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POLITICS AS CULTURAL PRACTICE

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Biographical Notes

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Our work explores politics as cultural practices. The titles of both books – Interpreting British Governance and Governance Stories – reflect this concern. ‘Governance’ conveys the idea that politics consists of historical practices arising out of the conjunction of state and civil society. ‘Interpretation’ and ‘Stories’ convey the idea that politics, like all human activity, is cultural or meaningful, so the study politics is largely a matter of recovering the meanings that inform actions.

Our view of politics as cultural practices stands in stark contrast to two common motifs in the study of British government, namely, the Westminster model and modernist empiricism. Our insistence on governance and practices challenges those who still believe that British politics can be understood as the formal institutional arrangements that make up the Westminster model. Our insistence on stories and culture (meanings and beliefs) challenges those who still believe the study of politics aims at formal laws, correlations, classifications, or models.

In this symposium, we are among friends, for Martin Smith sympathises with our emphasis on governance, while David Howarth and Jason Glynos sympathise with our emphasis on interpretation. We are grateful to them for providing such a congenial setting in which to clarify and think through our account of British politics as cultural practices. In reply, we begin by rehearsing briefly our theoretical approach to cultural practices as agency situated in historical contexts. Then, we consider aggregate concepts and a recentred account of governance, the nature of power, some empirical questions, and finally, the distinctiveness of our narrative of a storytelling elite using routines to domesticate crises.

Postfoundationalism, meaning, and agency

Our approach to cultural practices derives from our philosophical analysis of the implications of postfoundationalism. We follow many other postfoundationalists in emphasising meanings. Our philosophy implies that social actions are constituted by the meanings with which actors imbue them. Social facts are cultural in that they exist only because of the meanings or beliefs of the relevant actors. To insist on the ubiquity of culture is not to suggest there is a distinct cultural sphere that determines other spheres of social life such as the economic or political. Rather, it is to suggest that all such spheres are composed of meaningful activity.

Besides an emphasis on cultural meanings, our philosophical analysis leads to positions that are more controversial among postfoundationalists. In particular, we argue that individuals are ‘situated agents’ who can reflect on their beliefs and act for reasons of their own, though only against the background of inherited traditions. Howarth and Glynos suggest that other postfoundationalists in fact believe in agency. We must admit to being surprised to learn that the entire post-structuralist and post-Marxist furore over the death of the subject, Man, and author meant so little. But, instead of quibbling over how best to interpret Foucault or Laclau, we welcome other postfoundationalists, such as Howarth and Glynos, who openly recognise situated agency.

Once other postfoundationalists recognise agency, we suspect the differences between them and us will mainly be terminological. It is true that at times Howarth and Glynos suggest we are committed to the truth of the self-descriptions of those whom we interpret. With a tinge of regret for lost innocence, we freely admit we grasp the notions of self-

deception and lying! Yet, at other times, they recognise, far more reasonably, not only that we can be sceptical of self-descriptions, but that our concepts of tradition and dilemma provide tools for genealogical critiques of just such self-descriptions. It is also true that Howarth and Glynos sometimes suggest that we offer loaded binary choices between an ‘all-determining structure’ and a ‘fully present subject’. Yet, at other times, they grant, far more reasonably, that our concepts, such as situated agency, seek to avoid such extreme, binary positions. We would add that our concepts also seek to introduce greater precision into a vague eclecticism that yokes together philosophers such as Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. Such rhetorical flourishes sidestep any attempt to defend precise positions on the many issues about which these philosophers disagreed, including, incidentally, the matter of agency.

Once other postfoundationalists recognise agency, they have a common cause with us. They too are studying politics as a cultural practice to be grasped as the meanings embedded in contexts. Sometimes these studies will be ahistorical, based on ethnography and discourse analysis. At other times, they will provide historical narratives that act as critical genealogies of particular traditions.

Unlike Howarth and Glynos, Smith does not share this postfoundational emphasis on meanings and interpretation. We are uncertain of the grounds on which Smith challenges our theoretical take on cultural practices. He neither rebuts our postfoundationalism nor points to flaws in our analysis of the implications of such postfoundationalism for social inquiry.

