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INTERPRETIVE THEORY

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Interpretive approaches to political studies focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so. Epistemology poses the question of 'how do we know what we know about political science'. Interpretive theories constitute one set of answers to that question. Behind the different types of interpretive theory, there lies the shared assumption that we cannot understand human affairs properly unless we grasp the relevant meanings. Different varieties of interpretive theory understand meanings in different ways. They can be expressions of, for example, reason, intentions, beliefs, the unconscious or a system of signs. They also explain meanings in different ways using such notions as logical progression, the dispositions of individuals, the structural links between concepts and power. In short, interpretive approaches study beliefs, ideas or discourses. As important, they study beliefs as they perform within, and even frame, actions, practices and institutions. Interpretive theory applies to all of political studies.

The inevitability of interpretation can be shown easily. In October 1943, the Danes rescued 7,200 Jews by taking them in small boats across the Øresund which separated Nazi-occupied Denmark from neutral Sweden. These widely shared 'facts' lie at the heart of a heated debate. According to the 'Heroic Danes' theory, the brave Danes at risk of life and liberty rescued the Danish Jews from the murderous Nazis. Others try to demythologise Danish actions. According to the 'Good Germans' theory the deportation was set up by the top brass of the Nazi regime but sabotaged by brave local Germans influenced by Denmark's democratic way of life. Finally, according to the 'Berlin' theory, Hitler's orders to remove the Danes from Denmark were interpreted creatively with Himmler's knowledge and approval. He was the most loyal of Hitler's top Nazis who cannot be suspected of frustrating Hitler's policy. So, the

Danes did what the Nazis wanted. The arguments rage from how much the fishermen charged the Jews to take them to Sweden to whether the documentation supports the view that Berlin approved the policy. Repeatedly, the debate revolves around the motives of key actors and is hampered only in part by inadequate source material. It is widely agreed that the Danes took many Jews to Sweden but it is less clear what these agreed 'facts' mean (for a summary see: Kirchhoff 1995, Paulsson 1995, and their citations).

Political science has its origins in such disciplines as history, law, and philosophy where interpretation often plays a dominant role. Historians focused on particular events as they unfolded chronologically. They sought to unpack the beliefs and motives of those involved in their story. Lawyers looked at the formal nature of institutions. They sought to unearth the intentions of lawmakers to decide how to apply the law. Philosophers explored the normative side of social life. They sought to discover the ideals by which others had lived as a guide to how we should do so. Alongside these varieties of political studies, there also arose approaches more defiantly indebted to the natural sciences, which tried to find laws or regularities that governed social life irrespective of the beliefs of individuals or the meanings found in a society.

After World War II political studies witnessed the emergence and gradual pre-eminence of behaviourism, structuralism and, most recently, rational-choice theory, all of which embody scientific ambitions. Present-day interpretive theory thus has two main strands. First, there are the interpretive approaches rooted in the humanities, notably history. They draw on hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophies that seek to understand the meanings people attach to social action. Second, new

approaches to interpretive theory flourished as disillusionment with the scientific aims of behaviourism and structuralism grew. These approaches draw on post-structuralist and post-modern philosophies.

This chapter has four sections. The first section explains why students of politics will find interpretive approaches useful. The second identifies some of the main varieties of interpretation, as well as exploring some of the issues that divide them. The third shows how our approach to interpretive theory can be used to explore empirical issues, for example, Thatcherism. The final section assesses the main criticisms levelled at interpretive approaches to political studies.

Why interpretation is necessary

An interpretive approach follows from two premises. The first straightforward premise is that people act on their beliefs and preferences. People vote for a Socialist party, for example, because they share its values, or they believe its policies will improve their well-being. Similarly, when politicians raise interest rates they do so because they think they will prevent inflation, or they believe they will get a reputation for financial prudence, or they want to save money for a pre-election binge. Because people act on beliefs and preferences, it is possible to explain their actions by referring to the relevant beliefs and preferences. Few political scientists would deny that such explanations have some force. Yet many would complain that such explanations lack the power of general applicability, and anyway that beliefs and preferences are impossible to corroborate. So, they seek to bypass beliefs by correlating actions with objective facts about people: for example, correlating voting and class. Alternatively they seek to build models on basic assumptions about the rationality of human actors:

they might suggest, for example, that rational people will raise interest rates when inflation increases.

So, the second premise common to interpretive approaches is that we cannot read-off people's beliefs and preferences from objective facts about them such as their social class, race, or institutional position. The impossibility of pure experiences implies that we cannot reduce beliefs and preferences to mere intervening variables. When we say that a top official managing the Department of Administrative Affairs has an interest in preserving the staffing and spending levels of his department, we necessarily bring our particular theories to bear to identify his position and deduce what interests go with it. People with different theories might believe that this top civil servant is in a different position. He is not a manager but rather a political and policy adviser and so has different interests - for example, protecting the minister from political flack and fire-fighting policy disasters. Or we may argue that top officials have different interests; for example, launching and promoting the department's long-standing policy preferences. Indeed, our theories may lead us to views contrary to a person's own view of his or her position and its associated interests. For example, some working-class voters might consider themselves to be middle-class with an interest in preventing further redistributive measures. Others might consider themselves to be working-class while believing redistributive measures are contrary to the true interests of the workers because they delay the revolution.

