly challenging behaviouralism and its leading beliefs. He argued, in 'Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', that beliefs, meanings, and language were constitutive of human actions and practices. The social sciences were unavoidably hermeneutical. His argument entailed a break with 'mainstream social science' and its empiricist and positivist epistemologies. In particular, 'we cannot measure such sciences against the requirements of a science of verification; we cannot judge them by their predictive capacity' (Taylor, 1971).

In 'Neutrality in Political Science', Taylor extended his argument to take direct aim at 'the cult of neutrality'. Proponents of behaviouralism defended the superiority of their approach to that of elder ones by arguing that the latter were always permeated by value positions in a way that meant their frameworks were never scientific but rather always serving the interests of a normative or ideological theory. Proponents of behaviouralism proposed instead to turn the study of politics into a technocratic 'policy science', akin to engineering or medicine, which would 'show us how to attain our goals'. Taylor argued, however, that when proponents of behaviouralism constructed theoretical frameworks to delimit the proper area of scientific enquiry, they made fundamental choices that entailed normative commitments. The work of Harold Lasswell, David Easton, and Gabriel Almond hides their beliefs. 'We come out with a full-dress justification of democracy', Taylor said, referring to Lasswell and Kaplan's *Power and Society* (1950), 'in a work which claims neutrality'. In general, Taylor suggested that conceptual frameworks always depended on theory, and theory could not be constructed apart from values. The ties binding theoretical frameworks and values also opened the possibility, he suggested, of seeing some values as especially meaningful responses to particular empirical contexts (Taylor, 1967, 48, 27, 46).

Post-idealists such as Taylor and Alisdair MacIntyre were closely involved in the New Left. Many others in the New Left also drew indirectly on Croce's historicism, often via Antonio Gramsci (1971), as they developed a dialectical Marxism that broke with mechanical materialism and economism. E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams granted some autonomy to human agency,



consciousness, and culture, while still seeing them as sites of the contradictions and conflicts associated with capitalism.

As the New Left allowed much autonomy to agency and culture, they focused on the beliefs and meanings that infuse actions and practices. As Williams wrote, ‘our way of seeing things is literally our way of living’: it is the ‘sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change’ (Williams, 1961, 55). Because the New Left took culture to be a complex web of meanings and practices, they emphasized the active relationship between agency and context; they located beliefs in culture understood as a way of life. As their historicism and their Marxism alike highlighted diversity and conflict, they often insisted, especially following Thompson’s (1961) critique of Williams, that society contains struggles and contests between different ways of life. So, although social humanists stressed meaning, agency, and context in a similar fashion to the idealists, they took a different view of language, traditions, and community as the relevant contexts. Social humanists placed far greater emphasis on the contingency and diversity of contexts and languages present within any given society. At times, social humanists also suggested traditions or languages were open-ended. There was no single correct way to apply them or extend them on any particular occasion.

The social humanists who have written most insightfully about modern British society and politics have probably been historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall. After shedding his early structuralism, Stedman Jones reinterpreted Chartism by reading texts to challenge orthodox Marxist historiographies (Stedman Jones, 1983). He treated the language of protest as relatively autonomous from the external development of capitalism. He suggested the language of Chartism revealed a political movement as much as a social one. Chartism was less the inauguration of a modern working-class looking forward to the twentieth century and more the end of a popular radicalism reaching back to the eighteenth century (and on socialist historiography, see Bevir and Trentmann, 2002).

Hall deployed a similar version of cultural Marxism to interpret Thatcherism as replacing the existing social democratic ideology with its own vision, and so creating a new historic hegemonic project described as ‘authoritarian populism’. The populism encompassed, ‘the resonant themes of organic Toryism — nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism — with the aggressive themes of a revived neoliberalism — self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism’. The authoritarian covered the ‘intensification of state control over every sphere of economic life’, ‘decline of the institutions of political democracy’, and ‘curtailment of ... “formal” liberties’. So the 1980s were characterized by centralization,



the ‘handbagging’ of intermediate institutions, the refusal to consult with interest groups, and state coercion. Thatcherism stigmatized the enemy within — for example, big unions, and big government — while creating a new historic bloc from sections of the dominant and dominated classes (Hall, 1980, 161; 1983, 29).

Post-structuralism

While the early New Left espoused a form of social humanism, its humanism soon came under fire from structural Marxism. The division between humanists and structuralists then persisted in socialist and post-Marxist responses to post-structuralism. On the one hand, socialists such as Stuart Hall expressed a broadly humanist opposition to the structuralist legacy in post-structuralism. Stedman-Jones complained, for example, of ‘the stultifying effect of the survival, sometimes in disguised form and often barely self-aware, of a residue of reductionist and determinist assumptions dating from the 1970s’ (Stedman Jones, 1996, 25). He sought in particular to move post-Marxism away from ‘the legacy of Foucault’. No doubt, as Stedman Jones implies, many post-Marxists pursue studies of languages, discourses, and traditions, with little thought of the underlying theoretical issues. Equally, however, some post-Marxists, notably Ernesto Laclau, are clearly more sympathetic toward — and even openly supportive of — the structuralist legacy in post-structuralism (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990).

