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STUDYING BRITISH GOVERNMENT: reconstructing the research agenda*

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Abstract

This article seeks to place the study of British government in a broader context by exploring the potential contribution of an anti-foundational epistemology. We seek to 'reinvent' a self-conscious, sceptical and tentative approach rooted in philosophy and history. The first section defines the Westminster model and the family of linked narratives: traditional sceptics, social science, radical theory, new public management. The second section outlines an anti-foundational epistemology, focusing on the notions of traditions, narratives, decentering and dilemmas. The third section applies this approach to one prominent school of thought about British government: policy networks. We argue that an anti-foundational approach will decenter networks, shifting the locus of analysis from the institutions to individuals, and focus on dilemmas to explain how networks change. Finally, we conclude there is no essentialist account of British government, only complex and diverse narratives, and no tool kit for solving problems, only lessons drawn from many stories.

Introduction

This article reviews the study of British government and seeks to meet the editors aims of setting 'traditional concerns' in 'a theoretical, historical and comparative perspective' (Marsh and others 1999). The 'State of the Discipline' section focuses on contributions by British and European scholars, and contributors are enjoined 'to take epistemological questions more seriously'. The 'traditional concerns' on this occasion are encapsulated by the phrase 'the Westminster model'. The article briefly outlines the Westminster model and its 'family' of concepts. It then outlines an anti-foundational approach before illustrating how it differs from the usual positivistic social science approach through a discussion of one of the most prominent modern schools of thought; policy networks.

The key difference between positivism and anti-foundationalism lies in the answer to the question of 'how do we know what we know about pure facts'. Positivism adopts some variant of the natural science model, tries to discover 'pure facts', and strives after successive approximations to given truth. In Hayward's (1986 p. 8) acerbic tones, political science was pervaded by 'portentous claims, methodological obsession and paltry performance' as it tried to live up to its name! An anti-foundationalist epistemology rejects all absolute truth claims, accepting there are no grounds for conclusively asserting the superiority of one interpretation over another. Our objective is to broaden the research agenda by showing how an anti-foundational epistemology raises distinctive and interesting questions about British government while, crucially, keeping an anthropological concept of objectivity.

In the manner advocated by Dearlove (1982 p. 453), we challenge positivistic social science and aim to be:

> 'self conscious, sceptical and tentative about our theory, opening ourselves up to a serious and sympathetic consideration of rival problematics and rejecting the philosopher's stone of a single key to understanding; …. And we need to be interested in disputes about all these matters within the other social sciences, within the sociology of knowledge and within the philosophy of social science.

Philosophy and history once constituted the entrenched heart of British political science (Hayward 1991 p. 94). We seek to 'reinvent' a self-conscious, sceptical and tentative philosophical and historical approach that can challenge the conventions of mainstream political science.

The Westminster Model

The Westminster model refers to the concepts, questions and historical story used to capture the essential features of British government which, through sheer longevity, form the conventional or mainstream view.[1] There is always the danger of erecting a straw man but we need a benchmark before discussing variations. So, we begin with the obvious - a dictionary definition:

> The characteristics of the Westminster model … include: strong cabinet government based on majority rule; the importance attached to constitutional conventions; a two-party system based on single member constituencies; the assumption that minorities can find expression in one of the major parties; the concept of Her Majesty's loyal opposition; and the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy, which takes precedence over popular sovereignty except during elections (Verney 1991 p. 637).

There are many similar definitions. For example, Gamble (1990 p. 407) adumbrates a unitary state characterised by: parliamentary sovereignty; strong cabinet government; accountability through elections; majority party control of the executive (that is, prime minister, cabinet and the civil service); elaborate conventions for the conduct of parliamentary business; institutionalised opposition, and the rules of debate. Obviously every author varies both the

list of characteristics and their relative importance[2]. The model has been criticised and adapted and there are several variants (see below). But there is a clear baseline to any discussion of the Westminster model and there are marked family resemblance's between the several varieties. The most prominent family characteristics are the focus on rules and institutions; the use of legal-historical methods, a Whig historiography, and a personalised view of power.

The Westminster model focuses on institutions - that is, the rules, procedures and formal organisations of government - which are the historical heart of political science. As Leftwich (1984 p. 16) points out, the discipline traditionally had two central foci; the study of the institutions of government and the study of political thought (see also Rhodes 1997a chapter 4). Greenleaf (1983 p. 7-9) argues that constitutional law, constitutional history and the study of institutions form the 'traditional' approach. Indisputably these topics are central to the Westminster model where they are reflected in a prevalent language of machine metaphors and phrases such as 'the machinery of government.

The Westminster model also contains a widely shared set of methodological assumptions. These assumptions involve using the inductive tools of the lawyer and the historian to explain the constraints on both political behaviour and democratic effectiveness. It firmly rejects the deductive approach of the economist. Indeed, as Gamble (1990 p. 409) highlights, it sometimes embodies an idealist moment, seeing 'institutions as the expression of human purpose' and focusing, therefore, on the interaction between ideas and institutions. For example, Johnson's (1975 pp. 276-7) rationale for the study of political institutions argues:

> political institutions express particular choices about how political relationships ought to be shaped; they are in the nature of continuing injunctions to members of a society that they should try to conduct themselves in specific ways when engaged in the pursuit of political ends.