These two premises are all we need to show that interpretation is important. However, there are reasons for insisting on a special role for interpretation in spelling out some features of social life. One obvious area is ideology, which political actors use to legitimate their actions irrespective of their real motivations. When politicians use

human rights to justify a policy, we cannot understand that justification and its effectiveness, irrespective of its truth, unless we grasp the content and role of ideas about human rights in the relevant society.

Much the same is true of a final area where interpretation plays a key role; that is in analysing the ideas and language conventions that underpin social practices (Koselleck 1998; Richter 1995). When a priest pronounces a couple married, for example, they become married only because of settled conventions about the legal authority of the church, the religious nature of marriage and the binding-power of contracts. To understand and explain what happens at such times, we have to grasp the relevant conventions and beliefs. A marriage can be neither contracted nor conducted without a structure of meanings stemming from theology, law, morality and custom. We can study the statistical rises and falls in the number of marriages only after we are able to take for granted a whole series of interpretations.

The arguments for the ineluctable role of interpretation are closely tied to arguments against the possibility of a science of politics. People act on their beliefs and preferences but we do not have external evidence of those beliefs. So, when we try to explain the link between beliefs and actions, there is no causal necessity to that link equivalent to the explanations found in the natural sciences. However, we can still explain social action: we can do so by pointing to the conditional and volitional links between beliefs, desires, intentions and actions. Political studies thus rely on a narrative form of explanation (Bevir, 1999a). We account for actions, practices and institutions by telling a story about how they came to be as they are and perhaps also about how they are preserved. Narratives are thus to political studies what theories are to the natural sciences. Although narratives may have a chronological order and

contain such elements as setting, character, actions and events, their defining characteristic is that they explain actions using beliefs and preferences. So, studying politics relies on narrative structures akin to those found in works of fiction. However, the stories told by the human sciences are not works of fiction. The difference between the two lies not in the use of narrative, but in the link between narrative structures and our objective knowledge of the world.

Varieties of interpretation

Interpretive approaches often begin from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the meanings, the beliefs and preferences, of the people involved. The emphasis is not new in political studies. John Stuart Mill (1969, pp. 119-20) remarked:

By Bentham ... men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it ... Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries ... With Coleridge ... the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for.
(Originally published in 1840)

As political studies developed, however, and separated from other disciplines, the concern with meaning became associated with hermeneutics and ethnology. More

recently, post-structuralist and post-modern philosophies have inspired other varieties of interpretation. The latter two forms of interpretation shift our focus from individuals and mind to systems of signs and how they work in society. We provide a brief outline of these approaches.

Hermeneutics and Ethnology

In the early part of the twentieth century, an analytical and atomistic form of positivism increasingly dominated Anglo-American philosophy. Typically this positivism helped to inspire a behaviourist social science with little interest in beliefs or meanings. Philosophers who inherited the idealist mantle of the late nineteenth century, and those who turned to continental traditions such as phenomenology provided the main alternatives to positivism. Idealists such as Michael Oakeshott and R. G. Collingwood favoured hermeneutic approaches to history and by extension to the human sciences as a whole. Phenomenology inspired sociologists and anthropologists who wanted to understand the meanings people attach to social action in their own or other societies. It resulted in the ethnology of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman and Clifford Geertz. To explain hermeneutics and phenomenology, we provide a brief definition followed by a longer example.

Hermeneutics emerged within Biblical scholarship. It has come, however, to refer to the theory of understanding, especially interpreting texts and actions (Bauman 1978; Gadamer 1979). So, it overlaps with an interest in the history of ideas (as in the examples of Collingwood 1993 and Oakeshott 1962 and 1975). Typically hermeneutic theorists explore the existential nature of understanding while recognising it is embedded in tradition. So to give specific examples, Collingwood argued all history

was ‘thought’, where thought was a series of answers to specific questions arising in a historically specific set of taken-for-granted ideas. Oakeshott insisted, against rationalists and positivists, that political knowledge could come only from history. Political activity should be explained by the wisdom and moral claims in the relevant tradition of behaviour. W. H. Greenleaf’s (1983-87) grand vision of British politics in the twentieth-century represents a self-conscious application of Oakeshott’s hermeneutic theory. Greenleaf traces the rise of collectivism, the ideological tensions that then surrounded the growth of government and the impact of such growth on the political system. He moves outwards from the intimations of a tradition to the practices and institutions it produces.

Edmund Husserl, the originator of phenomenological philosophy, argued the life world of everyday common sense provides the basis of any possible experience (Husserl 1931). Later theorists suggested our common-sense knowledge was always incomplete and variable. We only ever hold such knowledge provisionally. Contingent social processes produce it. So, ethnology focuses on different forms of common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning that occur in diverse social contexts. It has appealed mainly to sociologists and cultural anthropologists and to expand on this brief definition we outline the work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (but see also Berger and Luckman 1971).

For Clifford Geertz (1973), humans are suspended in the webs of significance they have spun. Anthropologists practice ethnology to discover the relevant weaves of meaning. Doing ethnography involves such techniques as selecting informants, transcribing texts and keeping field notes. More important, it is about ‘thick descriptions’; about explicating ‘our own constructions of other people’s

constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to' (all quotes in this summary are from Geertz 1973 chapter 1). The everyday phrase is 'seeing things from the others point of view'. The ethnographer provides his or her own interpretation of what the informants are up to and these accounts are second or even third order interpretations.