Laclau’s post-structuralism reiterates many themes found in other interpretive approaches. He understands actions, practices, and institutions as analogous to written and spoken texts, and he argues that to discuss them adequately, one has to engage with the meanings they embody. His post-structuralism resembles other interpretive approaches too in its concern to explore such meanings by locating them in the historical context of a tradition, language, or ideology. However, Laclau draws on structural linguistics in a way few other interpretive approaches do. So, he sees the relevant context as the relations between the semantic units within the discourse, though these relations are said to be unstable, and he allows almost no room for human agency.

Laclau’s debt to post-structuralism has undermined many of the characteristic themes of Marxist thinking. His emphasis on the role of discourses and on historical contingency leaves little room for any Marxist social analysis with its basic materialism. Similarly, his rejection of the privileging of class, and so presumably of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, allied to his hostility to any notion of human nature leaves little room for a Marxist ethics or politics. Why, after all, should anybody support radical struggles if these do not serve to end



ills such as exploitation or to realize human potentialities? As Simon Critchley (2004) has argued, Laclau confuses recognition of the ubiquity of hegemony with an argument for democratic hegemony. What is clearly needed for the latter is an account of why we should prefer democratic hegemony to any other form of hegemony.

One area where Laclau does use Marxist themes is in his use, following Gramsci and Hall, of the term hegemony. He concentrates on the hegemonic role of discourses and the possibilities for counter-hegemonic struggles. In his view, hegemonic projects set out to construct nodal points that serve partially to fix meanings and so to elide the historically contingent and politically constructed nature of a particular discourse. Yet, while hegemonic projects thus strive to fix discourses, any discursive configuration will contain social antagonisms. An antagonism is conceived of here as a ‘blockage of identity’ that occurs when the presence of an “‘Other” prevents me from being myself’. To use Laclau’s phrases, ‘the constitutive nature of antagonisms’ leads to a consequent ‘radical contingency of all objectivity’, and this contingency then creates a space for counter-hegemonic discourses (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 113, 115; Laclau, 1990, 26).

Most of the empirical work by post-Marxists focuses on political identities associated with gender and race. There is little work addressed to topics such as parliament, political parties, interest groups, and administrative and local politics. One exception is Griggs and Howarth’s (2000) analysis of the campaign against Manchester airport’s second runway. They take interests and identities alike to be contingent and politically constructed. In their case study of the runway, they then ask how the local village residents and direct action protestors overcame their collective action problem. Their explanation has three elements. First, there was strong group identity in that all were affected by the environmental costs of the runway. Second, there was a social network and political entrepreneurs. There was a strong and activist, conservationist tradition in the villages. The leaders of the several associations could call on the support of professional people and so lower the costs of the campaign. Third, new political identities were forged — ‘the Vegans and the Volvos’. Middle-class protestors saw democratic channels as unreliable and so supported more radical forms of protest. This alliance worked because the pro-runway campaign stigmatized both residents and protestors and used heavy-handed tactics, the media linked residents and eco-warriors as fighting a common foe and local political entrepreneurs played policy brokering and support roles. The protestors lost. Once evicted, the eco-warriors moved on to the next protest site. Residents split over whether to mount a national-level campaign or concentrate on the Public Inquiry. The local authority offered an environmental mitigation package and pursued their case with ‘ruthless efficiency’.



Ideational institutionalism

While some developmental historicists drew on idealism or radical historicism to oppose modernist empiricism, others tried to combine their studies of the ways ideas and institutions interacted with the topics and techniques of modernist empiricism or even behaviouralism. The leading examples include Samuel Beer (1982a) and Anthony Birch (1964), both of whom extend Whig historiography to explain the rise of the Labour Party and collectivist values. The link to behaviouralism is clearest in their jaundiced reassessments of these earlier works (Beer, 1982a,b; Birch, 1989). Beer pointed to pluralistic stagnation, class decomposition, and the revolt against authority to explain the paralysis of British government, invoking no lesser an authority than The Beatles on the way. In more phlegmatic tones, Birch commented on the implications of loosening party discipline, intra-party democracy, electoral reform, civil disobedience, referenda and the erosion of local democracy for representative and responsible government. In both cases, they were drawing on modernist empiricist work on, for example, ‘government overload’ (King, 1975) and adversary politics (Finer, 1975). Some sought to bury the model and its Whig developmental historicism. But most sceptics continued to subscribe to some variant of the Whig view of British history if only to explain decline. Thus, for David Marquand (1988, 154), Britain failed to become an adaptive, developmental state because of its ‘political culture suffused with the values and assumptions of whiggery’.

It is no surprise that adherents of Whig developmental historicism found it relatively easy to make incremental adjustment to meet the challenge of American behaviouralism. There were common bonds in the shared beliefs about atomization, classification, measurement, and about uncovering the facts and searching for regularities. The influence of American political science led to no succession to the Whig crown. A more appropriate analogy is with DNA. The mainstream of British political science is composed of a double helix of American political science and Whig developmental historicism. These strands are interwoven, bonded by a shared modernist empiricism (for an example, see Bogdanor, 1999).