Here the Westminster model typically goes with a Whig historiography that comes perilously close to telling the story of a single, unilinear, progressive idea, reason or spirit underlying the evolution of British government. It emphasises gradualism and the capacity of British institutions to evolve and cope with crises. It provides 'capacity for independent action, leadership and decision' while ensuring that 'British political institutions would remain flexible and responsive'. This narrative with its implicit Whig historiography was esteemed by political scientists who 'were largely sympathetic' (Gamble 1990 p. 411) … convinced that change needed to be evolutionary'; and willing to celebrate 'the practical wisdom embodied in England's constitutional arrangements' (Gamble 1990 p. 409).

The Whig tradition also makes some important if implicit assumptions about power. As Smith (1998) argues, it focuses on behaviour, motivations and institutional position. Power is an object which belongs to the prime minister, cabinet or civil service. So, 'power relationships are a zero-sum game where there is a winner and a loser' and power is 'ascribed to an institution or person and fixed to that person regardless of the issue or the context'. Personality is a key part of any explanation of an actor's power.

The family: variations on a theme[3]

Norton and Hayward (1986) distinguish between the formative period of political science before 1961 with its dominant philosophical and historical approach (see also Rhodes 1997a chapter 4); the emergence of a self-conscious community between 1961 and the early 1970s with its ‘reformist optimism’ and ‘scientific expectations’; and a maturing phase during which the discipline has ‘muddled its way forward’ to become more analytical. Much of this literature prefers positivism to the philosophical and historical version of the Westminster model to be found in Beer (1965) and Birch (1964).[4] We now describe this maturing phase

with its several variations on and alternatives to the mainstream.[5] There are some important challengers, including American behavioural social science, Marxism and the New Right, and the new public management (NPM). It has also been vigorously criticised from within.

The Traditional Sceptics

The optimism of the 'classical' Westminster model with its belief in the resilience of British institutions foundered on recurrent crises. The sceptics flourished in the 1970s. They bemoaned government overload (King 1975); adversary politics (Finer 1975); the cultural basis of Britain's decline (Barnett 1986); elective dictatorship (Hailsham 1978); and they called for constitutional reconstruction. Beer (1982) and Birch (1989) reassessed their analyses of the state of British government with jaundiced eyes. Beer pointed to pluralistic stagnation, class decomposition and the revolt against authority to explain the paralysis of British government invoking no lesser example 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. During the 1980s, the literature on constitutional reform began to take on the proportions of an avalanche (see the citations in Rhodes 1997a chapter 4). All was not as it should be, with the Westminster model under attack from within as scholars catalogued how constitutional theory and political practice diverged. Some scholars sought to bury the model and its Whig story. But most sceptics continued to subscribe to some variant, if only to explain decline. Thus, for Marquand (1988 p. 154) Britain failed to become an adaptive, developmental state because of its ‘political culture suffused with the values and assumptions of whiggery’.

Social Science

The influence of American political science and its positivist methods also prompted questions about the Westminster model. The preferred method of working was to frame hypotheses which could, in principle be refuted or falsified. Gamble (1990 p. 412) notes it 'introduced new rigour into British political science and widened the range of research questions but had no alternative organising perspective to propose'. Behavioural methods were used, but the tacit historiography was Whig, a point amply illustrated by the regular use of such phrases as Britain's 'traditionally modern political culture' (Kavanagh 1990 chapter 4, Norton 1991 chapter 2, Rose 1985 chapter 1).

There was a greater diversity of subjects. As well as the sceptics, Gamble (1990 pp. 414-18) and Tivey (1988) identify five important developments: public policy (for example Rhodes 1988); political economy (for example Hall 1986); political behaviour, especially the several theories of voting behaviour (for example Heath et al. 1991); Thatcherism (for example Kavanagh 1990 among many others); and managerialism (Pollitt 1993).

Amid this diversity, there are important continuities. Common major themes include: institutional continuity; the growth of government; and relative economic decline. For example, Bulmer and Burch (1997 p. 8) describe the UK system as 'evolutionary, flexible, unitary (as opposed to federal), centralised, and adversarial with substantial power concentrated in a "collective" central executive'. Clearly, the Westminster model has not disappeared. American political science received a 'cool reception' and its impact was 'muted'. British political science remains 'insular' in spite of its 'homoeopathic doses of American political science' (Hayward 1991 pp. 96 and 104).

The Radical Alternative

For most of the post-war period, the main radical challenge came from Marxism which broadened to encompass many varieties of state theory. The main challenge now comes from the New Right. Both state theory and the New Right offer distinct narratives of the British polity.