Ethnographic description has four main characteristics: it is interpretive; it interprets the flow of social discourse; it inscribes that discourse by writing it down; and it is microscopic. It is a soft science. It guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. However, it is still possible to generalise. Theory provides a vocabulary with which to express what symbolic action has to say. It is not about prediction. Theory has to 'generate cogent interpretations of realities past; it has to survive realities to come'. If experimental sciences are about description and explanation, then ethnography is about inscription (or 'thick descriptions') and specification (or clinical diagnosis). So, the task is to set down the meanings that particular actions have for social actors and then say what these thick descriptions tells us about the society in which they are found. And this analysis is always incomplete.

An Englishman (in India) who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked ... what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? 'Ah Sahib (sic), after that it is turtles all the way down.'

The ethnographer will never get to the bottom of anything. So ethnography is a science 'marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate. What gets better is the precision with which we vex each other'.

Post-structuralism and Post-modernism

Interpretive approaches indebted to hermeneutics and ethnology persisted even during the heyday of positivism. More recently, post-structuralist and post-modern philosophies have resulted in new varieties of interpretive theory. While these new approaches provide powerful challenges to the scientific hopes of behaviourists and rational-choice theorists, proponents of hermeneutic and ethnographic alternatives have not always welcomed them. The labels post-structuralist and post-modernist refer to a broad range of theorists who challenge foundationalism in philosophy and the human sciences. They include Jacques Derrida (1976), Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan (1977), Jean-François Lyotard (1984), Richard Rorty (1979) and Hayden White (1973 and 1987). Unfortunately, the clear differences among them makes these labels singularly unhelpful. Many of the theorists involved have renounced the labels for their own work. So, here we can only try to give the reader a feel for the interpretive theories inspired by post-structuralism and post-modernism rather than providing authoritative definitions. We do so by looking more closely at the work of Foucault.

Like most post-structuralists and post-modernists, Foucault is implacably hostile to the grandiose claims that characterise the so-called modern project. This project claims to ground our knowledge and ethics on objective and essential foundations. Typically it does so by appealing to either pure experience of the world or the pure nature of human subjectivity. In doing so, it relies on other positions about, say, the transparent nature of language and the progressive nature of human history. The question of how accurate it is to equate modernity with such claims and positions need not concern us here. Rather, we are concerned with post-structuralists and post-modernists analyses of the necessary limits of this modern project. Foucault's work

displays a continuing hostility to two modern concepts, the subject and reason (Bevir 1999b).

Foucault's hostility to the modern project leads him to adopt an interpretive approach to social life. In opposing pure experiences, he suggests we have experiences only within a prior discourse. Objects and actions acquire meaning, become 'real', only when they have a place in a language, a wider web of meanings. So, to understand an object or action, students of politics have to interpret it in the wider discourse of which it is a part. Human life is understandable only in an episteme or framework of meaning and this framework of meaning cannot be reduced to an objective process or structure. Discourse cannot be dismissed as a passive reflection of social or economic forces; social class or the means of production do not determine it. However, Foucault does not credit a significant role to human agency in constructing such discourses. Rather, he suggests they develop randomly as products of time and chance. There are no cosmic logics, no great impersonal forces of history, which allows us to read-off a discourse from our knowledge of that logic or history. Students of politics have to interpret objects and actions in their historically specific circumstances.

In his early writings, Foucault sometimes argued an episteme structured the particular meanings or objects of a given era (Foucault, 1973 and 1986). Even here, however, meanings were not fixed. The episteme only limited the particular meanings found in it. In his later work, moreover, Foucault turned from the notion of an episteme to that of a discursive practice (1972). A discourse consists of endlessly multiplying meanings, many statements and events, none of which are stable, none of which makes up an essence. From a post-structuralist perspective, the key to understanding a social practice is not its formal legal character – for example, the law on marriage and

sexual conduct – or the objective characteristics of those involved – for example, an individual's educational and occupational background. Rather, these characteristics, like the practice itself, can only be understood as part of the cluster of meanings that make them possible. For example, Foucault argues the modern state gets its character from the way in which it brings together the concepts of sovereignty, discipline and pastoralship (Foucault, 1991).

The distinct nature of Foucault's interpretive approach owes much to his hostility to the subject and reason. For a start, his hostility to the subject means he stresses the ways in which regimes of power and epistemes construct individuals and their beliefs. Foucault rejected the idea of an autonomous subject; that is, the subject did not have its own foundation or meaningful experiences, reasoning, beliefs and actions outside a social context. Equally, he rejected the Hegelian and Marxist vision of history as realising the subject. For Foucault, the subject is a contingent product of a particular discourse, a particular set of techniques of government and technologies of the self (Foucault, 1982). So, he stresses discourses rather than beliefs. In addition, Foucault's hostility to reason means he decentres discourses to show how they arise out of the more or less random interactions of all sorts of micro-practices (Foucault, 1978-1985). In his later works, he rejected the notion of structural relationships, essential characteristics, or a logical development governing social practices. The modern state, for example, arose by adapting various techniques - such as the pastoral power of the church - which clearly are not integral to the state (Foucault, 1991).

An anti-foundational approach to interpretation

In this section we outline our approach. We start by showing how our approach relates to other varieties of interpretation under the general heading of subjectivity, rationality and relativism. We then provide an example of this approach 'in action' by exploring varieties of Thatcherism.