The same accommodation to, and intertwining with, American political science can be seen in the response of British political scientists to the ‘new institutionalism’. The first point to note is that many British political scientists denied any novelty to the new institutionalism. After all, in Britain, neither the behavioural revolution nor rational choice had swept the study of institutions away. To the contrary, British political scientists often took the rise of the new institutionalism in America to be a vindication of British modernist empiricism, with its scepticism toward universal theory, and its stance against the deplorable scientism characterizing American political science. British



political scientists may claim they wear the latest fashionable clothes but, if you look closely, little has changed. As Hayward (1999, 35) observes of Finer's (1997), *The History of Government From the Earliest Times*, it is either 'the last trump reasserting an old institutionalism' or 'the resounding affirmation of the potentialities of a new historical institutionalism within British political science'. Whatever, it is modernist empiricism.

Second, the new institutionalism comes in several guises.³ In the mid-1980s, Peter Hall (1986), a student of Beer's, brought a distinctive concern with ideas to the study of comparative political economy (see Adcock *et al.*, 2006). He found a sympathetic audience among British political scientists accustomed to exploring the interaction of ideas and institutions and attuned to the impact of Thatcherite ideas by the analyses of the social humanists. British ideational institutionalism has its roots in the two Halls. Their influence can be seen clearly in the work of Colin Hay (2002, 126–134; 2006) and Hay and Wincott (1998).⁴

Hay takes issue with the conventional accounts of historical institutionalism. He argues it is an alternative to rational choice (cf. Hay and Wincott, 1998 with Hall and Taylor, 1996, 1998). So, he rejects efforts to build rational actor, micro-foundations into institutional analysis (cf. Hall and Soskice, 2001). Instead, he adopts the strategic-relational approach with its conception of a dialectical relationship between structure and agency. Strategic-relational theory emerges out of debates among social humanists and more structural Marxists; for example, between Stuart Hall and Bob Jessop about Thatcherism.⁵

Jessop treats structure and agency only as an analytical distinction; they do not exist apart from one another. Rather, we must look at the relationship of structure to action and action to structure. So, 'structures are thereby treated analytically as strategic in their form, content and operation; and actions are thereby treated analytically as structured, more or less context sensitive, and structuring'. This approach involves examining both 'how a given structure may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, ... some actions over others'; and 'the ways ... in which actors ... take account of this differential privileging through "strategic-context analysis"' (Jessop, 2001, 1223). In other words, individuals intending to realize certain objectives and outcomes make a strategic assessment of the context in which they find themselves. However, that context is not neutral. It too is strategically selective in the sense that it privileges certain strategies over others. Individuals learn from their actions and adjust their strategies. The context is changed by their actions, so individuals have to adjust to a different context. Institutions or functions no longer define the state. It is a site of strategic selectivity; a 'dialectic of structures and strategies' (Jessop, 1990, 129, see also Jessop, 1996 and Hay, 2002, chapter 3, who provides an appealing straightforward summary in Figure 3.2).



According to Hay (1999, 170), Jessop's central achievement has been to transcend 'more successfully than any other Marxist theorist past or present' the 'artificial dualism of structure and agency'. Hay builds on the approach by arguing that actors cannot just read off their strategies from the context. They have to interpret the world. So, 'ideas provide the point of mediation between actors and their environment'. Moreover, 'a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the ideational and the material is logically entailed by a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency' (Hay, 2002, 209–210). In short, ideas matter. They make a difference, whether the example is the 'Laffer curve', the winter of discontent, globalization, or managing the economy.⁶

From a Mainstream to an Interpretive Research Agenda

The mainstream agenda

Under the impact of trends in American political science, the research agenda of mainstream British political science broadened in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Gamble (1990, 414–418) and Tivey (1988) identify five important developments: public policy, political economy, political behaviour, especially the several theories of voting behaviour, Thatcherism, and managerialism. This agenda moves with the times. So, without essaying a comprehensive list, in the 1990s, topics such as New Labour, the European Union, devolution, and public service delivery came to prominence. The present-day 'state-of-the-art' is perhaps best captured by the recent survey of the discipline by the British Academy (Hayward *et al.*, 1999). It covers comparative politics, pressure groups, and parties, British political institutions (e.g. parliament and cabinet), electoral systems and elections, public administration, alongside other perennial favourites such as political theory (in its various guises) and international relations. There is an equivalent variety of social science theories. Their number includes policy network analysis, power-dependence in the core executive, cultural theory, rational choice, theories of regulation, transaction cost economics, and historical institutionalism.⁷ All these surveys atomize and classify political science into a set of discrete subfields. Criticism is limited to fault-finding: to identifying faults, big or small, in the set of ideas or data. There is no sense that they are offering but one among several possible narratives. There is no attempt to put rival narratives side-by-side (cf. Bevir and Rhodes, 2006b).

An interpretive agenda: We have introduced several interpretive approaches and they share a research agenda that differs markedly from that of mainstream political science. Without aspiring to be comprehensive, we



provide four examples of this difference. We look at critique, decentering governance, ethnography, and policymaking. We argue interpretive approaches ask different questions, use different methods, and provide novel answers.

Critique: Social humanists and post-structuralists have established critique as a thriving agenda for interpretive approaches. Of course, modernist empiricism and positivism can inspire evaluations of ideas and policies. But there are important differences between evaluation understood as a policy audit and the critiques prompted by interpretive approaches. An audit looks at the factual strengths and weaknesses of (say) a specific policy. Such audits can be an acceptable form of evaluation, especially if they are aware of their historical context and contingency. But it still limits criticism to ‘fault-finding’. The critique lists one or more faults, big or small, in a set of ideas or policies. It arrives at a judgement on their merits based on allegedly given facts; for example, on the extent to which a policy’s outcomes match its aims.