For example, we claim social scientists have to interpret beliefs to understand the social world. We argue that to explain actions social scientists have to appeal to the relevant beliefs and desires, and we argue that postfoundationalism precludes any attempt to read-off such beliefs from allegedly objective facts about social location, structures, or objective interests. So, we conclude postfoundationalism makes interpreting beliefs central to the study of society. Smith complains that this conclusion is a problem, but we do not understand his reasons for saying so. He does not challenge our postfoundational analysis. He does not challenge our philosophical analysis that any explanation of actions requires appeals to the relevant (conscious or unconscious) beliefs. He does not point to a logical gap in our argument that such beliefs and desires cannot be reduced to social facts about people.

We have a similar problem with Smith's criticisms of our analysis of tradition. We argue postfoundationalism implies not only that agents are necessarily situated in historical traditions, but also that particular traditions cannot be seen as equivalent to natural phenomena. We conclude that postfoundationalism points to a pragmatic concept of traditions. Smith complains that our concept of tradition is loose. But a pragmatic concept is bound to be loose. So, Smith's comment presupposes either something is amiss with pragmatic concepts in general or with our particular analysis of tradition as a pragmatic concept. Again, we are unclear what Smith objects to and his reasons for so doing. He does not argue that our philosophical analysis is invalid. He does not point to a gap in our argument.

How (and how not) to recentre

The absence of any sustained critique of postfoundationalism also undermines Smith's case for aggregate concepts such as institution and structure. There is a measure of agreement. We agree on the need for recentring or using aggregate concepts. Indeed, we use aggregate concepts like tradition and dilemma precisely to tell broad-brush stories of governance. However, 'tradition', 'dilemma', and 'narrative' all refer to broad patterns of belief. They are compatible with a postfoundational view of actions as meaningful and politics as cultural practices. Smith wants to supplement these aggregate concepts with such notions as institution, structure, and causal mechanism. But we find his use of these concepts philosophically vague and incompatible with the idea of politics as cultural practices.

Concepts like institution and structure can be unpacked in terms that are consistent with a postfoundational emphasis on meanings. However, we prefer to use alternative concepts. So, we unpack 'structure' in four ways. First, some structures might be traditions; that is, inherited webs of belief that influence what people do. Second, some structures might be a subset of dilemmas; that is, intersubjective views about the way the nature of the world preclude or impel certain actions. Third, some structures might be cultural practices, where although these practices arise from people's actions, they then confront other people as if objective social facts. Fourth, some structures might be the unintended consequences of meaningful actions, where, of course, to explain such consequences, we would have to refer to the actions and so the meanings (or intentionality) they embodied. Obviously we have no problems with the idea of structures so conceived. We would only

add that it is much clearer if we replace the word 'structure' with the more specific notions of 'tradition', 'dilemma', 'practice', and 'unintended consequence'.

When Smith complains that we neglect concepts such as structure, we assume he wants to give these concepts a different content from that of tradition, dilemma, and practice. To do so, he falls back on modernist empiricism and an essentialist view of structures as given or objective social facts and to reject the argument that actions are constituted by the meanings with which actors imbue them. Indeed he must do so because, if his concepts refer to beliefs and meanings, he has no reason to think we disagree.

Curiously, Howarth and Glynos, despite their postfoundationalism, also give the impression they are defending a modernist empiricist concept of structure. We do not understand how they reconcile their concept of structure with Laclau and Mouffe's (surely justified) rejection of economism and determinism as foundationalist and leading to authoritarian politics. If structures are introduced in contrast to contingent cultural practices, surely they embody the essentialism and reification that so bedevilled orthodox Marxism? Perhaps, however, Howarth and Glynos use the word 'structure' merely to capture the background and the consequences of contingent meaningful practices. Perhaps, in other words, they seek to evoke traditions, unintended consequences, and the ways in which others' actions constitute a social world that is given to any particular individual.