Subjectivity

Post-structuralist and post-modern varieties of interpretation differ from hermeneutic ones principally because of their hostility to subjectivity and rationality. We favour a form of interpretation that lies between hermeneutics and post-structuralism. Critics often view post-structuralism and post-modernism as marking a total break with the modern ideas of the subject and truth; that is, with a nihilistic irrationalism (Bloom 1987; Habermas 1987). Foucault and others sometimes lend credence to this view, though they are better understood as attacking autonomy and foundational notions of truth without spending enough time spelling out where that leaves us. We are neither nihilistic nor irrational. We will defend, first, the possibility of agency even without autonomy, and, second, an anthropological concept of objectivity based on criteria of comparison (Bevir, 1999a).

Some interpretive theories assume autonomous subjects who think and act according solely to their own reason and commands. Post-structuralists and post-modernists oppose such an idea. However, a rejection of autonomy need not entail a rejection of agency. To deny that subjects can escape from all social influences is not to deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them. On the contrary, we must allow for agency if only because we cannot separate and distinguish beliefs and

actions by reference to their social context alone. Different people adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the background of the same social structure. So, there must be a space in social structures where individual subjects decide what beliefs to hold and what actions to perform for their own reasons. Individuals can reason creatively in ways that are not fixed or limited by the social contexts or discourses in which they exist. We agree with the post-structuralists and post-modernists that subjects experience the world in ways that necessarily depend on the influence of social structures on them. Nonetheless, we still must allow that the subject has the ability to select particular beliefs and actions, including novel ones, which might transform the relevant social structure. This view of agency suggests we see social structures not as epistemes, languages or discourses, but as traditions. The concepts of episteme, language and discourse typically imply social structures that fix individual acts and exist independently of these acts. By contrast, the notion of tradition implies the relevant social structure is one in which the subjects are born which then acts as the background to their later beliefs and actions without fixing them. 'Tradition' allows for the possibility of subjects adapting, developing, and perhaps even rejecting, much of their heritage.

We view a tradition is a set of theories or narratives, and associated practices, which people inherit that form the background against which they reach beliefs and perform actions. Traditions are contingent, constantly evolving and necessarily located in a historical context. They 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, traditions are not fixed or static, so we can only identify the

particular instances that compose any given tradition by tracing the appropriate historical connections back through time.

Rationality

Our analysis of tradition contrasts with previous ones, which usually involved some form of essentialist fallacy; that is they equate traditions with fixed characteristics. They then identify variations from these characteristics. In effect, the essential parts of any tradition are necessarily present in all its adherents say or do. At other times, traditions are said to have an internal logic of development so the principles in a tradition fix their own use. We regard traditions as contingent; that is people produce them through their actions as agents. So, to grasp the content and nature of a tradition, students of politics have to decentre it. A decentred study of a tradition, practice or institution unpacks the way in which it is created, sustained and modified through the beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals in many arenas. The study of politics, for example, should go beyond the state to explore topics as diverse as drains, telegraph wires, schools, managing risk and developing self-esteem (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). It should do so because the discourses and practices that govern society arise out of these micro-practices. We have to redefine tradition in a non-essentialist, decentred manner to avoid any lingering sense of objective reason.

Nonetheless, because the idea of a tradition suggests that subjects can change their heritage for reasons that make sense to them, it also encourages us to move away from the post-structuralists simple rejection of truth or objective reason. We should grapple here with the nature and effects of local reasoning. While a rejection of the autonomous subject prevents a belief in a neutral or universal reason, the fact of

agency enables us to accept local reasoning in a way that Foucault is reluctant to do. Even philosophers who reject the possibility of pure experience and the existence of necessary truths tend to insist that a concern with consistency is a necessary feature of all webs of belief (Putnam, 1981, pp. 155-68, Quine 1960, p. 59). People try to organise their beliefs to fit consistently with their own notion of best belief.

Students of politics cannot understand changes in traditions, mentalities or discourses unless they link them to the reasons people had for making them. Traditions do not contain an inherent logic fixing their development: there are no compelling causes forcing individuals to change their beliefs and actions. Rather, we argue that people change their beliefs or actions in ways that depend on local reasoning. We cannot portray such changes as either purely arbitrary, random breaks or as explicable by allegedly objective social facts. Change occurs in response to dilemmas. A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to an existing idea and so forces reconsideration. Because we cannot read-off the beliefs and actions of individuals from objective social facts about them, we can understand how the social practices they produce change only by exploring the ways in which they conceive of, and respond to, dilemmas.

Relativism

Once we allow for local reasoning, we can meet the charges of relativism and irrationalism so often levelled at both post-structuralism and post-modernism. Although we do not have access to pure facts that we can use to declare particular interpretations and narratives to be true or false, we can still hang on to the idea of objectivity. We can define objectivity in anthropological terms by using criteria of

comparison. So, we judge one narrative better than another because it best meets such criteria as: accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency and opening new avenues of inquiry. Objectivity arises from criticising and comparing rival webs of interpretation about agreed facts. The clear difference between this approach and conventional approaches to studying politics is that all interpretations are provisional. We cannot appeal to the logic of refutation as if we are scientists doing experiment to disprove earlier findings. Rather, objectivity rests on criteria of comparison. The interpretation we select will not be one that reveals itself as a given truth. Rather, we will select the 'best' interpretation by a process of gradual comparison.