Many evaluations of New Labour are just such audits. They are based on the modernist empiricist tropes of atomization and analysis and the expertise that supports this form of analysis. The clearest examples are the collections of essays in which the authors consider New Labour’s record in the policy area in which they claim expertise. The Department of Government at Manchester University produced such a collection. ‘It was agreed’, the editors write, ‘that individual members of staff would examine the policy areas of most interest to them guided by two simple questions: What did New Labour promise, and what have they delivered so far (Coates and Lawler, 2000, ix)?’ ‘We did not set out to come to a singular, collective judgement of the Blair Government’s performance.’ Instead, they ‘left the individual contributors to draw their own conclusions and, not surprisingly, they are mixed’ (Coates and Lawler, 2000, x). Of course, libraries are full of collections of discordant essays.⁸ The crucial point about the Manchester collection is the division of the essays by policy area and the resulting method of evaluation. The collection does not consist of a series of narratives of New Labour written from avowedly different theoretical positions. On the contrary, while there are one or two exceptions, the essays typically present themselves as theoretically innocent accounts of given empirical facts. New Labour is atomized into a set of discreet promises made in distinct policy areas, and then evaluated by experts who assess its effectiveness in delivering these promises. In other words, criticism is limited to fault-finding; that is, to passing judgement on the merits of a given ethical or instrumental standard from which the policy departs. It is deemed irrelevant that New Labour may not adopt the concept of equality favoured by the critics. It matters not that New Labour has a different view (and policies) from



the critics about the root causes of unemployment. The audit is fault-finding. So, the Manchester collection is meant to be, as its cover tells us, 'systematic', 'comprehensive', 'an audit'. It is not supposed to be argumentative, or, in the sense we are giving to the term, critical.

Interpretive approaches supplement fault-finding with critique. They take historicism and contingency seriously and put their fault-finding in broader critiques. Consider, first, the implications of having a specific position as a critic of, say, New Labour. Once we allow that our criticisms are not based on given facts, but rather infused with our own theoretical assumptions, we might well become more hesitant in finding fault. We might be wary of treating our particular theoretical perspective as a valid one from which to judge others. This hesitation might give rise to self-reflexive moments in presenting our evaluations of others. These moments might suggest that our criticisms arise against the background of theoretical commitments and concepts that others might not share. They might lead us to be reflexive about the source of our authority. While we cannot avoid taking a stance that commits us to the epistemic authority of one or other set of beliefs, we might at least recognize that this authority is provisional and justified within a contingent set of concepts. We might even recognize that we are offering a narrative that is just one among a field of possible narratives. In this way, we would move from fault-finding to critique. Instead of evaluating others using given concepts, values, or facts, we could put rival narratives side-by-side. Or we could ask what should follow from a set of concepts whether we share them or not.

How then do we provide a critique of New Labour? All too often political movements present themselves as based on given or neutral truths whether these are facts or values. Critique consists less of an evaluation of its object, than in unmasking its object as contingent, partial, or both. So, we might unmask the contingency of New Labour by showing it to be just one among several possible narratives. We might unmask the partiality of New Labour by showing how it arises against the background of an inherited tradition that is held by a particular group in society. We might also note that critique often has a clear evaluative import. By unmasking the contingency and partiality of (say) New Labour, we portray it, at best, as mistaken about its own nature and, at worst, as eliding its own nature with the interests of a group or class.

An argumentative critique seeks to explain the broad contours of New Labour's policies as a social democratic response to issues highlighted by the New Right. This response draws not only on a social democratic tradition but also on communitarianism and the new institutionalism (see Bevir, 2005). This explanation provides a stark contrast to New Labour's self-image with its evocation of a Third Way that has broken with the old ideological dogmatisms of state and market and adopted a pragmatic stance, focusing on the effectiveness of policy instruments in delivering services. This self-image



assumes we can make a neutral, pragmatic judgement about effectiveness without prior theoretical biases. An interpretive approach suggests that New Labour's declared pragmatism disguises a clear bias — an ideological dogmatism — favouring networks as an alternative to hierarchies and markets.

Decentring governance: Critiques evoke, at least implicitly, alternative narratives of British politics. These alternative narratives might contribute strongly to a second substantive research agenda — decentred accounts of governance. Interpretive approaches might prompt us to explore practices of governance by studying the contingent meanings that inform the actions of individuals at all kinds of levels.

While many political scientists have lost faith in the Westminster model of British government, their alternative accounts of governance focus on the allegedly objective characteristics of policy networks and the oligopoly of the political market place. Their accounts stress topics such as power-dependence, the independence of networks, the relationship of policy outcomes to the size of networks, and the strategies by which the centre might steer networks (for a review and citations see Marinetto, 2003). To decentre governance is, in contrast, to focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meanings. A decentred approach changes our view of governance. It encourages us to examine the ways in which individuals create, sustain and modify social life, institutions, and policies. It encourages us to recognize that institutional norms — or some logic of modernization — do not fix the actions of individuals. They arise from the beliefs individuals adopt against the background of traditions and in response to dilemmas.