For Leys (1983 p. 15) the Marxist perspective focuses on the social totality, tries to rethink the present historically and seeks the social origins and effects of ideas. These are the basic tenets of the materialist interpretation of history. This focus on economic forces and class, allied to the critique of capitalism, characterises the Marxist challenge to the Westminster model and its Whig story.[6] However, the label Marxist is now too confining because it does not adequately capture burgeoning state theory.[7] These accounts of British politics dispute the factual accuracy of the Westminster model and challenge specific interpretations, although they prefer the language of 'counterfactuals' to 'falsification' and 'refutation'. Ironically, although their historical story is anti-Whig, their account continues to be shaped, even distorted, by key features of Whig historiography. They accept that Britain has a unique political tradition characterised by stability and continuity; they are domesticated by the British political tradition even though they focus on crises.

For example, Miliband's (1972 and 1982) analysis of the Labour Party and parliamentarism stresses its key role in managing conflicts and discontents by expressing grievances but also containing demands from below because it accepted the validity and legitimacy of the state and rejected radicalism for moderation. In a similar vein, Hall and Schwarz (1985 pp. 8-12) stress crises and 'frenzied reconstruction' to counter the focus of other commentators on continuities but still have to recognise the 'passive transformation' of the UK; the marginalisation of radical movements; the 'peculiarity of the British case'; the 'partial and uneven' transition to collectivism; and the 'underlying persistence' of the British political

tradition (ibid. pp. 26-7). The similarities extend to subject areas. The factual and interpretative challenges to the Westminster model also focus on, for example, the unitary state, parliamentary sovereignty, bureaucratic neutrality; ministerial responsibility and the impact of Thatcherism.[8] So, the Westminster model shapes other narratives through the questions it poses and the concepts used to answer them.

Central tenets of the New Right are a suspicion of the state, the primacy of markets and protecting the individual from state intervention and domination by producer interests. The narrative is closely associated with rational choice; the deductive theory and methods of the economist; and the assumptions of methodological individualism. It has exercised much influence on the practice of British government but there are few texts which provide an interpretation of British government.[9] The New Right literature provides critiques of government policy (for example, health, education) or British political institutions (for example, the civil service, local government). We agree with Gamble's (1990 p. 420) assessment that 'the New Right model is far from gaining the ascendancy which the Westminster model once enjoyed'.

The new public management

NPM is a global phenomenon and a policy ambition for international organisations (see for example OECD 1995). The label also received the seal of approval from many academics (see for example Hood 1991). Although it covers many varieties of public sector reform (see Hood 1995; Rhodes 1998b) the existing literature suggests there are six changes relevant to describing and analysing trends in British government: privatisation, marketization, corporate management, decentralisation, regulation and political control.[10]

Privatisation refers to the sale of public assets to the private sector. The British government sold over 50 major businesses and reduced the state-owned sector of industry by some two-thirds, raising some £64 billion to pay for tax cuts.

Marketization refers to the use of market mechanisms in the delivery of public services. In the UK, the term covers mainly contracting-out (for example, compulsory competitive tendering in local government); quasi-markets in the guise of the purchaser-provider split (for example, the national health service (NHS)); and experiments with voucher schemes (for example, nursery education).

Corporate management refers to introducing private sector management in the public sector. It stresses: hands-on, professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance and output; managing by results; value-for-money; and more recently closeness to the consumer.

Decentralisation encompasses both deconcentration and devolution. Deconcentration refers to the redistribution of administrative responsibilities in central government. Devolution refers to the exercise of political authority by lay, elected institutions within areas defined by community characteristics. In the UK, most of the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s sought to deconcentrate managerial authority - for example, to agencies - and it is only recently devolution has become a feature of public sector reform.

As the boundaries of the state were redrawn in the 1980s, the British state sought to strengthen its ability to regulate and audit institutions, their policies and implementation of those policies. The government substituted regulation for ownership, and so multiplied the watchdogs overseeing the new private sector monopolies. The 'audit explosion' refers to all forms of internal and external regulation. It covers management and financial audit and

evaluation with related quality assurance mechanisms and 'a distinct mentality of administrative control' which displaces trust and focuses on quantified, external, ex-post, expert forms of control (Power 1994 pp. 8-9).

The efforts of ministers to reassert political control over the civil service is a common feature of recent public sector reform in Westminster systems (Aucoin 1995 pp. 8-9). There may have been no overt party politicisation of the higher civil service, but we have lost 'institutional scepticism' (Hugo Young cited in Plowden 1994 p. 104).

There is now an enormous literature on these changes but the consistent even pervasive storyline is the dilemmas posed for the Westminster model by NPM. Thus, the search for greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness led to agencification and separating policy from operational management. Ministers delegated responsibility to agency chief executives but remained accountable to parliament for policy. Obviously many commentators welcomed this search for greater efficiency, but bemoaned weakened ministerial responsibility to parliament. Again, NPM is a member of the Westminster family because it draws on the key beliefs about the constitution to interpret change.

So, traditional sceptics, positivist social scientists, radicals and managerialists alike have highlighted factual and theoretical problems in the Westminster model, but despite the force of the criticisms, it survives. For example, most textbooks offer a critical variation, not a coherent alternative narrative. There is a ‘marked propensity’ for British political scientists ‘not to question the fundamentals of the British political process’ (Hayward 1991 p. 104). As Dearlove (1982 p. 438) concludes:

> New perspectives may have had to burst *through* the more established interpretations, but this does not mean they burst them *apart.* Quite the reverse. New approaches and perspectives were slowly absorbed

> and accepted precisely because they could be interpreted so as to sustain the credibility of the *core* assumptions integral to the earlier accounts and to the tradition of understanding as a whole.