Analysing Thatcherism

Our preferred interpretive theory deploys the concepts of tradition and dilemma to provide narrative accounts of beliefs, preferences and the practices to which they give rise. We can show how this theory works by considering the empirical case of Thatcherism (this section paraphrases Bevir and Rhodes, 1998). Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990. She is famous to some, notorious to others, for her distinctive approach and policies, commonly denoted as 'Thatcherism'. How we understand her contribution is the point of the example. We identify the Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist traditions and show how each tradition produces distinct analyses of Thatcherism. Figure 2 sketches the four traditions and their account of Thatcherism. We provide a brief summary of each tradition and an example of one of its narratives of 'Thatcherism'. We then explore the associated problems of essentialism and identifying traditions.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1: Traditions and Thatcherism

	Tory	Liberal	Whig	Socialist
TRADITIONS	Preserving traditional authority	Restoring the markets undermined by state intervention	Evolutionary change	Role of the state in resolving the crises of capitalism.
‘THATCHER-ISMS’	Party and electoral survival	Reversing Britain’s decline	Strong leadership and distinct ideology give new policy agenda	Failure of the developmental state

The Tory Tradition

The Tory tradition is elusive and all too often defined more by what it isn’t. Gilmour (1978, p. 121-43) argues the Conservative party is not averse to change (ibid. p. 121), not a pressure group (ibid. p. 130), and not ideological (ibid. p. 132). More positively, he contends ‘the fundamental concern of Toryism is the preservation of the nation’s unity, of the national institutions, of political and civil liberty’ (ibid.: 143). Some strands recur in the Tory tradition. For example, Michael Oakeshott provides the philosophical underpinnings for several Tory narratives. Ian Gilmour (1978, pp. 92-100; and 1992, pp. 272-3) adopts Oakeshott’s distinction between the state as a civil and an enterprise association. 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’. In contrast, 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, a set of common rules and a common government in pursuing their diverse purposes (Gilmour 1978, pp. 98). So, a free society has: ‘no preconceived purpose, but

finds its guide in a principle of continuity ... and in a principle of consensus' (Gilmour 1978, p. 97). The Tory tradition favours civil association and only accepts the state as an enterprise association 'when individuals are able to contract out of it when it suits them' (Gilmour 1992, p. 272). Nonetheless, Gilmour (1978, p. 236) accepts that some state intervention will often be convenient, practical politics, essential to preserving the legitimacy of the state.

One-Nation Toryism is a narrative of 'Thatcherism' in the Tory tradition. It sees Thatcherism as a threat to both the Conservative Party and to national unity. Gilmour (1992) is scathing about the 'dogma' of 'Thatcherism'. He argues 'Thatcherism' is based on 'a simplistic view of human nature'. He disputes that 'everyone is driven by selfish motives' and that 'everyone pursues his selfish interests in a rational manner' (ibid. p. 271). Thatcher is not a 'true Conservative ruler' because she bullied people into conformity with her view of Britain as an enterprise association (ibid. p. 273). The economy was not transformed and 'Much social damage was also done'. 'British society became coarser and more selfish' (ibid. p. 278). His brand of 'One Nation Toryism' holds that if the state is not interested in its people, they have no reason to be interested in the state (Gilmour 1978, p. 118). So, the government should "'conserve' the fabric of society and avoid the shocks of violent upheavals' and 'look to the contentment of all our fellow countrymen' (Gilmour 1992, p. 278).

The Liberal Tradition

The narrative of 'Thatcherism' as the revival of nineteenth century liberalism, with its faith in free markets, determined to slay the dragon of collectivism, and reverse Britain's decline, both economic and international, is one of the clichés of British

government in the late twentieth century. But, like so many clichés, it did not become one without containing a large grain of truth. This narrative has its roots in the Liberal tradition's stories about markets.

'New Conservatism' revived the Liberal tradition by stressing freedom, applying the principles of freedom to the economy and accepting the welfare state on sound Conservative grounds. For Willetts (1992, chapter 6), Adam Smith's 'system of natural liberty' provides the intellectual justification of free markets. Markets tap 'two fundamental human instincts'; the instinct to better oneself and the instinct to exchange. These instincts, when 'protected by a legal order which ensures contracts are kept and property is respected' are 'the source of the wealth of nations'. Big government cannot deliver prosperity, undermines markets and erodes communities. However, 'rampant individualism without the ties of duty, loyalty and affiliation is only checked by powerful and intrusive government'. So, Conservatism stands between collectivism and individualism and: 'Conservative thought at its best conveys the mutual dependence between the community and the free market. Each is enriched by the other' (Willetts 1992, p. 182). The Conservative Party's achievement is to reconcile Toryism and individualism. It was also Thatcher's achievement.

'Thatcherism' is not the antithesis of conservatism because it too recognises there is more to life than free markets'; it too sought to reconcile 'economic calculation with our moral obligations to our fellow citizens' (ibid. p. 47). Its distinctiveness does not lie in 'Mrs Thatcher's actual political beliefs - very little of what she said could not have been found in a typical One Nation Group pamphlet of the 1950s' (ibid. p. 52). It is distinctive because of Thatcher's 'political qualities'; her energy and conviction; her

ability to move between general principles and the practical; and her judgement about which issues to fight (*ibid.* p. 52-3).