Any existing pattern of government will have some failings although different people will have different views about these failings because they are not given by experience, but constructed from interpretations of experience infused with traditions. When people's perceptions of failings conflict with their existing beliefs, they pose dilemmas that push them to reconsider their beliefs and the intellectual tradition that informs those beliefs. Since people confront these dilemmas in diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them. Exponents of rival political positions or traditions seek to promote their particular sets of theories and policies, and this political contest leads to a reform of government. So, any reform must be understood as the contingent product of a contest of meanings in action.

The reformed pattern of government set up by this complex process will display new failings, pose new dilemmas, and be the subject of competing proposals for reform. There will be a further contest over meanings, a contest in which the dilemmas are often significantly different, and the traditions have been modified because of previous accommodations to dilemmas. Laws and



norms prescribe how all such contests should be conducted. Sometimes the relevant laws and norms have changed because of simultaneous political contests over their content and relevance. Yet, while we can distinguish analytically between a pattern of government and a political contest over its reform, we can rarely do so temporally. Typically, governing continues during most political contests, and most contests occur partly within local practices of governing. What we have, therefore, is a complex and continuous process of interpretation, conflict, and practice that produces an ever-changing pattern of governance.

A decentred account of governance represents a shift of topos from institutions to meaning in action. Other accounts of governance restrain the centrifugal impulse of this account of a differentiated polity by approaching it through modernist empiricism or positivism. They reduce the diversity of governance to a logic of modernization, institutional norms, or a set of classifications or correlations across networks. They tame an otherwise chaotic picture of multiple actors creating a contingent pattern of rule through their conflicting actions. In contrast, a decentred approach implies that governance arises from the bottom up. Governance is a product of diverse practices composed of multiple individuals acting on all sorts of conflicting beliefs that they have reached against the background of several traditions and in response to varied dilemmas. A decentred approach leads us, then, to replace aggregate concepts that refer to objectified social laws or institutions with ones that we craft to explain the particular beliefs and actions of interest to us. It inspires narratives of traditions and dilemmas.

So, we might argue that present-day British governance has arisen out of contingent and contested traditions, each of which typically has inspired a different narrative. There is the Tory narrative of intermediate institutions, the liberal one of networks of communities, the Whig one about reinventing the constitution, and the socialist one about joined-up government (see e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). The actions of individuals are informed by their beliefs in one or other of these narratives. Present-day British governance is an unintended effect of these actions.

Inspired by the Tory tradition, Ian Gilmour (1992, 198–224) portrays Thatcher's reforms as a 'series of tactical battles' that wrecked Britain's intermediate institutions, such as the monarchy, the church, the civil service, the judiciary, the BBC, and local government. These 'barriers between state and citizen' were torn down, he argues, in the drive to create an enterprise culture and a free market state. Gilmour values the pluralism of intermediate institutions and wants to return to moderation in the exercise of power. The Conservative party encompasses the paternal statism of the High Tories and economic liberalism but during the 1980s and 1990s, the former has become a submerged tradition.



For Liberals, the key to effective governance lay in market competition and bureaucratic reform. In her own words, Margaret Thatcher (1993, 48) ‘preferred disorderly resistance to decline rather than comfortable accommodation to it’. But the Liberal zeal in refashioning the state was also married to the notion of community. David Willetts (1992, 71) wants to claim the notion of an ‘overlapping network of communities’ as a core principle in the Liberal tradition. So, liberalism reconciles markets and community with the idea of ‘micro-conservatism’ or ‘the particular network of communities which gives each individual life meaning’. The role of the state is to sustain ‘a political order in which this multiplicity of communities can survive’ (Willetts, 1992, 105). Micro-communities populate the boundary between state and civil society, an image with a close affinity to 19th century notions of governance as private collectivism.

The Whig tradition lauds the capacity of British political institutions to incorporate and moderate changes. Its response to public sector reform is ‘wherever possible’ to use ‘traditional and familiar institutions for new purposes’ and so to ‘go with the grain of Westminster and Whitehall and their traditions’ (Hennessy, 1989, 734). Empathy with the British constitution leads to calls for a return to the organic constitution. In a similar vein Lord Bancroft (1983, 8), a former head of the home civil service argues ‘for organic institutional change, planned at a digestible rate’ so reforms work with, and so perpetuate, all that is salutary in Britain’s constitution and political practice.

New Labour rejects the command bureaucracy model of Old Labour with its emphasis on hierarchy, authority, and rules. New Labour rejects municipal socialism and nationalization and ‘does not seek to provide centralized “statist” solutions to every social and economic problem’ (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 27). Instead New Labour promotes the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnerships held together by relations of trust. It favours joined-up government or delivering public services by steering networks of organizations where the currency is not authority (bureaucracy) or price competition (markets) but trust. It exemplifies the shift from the providing state of Old Labour and the minimal state of Thatcherism to the enabling state and the continuing socialist commitment to making the state work.⁹

Ethnography: To improve our knowledge of present-day British governance, we need to pursue decentred studies of the diverse practices of which it consists. We need to explore the beliefs and actions of politicians, civil servants, public sector managers, street-level bureaucrats and citizens. These decentred studies open a wide range of new areas and styles of research about the beliefs and actions of many political actors. They can range from Prime Minister to



individual citizens — as they preserve and adapt traditions and practices — from Toryism and Parliament to, say, New Age travellers and forms of protest. Sometimes, we can explore beliefs through analysis of already written texts. For example, we might rely on texts, including official reports, to identify the beliefs that characterize Tory, Whig, Liberal, and Socialist constructions of governance. At other times, however, we can explore beliefs only by turning to a third substantive agenda — ethnography.¹⁰

Ethnographic research has two principal features as a source of new data. First, it gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth, and nuance, so the story of the department has richness as well as context. Second, it allows interviewees to explain the meaning of their actions, providing insights that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. Interviews and non-participant observation offer a version of political anthropology that yields ‘thick descriptions’.