So, there is a mainstream which survives in spite of manifold cracks.

An anti-foundational approach

Anti-foundationalism provides an alternative epistemology to the positivism. We are sympathetic to the historical and philosophical approach of Beer (1962) and Birch (1964) and our criticisms focus primarily on the positivism informing much of the Westminster model and its family. Anti-foundationalists explicitly reject the idea of given truths whether based on pure reason or pure experience. As a result, they typically look suspiciously on any claim to describe neutrally an external reality. They emphasise the constructed nature of our claims to knowledge (Rorty 1980).

'Constructivist' theories of the human sciences also suggest there is an 'irreducible and inexpungeable element of interpretation' (White 1978 pp. 51 and 82). For example, Collingwood (1939 and 1993) argues that historians ask questions and answer them with stories to make sense out of 'facts' which in their raw form make no sense at all. He summarises his position as follows:

> history should be (a) ... an answering of questions; (b) concerned with human action in the past; (c) pursued by interpretation of evidence; and (d) for the sake of human self-knowledge (1993 pp. 10-11).

And Collingwood insists knowledge is 'Created, not discovered, because evidence is not evidence until it makes something evident' (Collingwood 1965 p. 99 italics in original). This does not mean there are no 'facts', only that historians construct them. The human sciences are constructed and shaped by the concepts and theories used. The resulting interpretation is always incomplete, always open to challenge. Such a view of the human sciences contrasts

markedly with those commonly found in political science where the influence of natural science models is great (Kavanagh 1991).

Crucially, our anti-foundational epistemology in the human sciences still allows for the possibility of our judging competing theories or narratives by agreed standards of comparison. Objectivity arises from criticising and comparing rival webs of interpretation about agreed facts using rules of intellectual honesty. The key rules are accuracy and openness. Accuracy means using established standards of evidence and reason; so, we will prefer one theory over another if it is more accurate, comprehensive and consistent. Openness means taking criticism seriously and preferring positive speculative theories which open new avenues of research and make new predictions supported by agreed facts. These rules provide the criteria for comparing webs of beliefs. The clear difference between this approach and conventional approaches to studying government is that all interpretations are provisional. We cannot appeal to a logic of vindication or refutation. Objectivity rests on criteria of comparison. The interpretation we select will not be one which reveals itself as a given truth. Rather, we will select the 'best' interpretation by a process of gradual comparison. [11]

Anti-foundationalism has implications beyond the epistemological domain. Neither scholars nor their subjects have pure perceptions or pure reason. Those we study do not have pure experiences or interests. So, we cannot read off their beliefs, desires or actions from allegedly objective social facts about them. Rather, we must allow they construct their beliefs against the background of a tradition (or episteme or paradigm) and often in response to dilemmas (or problems, or anomalies). Anti-foundationalism encourages us, therefore, to understand explanation in the human sciences through such notions as traditions, narratives, decentering and dilemmas (Bevir 1999a).[12]

Traditions

A tradition is a set of theories or narratives, and associated practices, that people inherit and that form the background against which they form beliefs and perform actions. Traditions are contingent, constantly evolving, and necessarily located in a historical context. Traditions emerge out of specific instances and the relations between them where the instances that make up a tradition are handed on from generation to generation, whether from parent to child in families or elder to apprentice in organisations and networks. Traditions must be composed of beliefs and practices relayed from teacher to pupil and so on. Moreover, because traditions are not fixed or static, it is not possible to identify or construct their particular instances by comparing them with the key features of the tradition. Rather, we can only identify the particular instances that compose any given tradition by tracing the appropriate historical connections back through time.

Narratives

Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences; they are to the human sciences what theories are to the natural sciences. The point we want to make by evoking narratives is that the human sciences do not offer us causal explanations that evoke physically necessary relationships between phenomena. Rather, they offer us explanations of human affairs that work by relating beliefs, actions, and institutions to one another through the appropriate conditional and volitional connections. Although narratives may follow a chronological order and contain such elements as setting, character, actions and happenings, their defining characteristic is that they explain actions by reference to beliefs and pro-attitudes. The human sciences rely, therefore, on narrative structures akin to those found in works of fiction. However, the stories told by the human sciences are not fiction. The difference between the

two lies not in the use of narrative, but in the relationship of the narrative structures to our objective knowledge of the world.

Decentering

A decentered study of an institution explores the way it is created, sustained or modified through the ideas and actions of individuals. Decentered studies are essential because we cannot read-off the ideas and actions of individuals from knowledge of objective social facts about them. Although historians of ideas increasingly emphasise both how social discourses inform individual utterances and how social discourses are embedded in practices and institutions, it remains the case that individuals can exercise their particular reason in given social contexts. A decentered account will produce a radical emphasis on the capacity of the individual subject to imbue his or her actions with meaning and to redefine that meaning in, for example, organisational dialogue.