So, the ‘Thatcherism’ narrative in the Liberal tradition restores markets to their rightful place in Conservatism: it ‘is within the mainstream of conservative philosophy’ (*ibid.* p. 54). It also shows great political skill. The government stuck to its principles and showed that the commitment to freedom meets people’s aspirations and made them prosperous (*ibid.* p. 61). State intervention stultifies. Competition improves performance: ‘Free markets are ... the route to prosperity’ (*ibid.* p. 136).

So, the narrative in the Liberal tradition stresses markets and its storyline emphasises the need to reverse Britain’s economic decline through free markets sustained by an enterprise culture.

The Whig Tradition

The Whig tradition typically uses the Westminster model (for a guide and references see Bevir and Rhodes 1999; Tivey 1988). This model has many variants but the family of concepts includes Britain as 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 (Gamble 1990, p. 407). The Whig tradition also incorporates an idealist strand, seeing ‘institutions as the expression of human purpose’ and focusing, therefore, on the interaction between ideas and institutions (see Rhodes 1997a, chapter 4; Gamble 1990, p. 409; Johnson 1975, pp. 276-7). It highlights: ‘how institutions and ideas react and co-operate with one another’

(Greenleaf (1983, p. xi); gradualism; and the capacity of British institutions to evolve and cope with crisis. Indeed, Whig historiography comes perilously close to telling the story of a single, unilinear, progressive idea, reason or spirit underlying the evolution of the British political system. Institutions provide the ‘capacity for independent action, leadership and decision’ while remaining ‘flexible and responsive’. As important, the political science profession esteemed this tradition; they ‘were largely sympathetic’ (Gamble 1990, p. 411); ‘convinced that change needed to be evolutionary’; and celebrated ‘the practical wisdom embodied in England’s constitutional arrangements’ (Gamble 1990, p. 409 and for recent examples see: Hennessy 1995; Norton 1996). In this tradition, power is an object that 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’ (Smith 1998). Personality is a key part of any explanation of an actor’s power. The Whig tradition’s narrative of ‘Thatcherism’ contains these characteristics.

Kavanagh (1990) uses the theme of ‘the end of consensus’, and an analysis of the interplay between events, ideas and actors, to argue the political agenda of British government has been substantially rewritten. Consensus refers to agreement between political parties and governing elites about: the substance of public policy; the rules of the political game; and the political style for resolving policy differences (Kavanagh 1990, p. 6). Thatcher had a distinctive set of New Right inspired policies: using monetary policy to contain inflation; reducing the public sector; freeing the labour market through trade union reform; and restoring the government’s authority. These policies would take the shackles off markets and create the enterprise society. He

concludes the government was ‘radical and successful’ (ibid. p. 241); ‘reversed the direction of previous post-war administrations’ (ibid. p. 209); and pursued policies, which appeared far-fetched in 1978, such as privatisation, but which are no longer exceptional (ibid. p. 281). In typical balanced, not to say Whig style, Kavanagh opines ‘talk of permanent or irreversible changes may be too bold’, but ‘the Thatcher government has created a new agenda, one which a successor government will find difficult to reverse’ (ibid. p. 302).

This narrative accommodates ‘Thatcherism’ to the Whig tradition in two ways. First, it identifies the constraints on political action and the continuities in policy to domesticate the political convulsions of the 1980s. Thus, Kavanagh (1990, pp. 18, 238-41 and 15): treats ‘events’ as a constraint on political leadership; recognises the changes had many causes; and muses how ‘disappointment has been a fact of life for British ... governments’. Nonetheless, there has been change and Thatcher is central to his explanation. So, second, this Whig narrative explains change by appeal to the personal power of Thatcher. Kavanagh repeatedly describes her as the ‘dominant figure’; and ‘a remarkable figure’ (ibid. pp. 243; 272; 276; 318). Of course, he is not claiming ‘that personal leadership is all-important but Mrs Thatcher’s personality and policies enabled her to take advantage of the constellation of events and ideas’. Nonetheless, the storyline of this narrative assigns great explanatory power to Thatcher’s personal qualities and her distinctive policies. Above all, it is part of the Whig tradition. Kavanagh (1990, p. 209) makes the point succinctly: ‘Over the long term, continuity is more apparent than discontinuity’.

The Socialist Tradition

The Socialist tradition, with its structural explanations focused on economic factors and class and its critique of capitalism tells a historical story which is anti-Whig. For example, Marquand (1988, p. 198) comments: ‘The old Whig historians were not wrong in thinking that Britain’s peaceful passage to democracy owed much to the hazy compromises’. However, ‘once these compromises cease to be taken for granted’, then ‘respect for the rules of the game will ebb away’. So, the Whig tradition collapses because it confronts a heterogeneous, pluralistic society in which authority has been de-mystified, cultural values have changed, the political system has lost legitimacy and territorial politics is in disarray (ibid. pp. 199-204). Although the Socialist narratives of ‘Thatcherism’ come in many guises, we provide one brief illustration.

Marquand (1988) explores why the Keynesian social democratic governing philosophy collapsed and the main economic and political problems that a successor philosophy must address. He argues the collapse took place because Britain failed to become a developmental state. Britain failed ‘to adapt to the waves of technological and institutional innovation sweeping through the world economy’ and ‘Britain’s political authorities ... repeatedly failed to promote more adaptive behaviour’ (ibid. p. 145). Britain failed to become an adaptive, developmental state because of a: ‘political culture suffused with the values and assumptions of whiggery’; and because ‘The whole notion of public power, standing apart from private interests, was ... alien’ and so a developmental state could not exist (ibid. p. 154).