In the space available, we can only briefly illustrate some of the available methods.¹¹ Elsewhere we describe the changing world of permanent secretaries and ministers (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006a, chapter 7). We sought to recover their beliefs about the world (Taylor, 1971, 32–33), using ethnography to identify the beliefs on which they act. Our methods included diary analysis, shadowing, elite interviewing, and non-participant observation with extensive field notes. The fieldwork generated seven sets of primary data. The first set includes transcribed repeat interviews with nine permanent secretaries. The second consists of transcribed interviews with three secretaries of state and three ministers. Third, we taped and transcribed interviews with nineteen other officials. Fourth, we acquired copies of curriculum vitae, speeches, and public lectures. Fifth, we had field notes from at least two days of non-participant observation in each private office (two ministers and three permanent secretaries). Sixth, we had field notes based on five working days spent shadowing each of two ministers and three permanent secretaries. Seventh, we had copies of the committee and other papers relevant for meetings during the non-participant observation and shadowing.¹²

These methods give us access to everyday behaviour. One example taken from the field notes collected during our periods of observation must suffice. Life at the top is pressurized. Crisis management may be about the press conference, questions in parliament, and the television interview. It is also about chats, meetings, a cup of tea, a drink after work, and the everyday routines that domesticate the unexpected. Such routines are unquestioned, unrecognized, and surprisingly ordinary. There are rituals aimed at relaxing new arrivals and making them feel at home. Tea and coffee are served at almost every meeting. Stothard (2003, 34, 61) refers to ‘coffee sipping amity’ and to the messengers who deliver it as ‘a source of continuity and a kind of comfort’. In our departments, it was tea more often than coffee but the quality of ritual



comfort remained. Every cup of tea signals the meeting of a London accent with middle-class vowels to discuss the weather, TV, a new baby, or how you are — to which the answer is ‘well, thank you’, any itemizing of complaints would be well out of order. It breaks tension. Perhaps it is the music of our cribs but the clatter of cups and saucer, the sound of a teaspoon on China, is wondrously reassuring. Even to an English person it all can seem ‘very English’, and that is an observation not a criticism.

Alongside the tea ritual are the conventions of polite behaviour. People do not run, they do not shout, and they do not express overt emotion. Points are made politely. There are few if any cries of ‘rubbish’, and even expostulations are expressed mildly. All defer to the chair. At one meeting about the departmental budget, a senior manager, whose section was facing severe cuts, became angry. He shouted at his colleagues around the table and eventually stormed out of the meeting. As we walked back to the office after the meeting, the permanent secretary apologized for his colleague’s behaviour more than once. Simply, one did not behave like that. One did not shout at colleagues but addressed remarks to them through the chair. Indeed, the committee remains the mechanism for bringing together people and information within and between departments. Stories are built up through successive meetings with colleagues. As well as committees, there are KITs — Keeping in Touch — and one-to-ones. They are the mechanisms for managing everyday life, sharing experience, arriving at stories and building loyalty. And its ordinariness should not mislead. Tea and manners are crucial to domesticating a hectic life.

Much present-day political science prefers ‘scientific’ techniques and ignores, or even denigrates other methods. In contrast, an interpretive approach does not require an exclusive use of any one method. However, it does redress the balance to the qualitative analysis more often associated with anthropology and history than with political science. It recovers meanings and provides thick descriptions of everyday practices.

Policymaking: If interpretive critiques are to have purchase, they need to be accompanied by an alternative set of beliefs or actions arguably better than those being criticized. For many, effective critique presupposes the ability to suggest alternative public policies. Critics of interpretive approaches suggest that policy-relevant knowledge comes from prediction based on models and correlations between independent variables. In response, advocates of an interpretive approach ask: Is scientific expertise and prediction the correct way of thinking about the advice political scientists might offer to practitioners? Typically they reject the possibility of prediction — defined in contrast to the looser idea of informed conjecture — because it is incompatible with narrative forms of explanation.



In our view, change is a product of the ways in which people modify inherited traditions and practices, and the ways in which they do so are open-ended and so not amenable to prediction. Since traditions and practices are not fixed, we cannot know in advance how people will develop their beliefs and actions in response to a dilemma. Therefore, political scientists cannot predict how people will respond to a dilemma. Whatever limits they build into their predictions, people could arrive at new beliefs and actions outside those limits. Political scientists cannot make predictions. All they can offer are informed conjectures that seek to explain practices and actions by pointing to the conditional connections between actions, beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas. Their conjectures are stories, understood as provisional narratives about possible futures.