We remain unclear about what Howarth, Glynos and Smith mean by 'structure'. They do not unpack the concept. Are structures cultural practices? Alternatively, do structures refer to parts of the social world that are not meaningful (and so perhaps reified)? Are

structures just aggregate effects of situated agency? Alternatively, do structures refer to parts of the social world that are not contingent (and so perhaps essentialised)? Does the claim that structures are ‘incomplete’ differ from our analysis of tradition as influencing action without determining it and our analysis of particular traditions as pragmatic constructs? Unlike vague appeals to ‘structure’, our analysis of ‘tradition’, ‘dilemma’, and ‘practice’ at least engages with these questions (and see Bevir and Rhodes 2006).

What is power?

Despite the occasional suggestion otherwise, Howarth and Glynos’s conception of structure is compatible with postfoundationalism. They probably appeal to ‘structure’ only to give ontological weight to their concern with ideology and power. Their appeal to structure is, in other words, an echo of the claim that we have ‘too mechanistic’ a way of linking beliefs to their historical contexts. Howarth and Glynos argue that our philosophical analysis of that link neglects power. They complain that we fail to ask questions about why some traditions exert greater appeal than others, or why some strands of traditions resist change.

We do not want to dismiss this complaint. Instead, we want to suggest it confuses philosophical analysis with empirical social theory. A philosophical analysis draws out the implications of our concepts. It picks out things we are committed to across the board. For example, our postfoundational analysis implies that all humans are necessarily situated agents; they can innovate but they are not autonomous. In contrast, a social theory tells us about how things work under particular social conditions or in particular

historical eras. Our philosophical analysis tells us only about the ineluctable nature of agency and tradition. It does not tell us about the ways in which traditions work under particular social conditions. To put the same point differently, we do not provide philosophical answers to questions about the link between power and tradition, or the dominance of some traditions, because these are questions that philosophy cannot answer.

Philosophy can tell us, however, about the viability of different concepts of power. Our previous comments on the concept of structure point the way. On the one hand, we have been cautious about using the word 'power' since, like 'structure', it often ignores the meaningfulness of action and resorts to reification and essentialism. On the other hand, we can unpack a concept of power to make it compatible with our postfoundational analysis of politics as cultural practice. First, power can refer to the constitutive part played by tradition in giving us our beliefs and actions, and in making our world. So our governance stories show how traditions help construct complex patterns of governance in part by adopting technologies from disciplines such as political science itself. Second, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what we can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as Blair, Brown, senior civil servants, doctors, local police officers, and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, our governance stories show how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. Indeed, our governance stories are, on this understanding, studies of both power and resistance. They show how local actors –

Whitehall bureaucrats, doctors, and police officers – are able to draw on their own traditions to resist policies inspired by the narratives of others in the policy chain.

Rethinking governance – empirical questions

We now turn from questions of philosophy to our account of British governance. We begin by addressing specific matters raised by Smith. We then highlight what is distinctive about our tale about a storytelling elite.

We do not accept that ‘modernist empiricism’ is a caricature of mainstream political science. There is a mainstream, and we have already suggested how even Smith and Howarth and Glynos sometimes give the impression they are falling back on its implicit concepts of structure and institution. This mainstream is well represented by Jack Hayward et al (1999), The British Study of Politics in the Twentieth Century. Among the many examples we give, the most prestigious is Sammy Finer's award-winning three-volume history of government. Whether characterized as old or new institutionalism, it typifies the core beliefs of modernist empiricism in comparisons across time and space, regularities and neutral evidence. Besides, to claim there is a mainstream is not to deny there is a fringe. Most of Smith's examples are subfields in political science that challenge the mainstream, and we always exempted international relations from our comments (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 24 and 2006: 55).

In analysing governance, we seek to show there are competing notions rooted in different traditions. Our argument is not confined to New Labour. We do not argue that New

Labour's reforms stem from the Socialist tradition but from a response to the dilemmas posed for that tradition by neoliberalism. Smith describes New Labour's web of beliefs about the challenge facing the government. We essay a more difficult task. We trace the roots of these beliefs in competing traditions (see also Bevir 2005). So, we move beyond unhelpful summary descriptions such as 'pragmatic' to trace the origins of the ideas in competing traditions, including the Westminster tradition, liberal and Fabian socialism, and institutionalist and communitarian social science. It never occurred to us that centralization was not part of the socialist tradition.