Dilemmas

A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to an existing idea and so forces a reconsideration. Because we cannot read-off the ideas and actions of individuals from objective social facts about them, we can understand how their beliefs and actions, and social practices, change only by exploring the ways in which they conceive of, and respond to, dilemmas. Thus, an analysis of change and developments in British government must take place through a study of the relevant dilemmas. For example, to understand Thatcherism one needs to understand not only that Britain suffered from severe inflation in the 1970s but also the ways in which libertarians, conservatives, Whigs and socialists conceived the origins, nature and solution to such inflation (see Bevir and Rhodes

1998a). Political scientists should explore the ways individuals have developed intellectual traditions to bring about change in the institutions of which they are a part.

Reconstructing British Government: the case of policy networks

Deconstructing Networks

We have sketched the dominant approaches to the study of British government. We have also outlined an alternative epistemology. The next logical steps are to show the weaknesses of the mainstream and the strengths of the alternative. We could do so by presenting a general critique of the study of British government but then any specialist sub-field, such as electoral studies, could plead they were an exception to these generalisations. We prefer to develop our critique by focusing on one of the prominent schools of thought which has influenced the study of British government. Thus, we reconstruct the notion of policy networks, but insist our general arguments that beliefs are not determined by social structures and facts are not given but constructed are widely applicable in political science. So, our approach to the study of British government in general, and to policy networks in particular, differs markedly from mainstream approaches in four ways.

First, the dominant approaches adopt a positivist epistemology which, at least implicitly, leads its proponents to treat institutions as social structures from which we can read off the beliefs, interests and actions of individuals. The institution is given priority over the individual. So, the nature of the institution (or policy network) to which an individual belongs allegedly fixes the content of his or her beliefs and interests. In contrast an anti-foundational approach regards institutions as enacted by individuals. The beliefs and actions of individuals are not 'determined' or 'limited' by their 'objective' position in a network or other social contexts but only 'influenced' by it (Bevir 1999a chapter 5). Rather, their beliefs and actions

construct the nature of the organisation or network. An anti-foundational approach, therefore, encourages us to *decenter* government institutions. Such an approach will use, for example, the tools of political ethnography which: study individual behaviour in everyday contexts; gather data from many sources; adopt an 'unstructured' approach; focus on one group or locale; and, in analysing the data, stress the 'interpretation of the meanings and functions of human action' (paraphrased from Hammersley 1990 pp.1-2; see also Geertz, 1973 pp. 20-21).[13]

Second, current explanations of network changes rely on exogenous, not endogenous, causes. Thus, Marsh and Rhodes (1992 p. 261) argue that networks create routines for policy making and change is incremental. They identify four broad categories of change: economic, ideological, knowledge and institutional, all of which are external to the network. An anti-foundational approach decenters networks by exploring how they are enacted by individual actors. Thus, it encourages us to look for the origins of change in the contingent responses of individuals to *dilemmas*. By focusing on the individual's responses to dilemmas, exogenous change is built into the heart of networks.

Third, an anti-foundational epistemology does not treat institutions as given facts. It is a commonplace observation that even simple objects are not given to us in pure perceptions but are constructed in part by the theories we hold true of the world. When we turn our attention to complex political objects, the notion that they are given to us as brute facts verges on absurd. And yet the network literature is characterised by typologies. For example, Van Waarden (1992 pp. 39-41) provides the most daunting example. Over three closely printed pages, he identifies 11 network types which differ along 7 dimensions encompassing 37 characteristics (see also Marsh and Rhodes 1992 p. 251). This butterfly collecting or Casauban approach to networks just assumes they can be counted and classified. But the

'facts' about networks are not 'given' but constructed by individuals in the stories they hand down to one another. The study of government, therefore, is inextricably bound up with *narrative* interpretations of the beliefs and actions of the relevant individuals.

The final characteristic of the network literature is that it is practical, seeking to improve network management. There is an extensive literature on this topic (see for example Kickert and others 1997 and for a full discussion see Rhodes 1999 chapter 8). The social science model of networks treats them as given facts; as if they are cars and the researcher is the car mechanic, finding the right tool to effect repairs. An anti-foundational approach posits that networks cannot be understood apart from *traditions*. The individuals whose beliefs, interests and actions constitute a network necessarily acquire the relevant interest and beliefs against the background of traditions. In other words, there is no essentialist account of a network but only the several stories of the participants and observers. So there can be no single tool kit for managing them. An anti-foundational approach claims that practitioners learn by telling, listening to and comparing stories.

In short, an anti-foundational approach turns the current approaches to networks on their head by insisting that networks are enacted by individuals in part through the stories they tell one another and can not be treated as given facts.

Reconstructing networks.

So, where do we go from here? How do we develop an anti-foundational approach to networks? The way forward in the analysis of networks, and also of British government, lies in the notions of traditions, narratives, decentering and dilemmas.

Decentering and the 'Everyday Maker'

A *decentered* study of a network represents a shift of topos from institution to individual. Current approaches to policy networks focus on the oligopoly of the political market-place. They stress how networks limit participation in the policy process; decide which issues will be included and excluded from the policy agenda; shape the behaviour of actors through the rules of the game; privilege certain interests; and substitute private government for public accountability. A decentered account of networks makes no such assumptions. It would focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meaning.