The Westminster model also inhibited an adaptive response. The basis of this model is parliamentary sovereignty, which 'inhibits the open and explicit power-sharing on which negotiated adjustment depends' (ibid. p. 176). The British crisis is a crisis of maladaptation coupled with: a loss of consent and growing distrust between governments and governed; possessive individualism or sectional interests dominating the common interest; and 'mechanical reform' or change through command, not persuasion (ibid. 211-12). In short, Britain failed to adapt because of its political culture was rooted in reductionist individualism.

Marquand's account of 'Thatcherism' stresses the congruence between its market liberalism and a British political culture of possessive individualism and the inability of both to deal with the crisis of maladaptation (ibid. p. 72-81). In short, the liberal solution deals with the effects of state intervention, political overload and bureaucratic oversupply, not with the dynamics or causes of these processes. Possessive individualism is the cause of Britain's maladaptation, so it cannot provide the solution which lies in common, not individual, purposes and the developmental, not minimal, state. As a result, 'Thatcherism' contains three paradoxes (ibid. pp. 81-8 and 1989). First, the policies for a free economy conflict with the need for a strong, interventionist state to engineer the cultural change needed to sustain that free economy. Second, the wish to arrest national decline conflicts with the free trade imperatives of liberalism because of the weakness of the British economy. Third, the attack on intermediate institutions - the BBC, local government, and the universities - undermines the Tory tradition, which sees them as bastions of freedom; markets conflict with community.

In short, the socialist narratives interpret the ‘end of consensus’ as part of the crisis of British capitalism stemming from its inability to become a developmental state. ‘Thatcherism’ is a local response to this crisis and is beset by internal contradictions. Free markets are a transitional solution for the open economy of a medium-sized industrial country operating in a global economy.

So, the important lesson to be learnt from this example is that there are several overlapping but competing constructions of Thatcherism each rooted in a distinct and distinctive tradition. None are unquestionably ‘right’. None are unquestionably ‘wrong’. We can debate and agree which account is more accurate, comprehensive and open, but any such agreement will be provisional. Our account thus deals with the issues of essentialism and how to identify traditions. Essentialists equate traditions with an unchanging core idea or ideas and then explore variations. But there is no such core to Thatcherism. There are many ideas and although some of these ideas were widely shared, none was common to all. So, there is no essentialist account of ‘Thatcherism’. Even the search for a multi-dimensional explanation is doomed. It is not a question of identifying the several political, economic and ideological variables and determining their relative importance. It is not a question of levels of analysis. It is more fundamental. The maps, questions and language of each narrative prefigure and encode different historical stories in distinctive ways. Historical stories as different as preserving traditional authority, restoring markets, gradualism and resolving the crises of capitalism construct the phenomenon of ‘Thatcherism’ in radically different ways. There is no single notion to be explained. It was not an objective, given, social phenomenon with a single clear identity, but rather several overlapping but different entities constructed within overlapping but different traditions.

Because an individual can be placed in many traditions depending on the purposes of the study, the content of any tradition will vary with what we want to explain. We will identify traditions according to our own purposes, selecting one from the many because it best explains the actions and beliefs of the individual we are studying. The choice of tradition depends on what we are trying to explain. We can pick from a plurality of traditions at many levels of generality. The task confronting the scholar is to find the sources of evidence, which show that each historical story has a coherent set of ideas, and to trace the relevant connections between the ideas through time. So, this analysis of Thatcherism shows how several traditions adapted to its ideas and argues scholars construct traditions to answer the questions that interest them. We judge the usefulness of such a construction by the evidence marshalled to show the links between the ideas over time and the ability to explain how beliefs change.

Criticisms of interpretive theory

Other political scientists react to interpretive theory in three main ways. The most accommodating recognise interpretation as an integral part of social explanation. A famous example is Max Weber's account of verstehen (Weber, volume 1, pp. 4-22). Weber champions explanations through ideal types that provide satisfactory accounts of action incorporating the analysis of both meaning (of intentions) and objective (quantified) data. Some political scientists regard interpretive theory as useful for limited areas of their discipline; for example, the study of values and ideologies. Finally, hostile political scientists reject interpretive approaches as inappropriate, or as superseded by a positive, scientific alternative. Interpretive theorists should allow that objective data could provide useful guides to research and reinforce some conclusions. They also need to respond to the specific criticisms raised by political scientists. Two

criticisms are prominent and important: first, interpretive theories do not adequately account for material reality; and second, they provide no basis for criticising social life. Different species of interpretive theory rebuff such criticisms differently. Neither criticism can be accepted as it stands.

On Material Reality

For some critics, interpretive approaches do not allow for the material constraints on social action. Although interpretive theorists must indeed remain implacably opposed to any form of economic reductionism, they can allow for economic influences in several ways. For a start, we might accept that dilemmas often reflect material circumstances. The important point is the subjective beliefs people hold about the world but these beliefs often arise because of pressures in the world. For example, the dilemma of inflation was an agreed, accurate perception of a real economic pressure, even if it was variously constructed and the responses to that pressure were equally varied. There is a real world 'out there', and while we do not have unmediated access to it, it is a source of pressures. In addition, just because a government acts on a particular view of the world does not mean its view of the world determines the effects of its action. The effects will depend on how others react and their reactions will collectively constitute relevant material reality. Whether a new deal for the long-term unemployed will lead to them getting jobs depends, for example, on how they react to the opportunities given to them, how employers view them, and the state of the economy.