At this point we can directly address the issue of how an interpretive approach can contribute to policy advice. Much contemporary policy analysis seeks to improve the ability of the state to manage the markets, bureaucracies, and networks that have flourished since the 1980s. This work treats hierarchies, markets, and networks as fixed structures that governments can manipulate if they use the right tools (see e.g. Salamon, 2002). An interpretive approach undercuts this idea of a set of tools for managing governance. Since governance is constructed differently, contingently, and continuously, we cannot have tool kits with which to manage it. Hence, an interpretive approach encourages us to forswear management techniques and strategies but, and the point is crucial, to replace such tools with learning by telling stories and listening to them. While statistics, models, and claims to expertise can have a place in such stories, we should not become too preoccupied with them. Instead, we should recognize that they too are narratives about how people have acted or will react given their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigour or expertise we bring to bear, all we can do is tell a story and judge what the future might bring.

Narratives offer a different version of policy advice. They do not provide audits. They do not employ a social logic or law-like regularities to predict. Rather, they enable policymakers to see things differently. They exhibit new connections within governance and new aspects of governance. They encourage dialogical modes of policymaking. Typically, we see new aspects of a policy area or problem when someone tells us a story that highlights them. So, policymakers would be well advised to engage in more dialogic modes of policy formation that involve them in conversations with diverse groups of citizens. In short, an interpretive approach points to policy advice as stories that enable listeners to see governance afresh.¹³

Morgan's (1993, 2–19) approach to storytelling is about creating new metaphors, new stories, with which to understand an organization. He aims to develop new ways of seeing; it is 'the art of framing and reframing'. It uses 'images, metaphors, readings and storylines to cast situations in new



perspective and open possibilities for creative action.’ Metaphors are central to this process. They use paradox to ‘break the bounds of normal discourse’. They require the ‘users to find and create meaning’. But they work only if they ‘ring true, hit a chord and resonate’ (Morgan, 1993, 290). In sum, ‘organization always hinges on the creation of shared meaning and shared understandings’ (Morgan, 1993, 11).

Morgan employs the techniques of action learning (Morgan, 1993, Appendix B) to create new meanings and shared understandings. We can illustrate this process with the cautionary tale of Network (paraphrased from Morgan, 1993, chapter 6). Network runs community action programmes for young people. The problem is that they are spread too thinly, with inadequate resources and have problems in setting priorities. They felt they were not organized. They were ‘a blob out of water’ and at their most ‘blobby’ when dealing with the church hierarchy; for example, the bureaucracy was irritated by their views on social justice. Morgan helped the staff to come up with new, shared meanings.

They were like the dandelion seeds and supernova. They were like an amoeba and chameleon, changing shape and colour in different circumstances. They operated in a loose, expansive, and at times chaotic style, yet ... they were held together ... through their strong value base (Morgan, 1993, 138).

The disorganization was better seen as flexibility; staff could operate autonomously but in unison. But it was too late. Their ‘blobbiness’ got them. The church hierarchy saw them as too chaotic and closed them down. So the story has four messages. It shows the qualities needed for an organization to be flexible. It shows how metaphors can create new meaning, how chaos can be reconceived as flexibility. And it shows how an interpretive approach can be applied to helping people run their organization. It shows the dangers of a clash in organizational styles; most governments, like the church, will find networks fundamentally messy and carp at the mess. As Morgan (1993, 306) concludes, such stories will be more or less effective as interventions if they ‘resonate and evoke ideas and personal responses in a wide variety of situations’ (see Morgan, 1993, 307–311 for an extended discussion).

Others still might ask, however, how do you write stories that guide managers? Morgan’s (1993, 301–302) basic protocol is to ‘get inside a situation and understand it as far as possible on its own terms’; adopt the role of a learner, not expert, and let ‘the situation ‘speak for itself’; ‘create a rich description’ of what is said and done; and develop an ‘evolving ‘reading’ or interpretation. He collects three kinds of data: the ‘so-called objective facts of a situation’; the social constructions of reality; and the researcher’s social constructions of reality. The resulting knowledge can be generalized in two ways. First, it provides ‘insights that capture the pattern of events and



problems'. Second, it provides 'strategies and tactics through which similar problems ... can be tackled elsewhere'.

It is important to recognize that storytelling is grounded in the everyday practices of administrators. Most if not all policy advisers will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Such phrases as: 'Have we got our story straight?', 'Are we telling a consistent story?', and 'What is our story?' abound. The basis for much advice is the collective memory of the department, its traditions if you will. It is an organized, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Advisers explain past practice and events to justify recommendations for the future. In short, our stress on storytelling is not an example of academic whimsy. It draws on both an interpretive approach and the everyday practice of advisers.

Conclusions

We have tried to provide a sense of the diversity of interpretive approaches and of the distinctive research agendas they can support. We have contrasted the several interpretive approaches to modernist empiricism and positivism. We have pointed to the family resemblances between idealism, social humanism, post-structuralism, ideational institutionalism and decentred analysis. Of course, there are family quarrels. Social humanists and post-structuralists might worry about the tendency of idealism and ideational institutionalism to play down difference, discontinuity, and dispersal. Idealists and ideational institutionalists might wonder if social humanists and post-structuralists are able to go beyond critique and decentred narratives to produce ethical prescriptions and policy-relevant knowledge. Social humanists and post-structuralists might debate whether individuals are situated agents or mere effects of discourse.