Bang and Sørensen's (1998) story of the 'Everyday Maker' provides an instructive example somewhat akin to a decentred account of governance as networks focused on the beliefs and actions of individuals. They interviewed 25 active citizens in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen to see how they engaged with government. They argue there is a long tradition of networking in Denmark and as networks multiply, citizens (or the 'Everyday Maker') focus on immediate and concrete policy problems at the lowest possible level.

Thus, Grethe (a grass-roots activist) reflects that she has acquired the competence to act out various roles: contractor, board member, leader. There has been an 'explosion' of 'issue networks, policy communities, ad hoc policy projects, and user boards, including actors from "within", "without", "above", and "below" government'. So the nature of the 'Everyday Maker' is 'to enter in and do work at one point of entry or another' (Bang and Sørensen 1998 p. 15). Political activity has shifted from 'formal organising to more informal networking' (Bang and Sørensen 1998 p. 20). Politics is no longer about left and right but engaging in what is going on in institutions (Bang and Sørensen 1998 p. 23). In short, Bang and Sørenesen draw a picture of Nørrebro's networks through the eyes of its political activists.

There are, however, some instructive contrasts between Bang and Sørensen's research and a decentered, anti-foundational account. First, they employ an ideal-typical research method, specifying not only the characteristics of the 'Everyday Maker' but also the maxims which guide their political behaviour. Specific instances are then compared with these ideal-typical formulations. A decentered account would not assume the 'Everyday Maker' had these characteristics but would use ethnographic tools to study behaviour in everyday contexts.

Second, Bang and Sørensen's account of networks focuses on the beliefs and actions of only one group of actors and does not provide a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973 chapter 1). A decentered account requires a micro-analysis but does not necessarily demand a bottom-up approach. The analysis is not restricted to any one category of actor. So, to the 'Everyday Maker', we need to add: the street-level bureaucrats, who can make and remake policy; services users, whose experiences can differ markedly from the expectations of the service provider; and the beliefs and actions of the political and managerial elite who seek to steer other actors in the network. Decentered studies of networks would build a multifaceted picture of how the several actors understand and enact them. The researcher constructs stories about how other people understand what they are doing in networks. These stories will be built out of the several organisational, network, and political traditions actors have learnt and constructed as they enact and remake networks in their everyday lives.[14]

Traditions and Narratives

One popular explanation for the growth of networks posits that advanced industrial societies grow by a process of functional and institutional specialisation and the fragmentation of policies and politics (Rhodes 1988 pp. 371-87). For some authors, differentiation is part of a larger context. For example, regulation theory sees it as an outcome of the shift from Fordism

to post-Fordism (see also Jessop 1997 pp. 308-15: Stoker 1998 pp. 126-7 and 1999). In contrast an anti-foundational approach stresses how, from within diverse traditions, people understand and respond to networks. In addition, members of networks construct or reconstruct their own traditions. Individuals learn about the network and its constituent organisations through stories of famous events and characters. Traditions are passed on from person-to-person. Much will be taken for granted as common sense. Some will be challenged; for example, when beliefs collide and have to be changed or reconciled. The several traditions will produce different stories which we might tell and compare.

One way of illustrating this approach would be to explore the traditions that inspire political actors. In this way we could show how governance as networks arises out of the multiple narratives legislators, bureaucrats and others have come to adopt through a process of modifying traditions to meet specific dilemmas. However, because we do not know their relevant stories, we will fall back on academic accounts of the rise and nature of governance as networks, showing how these accounts reflect different traditions.

Governance as networks is a narrative interpreted through traditions. In Britain it is possible to identify several relevant traditions; for example, Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist (Bevir and Rhodes 1998a). Here we illustrate the argument by looking at the liberal Tory and the Socialist traditions, both of which exercise a powerful influence on how we currently understand British government.

Henney (1984 pp. 380-81), writing in the liberal Tory tradition, sees governance as networks as an example of the corporate state; 'the institutionalised exercise of political and economic power' by the various types of local authority, government, the unions and to a lesser extent business. They 'undertake deals when it suits them; blame each other when it suits them; and

cover up for each other when it suits them'. These interactions are conducted 'behind closed doors' and each network builds a 'cultural cocoon' rationalising their interests with the public interest. They 'institutionalise irresponsibility'. Producers interests rule OK, only for Henney it isn't, and he wants to cut local government down to a manageable size by removing some functions and transferring others to the social market. But the problem of networks as producer-capture is not easily resolved. Marketisation is the alleged solution but it fragments service delivery structures, creates the motive for actors (individuals and organisations) to co-operate and, therefore, multiplies the networks and opportunities for the producer-capture that Henney's reforms seek to counter. Beliefs in the virtues of markets have to confront the defects of quasi-markets and resilience of networks.