Similarly in our analysis of the police, after dozens of interviews, it would be hard to ignore the importance of hierarchy. However, this tradition of command and control confronts the dilemmas posed by the ideas of contracting and partnerships. We seek to show that the problems of police reform cannot be explained solely by the resistance to change by die-hard proponents of hierarchy. In fact, many police officers sympathise with the reform proposals but they struggle with the dilemmas and unintended consequences posed by conflicting ideas.

We read with some surprise that presidentialism is a trivial notion confined to journalists. Not only does that statement do a grave disservice to Peter Riddell and Andrew Rawnsley, to name only two, but it is also inaccurate. The academic contribution is large including, naming only the main contenders, Foley, 2000, Hennessy, 2005 (and citations to earlier work in his note 3); Mughan, 2000; and Poguntke and Webb 2005. Besides, our point is that the notion of presidentialism is widespread not only among journalists and academics but also among practitioners. We seek to understand the latter's beliefs so as better to understand their cultural practices.

Officials hold beliefs commonly described as the Westminster model but these beliefs do not fix practices. Rather, as in the cases of New Labour and police reform, we trace the pressures for change – the dilemmas - as understood by officials against the backcloth of that tradition. We describe a tradition under challenge. In doing so, we document both the traditions and their dilemmas; in shorthand, the competing ideas of Westminster and managerialism (and for a recent summary account see Fawcett and Rhodes 2007). The Westminster tradition may lay out the roles of ministers and civil servants but we also explore how individuals’ understand these roles, how they shape these roles by their personalities and experiences, how they breathe life into the system, and how roles and beliefs change under the impact of new ideas.

Governance as storytelling

We depict a storytelling administrative and political elite with beliefs and practices rooted in the Westminster model, confronting the dilemmas posed by both marketisation and managerialism, while using everyday rituals and routines to domesticate crises. This picture is not conventional.

Our up close and personal use of textual analysis and ethnography also admits of surprises – moments of epiphany, serendipity and happenstance – that can open new research agendas. In our work, the surprise was the role of the mundane in managing crises. For example, in one meeting the minister and his special advisers reduced the Iraq war to the question of how to get a level playing field for commercial contracts. Routines also mean that ministers do not have to instruct their civil servants because they know

what is expected before it is spoken; they get `anticipatory compliance' ('t Hart 1994). Our constructions of everyday life in the cultural practices of governance may be well known to political scientists but they are yet to write them down.

Reservations about textual analysis and ethnographic research methods reflect the bias of mainstream political science. 'Thick descriptions' are well-established in some other social sciences, and face-to-face, in-depth interviews with extended periods of observation are central to their production. Interpretive approaches get below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance. They provide an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. They let interviewees explain the meaning of their actions. They help us to analyse the symbolic dimensions of political action. They are valuable both in their own right and as a corrective to approaches that read off beliefs from social structure. It is as foolish to dismiss thick descriptions as survey methods. The aim is to see the world through the eyes of the manager, top civil servant and politician. Whether our fieldwork is judged poor or excellent, we insist that 'thick descriptions' are essential in the study of governance. There is little work in political science of this sort. As Fenno (1990: 128) comments, 'not enough political scientists are presently engaged in observation'. Yet sociology and anthropology are not reluctant to use ethnographic methods. If we encourage others to give the lie to Fenno's claim, we will feel we have achieved something (and for a more detailed discussion see Rhodes et al 2007, chapter 9).

The parallel between our account of politics as cultural practice and Geertz's interpretive anthropology is deliberate. Like Geertz we seek 'to open ... the consciousness of one group of people to ... the life-form of another'. We also hope to enlarge 'the possibility of

intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power' (Geertz, 1988: 143 and 147). We see creating our construction of their construction of the world of Westminster and Whitehall as both a novel challenge to political scientists and a way of opening understanding and discourse.

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