Other critics complain similarly that interpretive approaches cannot account for the solidity and persistence of institutions. We argue that they can, depending on how we

think about institutions. Many present-day interpretive theories deny that institutions have a reified or essential nature. They challenge us to decentre institutions; that is, to analyse the ways in which they are produced, reproduced and changed through the particular and contingent beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals. Even when an institution maintains similar routines while personnel changes, it does so only because the successive personnel hold similar beliefs and preferences which their predecessors passed on. So, we should not say that interpretive theory is lacking on institutions, but rather that it rethinks the nature of institutions. Interpretive theory sees institutions as sedimented products of contingent beliefs and preferences.

On Critique

Another criticism of interpretive theories suggests that they lack critical power. The varieties inspired by hermeneutics and ethnology seemingly must accept the self-understanding of those they study. But we can ascribe unconscious or even irrational beliefs to people in a process of interpretation. Our 'thick descriptions' are still our interpretations of other people's constructions and the logic of comparing webs of interpretation still applies. Similarly, the varieties of interpretive theory inspired by post-structuralism and post-modernism can appear to lack a notion of truth by which we can condemn beliefs as false. But, our anthropological approach to objectivity means we can dismiss some beliefs without appealing to some notion of absolute truth. Indeed, because we reject absolute truth, we are compelled to oppose those political ideologies claiming to be based on such a truth. We should deconstruct all those discourses that try to close themselves off, or that dismiss alternatives as unreasonable or absent. Such deconstruction would apply not only to fascism or communism but arguably also to many varieties of liberal universalism (Bevir, 2000).

Of course, to condemn systems of belief as false is not to dismiss them as ideological in the sense of being reflections of a class interest. Because interpretive theory opposes economic reductionism, it must avoid such a concept of ideology. Nonetheless, it can keep the idea of ideology as distorted belief, where distortions are identified with departures from the norms of belief formation (Bevir 1996). Ideologies would thus have a close association to lies, the unconscious, and contradictory beliefs. Imagine that politicians say unemployment has risen because of a global recession while believing it did so because of a global recession aggravated by government policy. We could condemn their utterances as ideological, not because they are false, but because they involve deception. Their words hide their true beliefs for political advantage.

Conclusion

Interpretive theory encompasses many approaches opposed to the positivism that provides the basis for so much political science. It takes seriously the role of ideas and meanings in individual lives and social practices. Most interpretive theorists argue the meaningful nature of human life makes the model of natural science inappropriate to political studies. Some insist the human sciences must understand the objects they study rather than seek explanations for them (Winch 1958). Others insist the human sciences are explanatory but distinguish the narrative form of explanation from the strictly causal form found in most natural science.

Although interpretive approaches all focus on ideas and meanings, they often take different views of their nature. Many of the key debates following the rise of post-structuralism and post-modernism concern the nature of the subject and the limits of

reason. Many traditional varieties of interpretation came dangerously close to embodying an analysis of the subject as autonomous and an analysis of reason as pure and universal. Post-structuralists and post-modernists rightly criticise such analyses. They prompt us to decentre traditions and practices. Conversely, post-modern and post-structuralist varieties of interpretation teeter on denying any scope to the subject and to reason. The future for interpretive theory lies in a course between the two. We might evoke a subject who is an agent but not an autonomous one, and local reasoning that never becomes universal.

For the second half of the twentieth century, many political scientists followed Bentham in asking: Is it true? Unfortunately for its proponents, as Greenleaf (1983, Volume 1, p. 286) argues:

The concept of a genuine social science has had its ups and downs, and it still survives, though we are as far from its achievement as we were when Spencer (or Bacon for that matter) first put pen to paper. Indeed it is all the more likely that the continuous attempts made in this direction serve only to demonstrate ... the inherent futility of the enterprise.

If copying the natural sciences will not tell what is and is not true, then perhaps we had better take to heart Cowling's (1963 p. 209) advice that:

political explanation exists as philosophy and history' ... 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.

This chapter suggests the time has come to return to the discipline's historical and philosophical roots; to follow Coleridge and ask, 'What is the meaning of it?' We can scarcely find less prosaic cul-de-sacs than the specialist sub-fields of modern political science.

Guide to further reading

Bernstein (1976 and 1991) provides a critical review of many of the social and political theories on which we draw. On hermeneutics and the philosophy of history see: Bauman (1978) and Jenkins (1995). On ethnographic methods see Hammersley (1991) and Silverman (1993). On post-modernism see Rosenau (1992). On Foucault in particular see: Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), McNay (1994), and for a biographical study Eribon (1991).

On the varieties of interpretive theory see Gibbons 1987 but there is no substitute for consulting the originals. We have tried to suggest accessible summaries but you should read some of the main texts discussed in the chapter. Collingwood's autobiography (1978, chapters V, VIII, X and XI) provides the best short summary of his approach. Geertz (1973, chapter 1) is an elegant summary of ethnography. Berger and Luckman (1966) is deservedly a classic in the sociology of knowledge. Foucault (1977) is a good read, though all his main works have been highly influential.

On our approach see Bevir (1999) and for its application to British government see Bevir and Rhodes (1998, 1999) and Rhodes (1999, chapter 8).

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