The socialist tradition in the guise of New Labour sees governance as networks as a problem of integration. For Perri 6 (1997) government confronts 'wicked problems' which do not fit in with functional government based on central departments and their associated policy networks. Such functional government is costly, centralised, short-term, focuses on cure not prevention, lacks co-ordination, measures the wrong things and is accountable to the wrong people (Perri 6 1997 p. 26). The solution is holistic government which will span departmental cages. The twelve recommendations include: holistic budgets designed around outcomes, not functions; cross-functional outcome measures; integrated information systems (for example, one stop shops); and culture, value for money and preventive audits (Perri 6 1997 pp. 10-12 and chapters 4-7).

This report epitomises a long-standing tradition in the Labour Party which sees salvation in administrative engineering. But again the problem of network integration is not easily resolved. Perri 6's proposed reforms have a centralising thrust. They aim to co-ordinate the departmental cages, a centralising measure, and to impose a new style of management on

other agencies, a central command operating code. But network are often constructed by members who believe a decentralised, diplomatic, negotiating, style is beneficial (Rhodes 1997b). Beliefs in leaders know best confront the belief that decentralised structures need indirect or hands-off management.

In short, traditions underpin different interpretations of networks, causing distinct and distinctive dilemmas.[15]

Dilemmas and the Analysis of Change.

As noted earlier, a *dilemma* arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to an existing idea and so forces a reconsideration. We understand how their beliefs and actions change by exploring the ways in which people think about, and respond to, dilemmas and reinterpret and reconstruct their traditions. Stoker's (1999a) analysis of NPM in British local government shows how dilemmas stemming from inflation and changing beliefs about public spending led to a new story, not about NPM, but about local governance, illustrating people's contingent responses to dilemmas.[16]

Inflation had become a major problem for the British economy by the end of the 1970s and it is now widely accepted that: the key monetary levers should be interest rates rather than fiscal policy; the supply side of the economy should be considered more significant than demand management; low inflation should be as important a goal of economic policy as low unemployment; and government should develop monetary policy in accord with rule, not discretion, to preserve credibility. These beliefs had direct and immediate consequences for public spending; it was to be cut.

Local authorities are a major vehicle for delivering welfare state services and account for much public spending. They are thus a prime target for any government committed to low

inflation and the attendant curbs on public spending. Management reform was one part of the effort to contain public spending. NPM's rhetoric told a story of economy, efficiency and effectiveness - the '3Es' -which would deliver more public services for less money. There was a second strand to NPM; marketisation which transferred services to the private and voluntary sectors.

Both the '3Es' and marketisation generated unintended consequences. Thus Stoker (1999) identifies several, negative unintended consequences, including fragmentation, loss of accountability, and a decline in the public service ethic. More significant for our argument, he also identifies important unintended benefits. First, NPM disrupted the system. Second, local authorities were increasingly forced to account for their actions in public. Third, these twin pressure produced a sense of crisis which helped to create new policy ideas. The delicious irony is that the new ideas were not those of NPM but of local governance; of service delivery through organisational networks spanning the public, private and voluntary sectors (Rhodes 1997a chapter 3). As Stoker (1999) concludes NPM aimed at 'a more efficient and customer-oriented service delivery but got 'a broader vision of a new community governance'.

The response to the dilemma of inflation and public spending cuts can be seen in the discourse used to talk about the management changes. Mackintosh (1999) argues that NPM contains two economic discourses. The public trading discourse is that of corporate management and marketisation handed down by the government for years. The public business discourse is a reaction to the perceived limits of NPM. It seeks adaptable, flexible relationships for dealing with several agencies and clients. These changes in management and in discourse illustrate the contingent nature of the way people responded to the dilemma posed by inflation and the need to curb public spending. There is no objective or rational reason for NPM to evolve into local governance. Individuals can modify the practices they

inherit in many ways; there is no one rational, scientific, or self-interested response to any given dilemma.

Conclusions

In a deliberately tendentious manner, Cowling (1963 p. 209) argued that 'political explanation exists as philosophy and history' and 'political science, … and comparative government, when looked at critically dissolve into these two disciplines: and if they do not, they have not been looked at critically enough'. We are being wayward in agreeing with him. This paper does indeed seek to return political science to its historical and philosophical roots, but with a twist. We draw on constructivist history and anti-foundational philosophy to support our case; two schools of thought Cowling would probably detest. We do not want to return to the institutional-legal descriptive legacy of yesteryear. But we are convinced there are better ways of doing political science than the mildly apologetic positivism which pervades the study of British government. So we have criticised the Westminster model and its family, sketched an anti-foundational approach using historical narratives to analyse traditions and dilemmas, and provided a concrete example of our approach 'in action' by reconstructing the theory of policy networks. In conclusion we want to suggest that an anti-foundational approach to studying British government teaches some important lessons for the study of government.

First, we argue there is no scientific account of British government which can be said to rest on law-like generalisations.

Second, the road to understanding lies in decentered accounts focusing on the political ethnography of government - on traditions and dilemmas as they are constructed by creative individuals. As researchers, we write 'constructions of other people's constructions of what they are up to' (Geertz 1973 p. 9).