These quarrels are important theoretical debates. The plausibility of interpretive approaches will depend in part on our tackling such disagreements (see e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2006a). Equally, we should neither expect nor want theoretical unity among those pursuing interpretive approaches to British politics. The vitality of interpretive theory might derive in part from the vigour and sophistication of such debates. Only by engaging in such debates can proponents of each approach fruitfully advance their own ideas. Similarly, the vitality of substantive agendas such as critique, decentring governance, and ethnography might derive in part from the different types of studies promoted by the different interpretive approaches.

We have also shown that interpretive approaches make a difference. Typically, we do not look at the same topics as mainstream political science, and even when we do, we treat them differently. In contrast to the focus of the mainstream on specific subfields, we do not look at governance as a social



science theory with its objective, given characteristics such as policy networks. Rather, we stress that governance is a product of diverse practices. It is constructed by many individuals with manifold, conflicting beliefs, which they have reached against the background of several traditions and in response to varied dilemmas. We do not require political scientists to conduct surveys, construct typologies, search for correlations, or test models. Rather, we emphasize instead the reconstruction of meanings — the recovering of other people's beliefs from practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches. We show the significance of everyday practices in running bureaucracies. We do not provide audits, nor do we invoke a social logic or law-like regularities to make predictions. Rather, we employ narratives to encourage policymakers to see things differently; to highlight new connections within governance and new aspects of governance. It is political science — but not as we know it.

Notes

- 1 Although this paper concentrates on political science, interpretive approaches are widespread across the human sciences. Useful collections include Rabinow and Sullivan (1979, 1987) and Scott and Keates (2001).
- 2 The rediscovery of interpretive approaches in British political science is relatively recent and the application to British government and politics has barely begun. That said, we recognize that interpretive approaches are strongly established in cognate fields, most notably international relations and sociology. On international relations see, for example: Finnemore and Sicking (2001), Hay (2002), Smith (2000), Wendt (1999). On sociology see, for example: Berger and Luckman (1971), Burchell *et al.* (1991), Rose (1996, 1999), and Rose and Miller (1992).
- 3 These variants and their historical roots need not delay us. For a detailed historical account of the American variants, see Adcock, Bevir and Stimson, 2006. For a survey that includes the rest of the world, see Rhodes *et al.* (2006). Suffice it to note that the main influences on British political science were neither the structural or historical institutionalism of, for example, Theda Skocpol (see Evans *et al.*, 1985; Skocpol, 1978; Pierson and Skocpol, 2002) nor the rational choice institutionalism of, for example, Kenneth Shepsle (see Shepsle, 1995, 2007).
- 4 On ideational or constructivist institutionalism and its relationship to historical institutionalism, see also: Berman (1998), Blyth (1997, 2002a, 2002b, 2003), Campbell and Pederson (2001), Hall (1989, 1993), Hall and Taylor (1996, 1998).
- 5 See Jessop *et al.* (1988). This volume also contains Stuart Hall's reply to their criticisms of Thatcherism as an hegemonic project of 'authoritarian populism'. See also Hay (1996a).
- 6 On the Laffer curve, see Hay (2002, 202–204). On the winter of discontent, see Hay (1996b). On globalization, see Hay (2002, 210–213) and Hay and Rosamond (2002). On economic ideas, see Hall (1989), Hay (2001) and Blyth (2002a, b).
- 7 It would be cumbersome to provide references for each of these topics. The interested reader will find many citations in the several surveys of the 'discipline' of political science: see Gamble (1990), Hayward and Norton (1986), Hayward *et al.* (1999), Rhodes (2000) and Tivey (1988). *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* has regular surveys of the 'state-of-the-art' on specific topics.
- 8 There are many more examples of such audits — they are a 'genre' within mainstream political science. See, for example: Kavanagh and Seldon (1989, 1994), Marsh and Rhodes (1992), Savage and Atkinson (2001), and Seldon (2001).



- 9 Other examples of decentred analysis include Bang (2004), Bang and Sorensen (1999), Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006a), Bevir *et al.* (2003), Deeming (2004), Dudley (2003), Loeseng and Zimmerman (2005), Richards and Smith (2004) and Schultze (2003).
- 10 On the several forms of non-participant observation relevant to British government, see: Dexter (1970), Eckstein (1975), Fenno (1990), Geertz (1973), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), Richards (1996), Sanjek (2000), Silverman (1997, 2000), Strauss *et al.* (1973) and Yin (1994).
- 11 Examples of ethnographic analysis in the study of British government include: Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006a), Glennerster *et al.* (1983), Hecló and Wildavsky (1974), McPherson and Raab (1988), Rhodes and Weller (2001), Richards and Smith (2004), Silverman and Jones (1976) and Theakston (1999, 2000).
- 12 Cris Shore's (2000, 7–11) cultural analysis of EU elites similarly used a battery of methods including participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques.
- 13 There is a growing literature on interpretive policy analysis. See, among others, Bobrow and Dryzek (1987), Dryzek (1993), Fischer (2003), Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), Rein (1976), Roe (1994), Schram (1993), van Eeten *et al.* (1996), Weick (1995) and Yanow (1999).

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