Third, there are no scientific laws to legitimate advice to policy makers. The key lesson of an anti-foundational approach is that there is no single tool kit they can use to steer networks. We have 'the capacity to offer some hindsight, a little insight and almost no foresight' (Hayward 1986 p. 17). But an awareness of our limits does not render the human sciences useless. If we cannot offer solutions, we can define and redefine problems in novel ways. We can tell the policy makers and administrators distinctive stories about their world and how it is governed. For example, NPM told a story of the '3Es' which contrasted sharply with the story of the local government officer as professional with clients and the permanent secretary as policy adviser and fire fighter for the minister. The language of narratives challenges the language of predictive social science.

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Notes

[1] For brief histories of the discipline see Chester 1975 and Hayward 1991; and for the nineteenth century see Collini and others 1983. For earlier assessments of the political science of British politics see Dearlove 1982; Gamble 1990; Hayward 1986 and 1991; Johnson 1989; Tivey 1988. Tivey 1988 provides a useful guide to the mainstream literature and its many variations, thereby removing the need for a lengthy list here.

[2] See also among many others Parker 1979; Weller 1985: 16; and Wilson 1994: 190-93.

[3] We draw here on Wittgenstein's (1972) view that our concepts often cover diverse contents connected by family resemblance rather than a single, essential idea.

[4] Although we do not want to return to, and are critical of, earlier versions of the historical and philosophical approach to British government (see for example Greenleaf 1983), we are primarily concerned to challenge positivist accounts of the Westminster model. We take positivism to have two main theses; that one can explain human behaviour in terms of allegedly objective social facts about people in a way which makes beliefs or meanings largely irrelevant or unnecessary; and that the relation between antecedent and consequent in political explanation is a causal or necessary one akin to that found in the natural sciences.

[5] Recent examples of mainstream literature are legion. See Eckstein, 1987, especially the references on pp. 100-104; Harrison 1996; Hennessy 1995; Norton 1983, 1991 and 1996; and Porter 1994. Gamble 1990: 412 makes the same point with different examples.

[6] There was also an important challenge to the Westminster perspective's focus on central elites; for example, Hechter 1975 and Nairn 1981 looked at British government from the periphery, not the centre.

[7] See, for example: Dearlove and Sanders 1984; Gamble 1985; Jessop 1990; Kingdom 1991; Leys 1983; Miliband 1969 and 1982; Nairn 1981.

[8] All these topics are covered in the texts listed in note 7. On Thatcherism see: Bevir and Rhodes 1998; Gamble 1988; Hall and Jacques 1983; Jessop et al. 1988.

[9] The more distinguished contributions include: Johnson 1977; Mount 1992; and Willetts 1992, all of whom claim Oakeshott 1975 as their intellectual godfather. The Institute for Economic Affairs has published many pamphlets on: marketising public services; pushing back the boundaries of the state; and the defects of British political institutions. Any listing would be inordinately long.

[10] See for example: Aucoin 1995; Hood 1991 and 1995; Pollitt 1993; Pollitt and Summa 1997; Rhodes 1991, 1997b and 1998a; Wright 1994. The policy of New Labour has been 'more of the same': see Hennessy 1997; Rhodes 1998a.

[11] This approach is not relativist but we do not have the space to develop the argument. See: Bevir 1999a; chapter 3.

[12] For an historical and philosophical defence of our choice of concepts compared to other anti-foundationalists see Bevir 1997 and 1999b.

[13] For a similar recognition that political ethnography is an instructive approach see: Heclo and Wildavsky 1974; McPherson and Raab 1988; and Rhodes 1997a: chapter 9.

[14] It is also worth noting that the 'Everyday Maker' is a democratic, normative ideal. Her behaviour epitomises civic engagement in Denmark but she may be an endangered species. Jensen (1998) shows how the democratic experiment in Danish social housing is confounded

by the fatalism of tenants and the lack of suitable democratic skills. Normative ideals could lead the researcher to ignore the fatalist for whom networks will have a different meaning.

[15] This approach also allows for the comparative analysis of traditions and their impacts on, for example, public sector reform. It is common place to distinguish between the Anglo-Saxon (no state) tradition; the Germanic (organicist) tradition; the French (Napoleonic or Jacobin) tradition; and the Scandinavian tradition which mixes the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic. These traditions interpret networks differently. For example, local networks with high participation are common in Denmark posing the issue of how to keep the multiplying networks under democratic control. In Britain the problem of networks is seen as an issue of control; how can the centre steer multi-organisational policy systems? The notion of tradition will need unpacking to identify the variety and their interweaving but we have said enough to show its relevance to the analysis of both British government and, at least, other West European democracies (see Rhodes 1998b for a fuller exploration and citations).

[16] Ideally, of course, we should tell the story through the eyes of public managers but their version of the story is not available to us. So, instead we use Stoker's accounts of how public managers responded to the dilemma of inflation and reduced public spending. Also, we simply illustrate the argument that the notion of dilemma helps us to understand change. We do not provide a detailed exploration of change in networks. Any such account would need to recognise that individuals have several antidotes to, and coping mechanisms for, challenges to their belief systems. Such challenges can take the form of responding to different beliefs or to the actions of others and any response will be affected by the salience of those beliefs and actions for the several parties. Also, understanding changes needs an understanding of how

beliefs are constructed both in the complex patterns of social interaction and the handed-down traditions.