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DECENTERING TRADITION: INTERPRETING BRITISH GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article argues the study of traditions is an integral part of the human sciences and then concentrates on how to study traditions. In section 1, we outline a pragmatic approach to traditions, before illustrating our case in section 2 by analysing three features of British government - public sector reform, Thatcherism and joined-up governance. We seek to show it is possible to decenter the idea of tradition and analyse traditions at several levels. Finally, in section 3, we discuss the problems posed when analysing traditions at different levels of generality; including, reifying traditions, essentialism, identifying traditions, and creating traditions.

INTRODUCTION

This article argues the study of traditions is an integral part of the human sciences and then concentrates on how to study them. First, we discuss of the idea of tradition. We do not do so in detail, preferring to use the notion to analyse three features of British government: public sector reform, Thatcherism and joined-up governance.[1] We use each of these illustrations to raise issues about the concept of tradition. We decenter the concept by moving from the general to the specific, from the institutional to the individual level, in our discussion. We start with a broad characterisation of the British governmental tradition. We describe it by comparing it to other governmental traditions. By so comparing traditions, we can identify and highlight some defining characteristics of the British governmental tradition treated as a whole. The next step is to unpack this broad idea of tradition into some of its constituents. We identify the Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist traditions, and show how each of them produces distinct analyses of Thatcherism. Finally, we unpack the Socialist tradition further still by comparing Old and New Labour's conception of governance. We progressively unpack the idea of tradition to show there is no one level of analysis suitable for answering all questions. Also, we discuss the issues raised by each illustration. These include reifying traditions, essentialism, identifying traditions, and the processes which create traditions.

ON TRADITION

Forms of explanation about human life commonly revolve around two sets of ideas. The first set analyse the social context in which individuals reason and act in terms of such notions as tradition, institution, structure and paradigm. The second set analyse

the processes by which beliefs, practices, and institutions change in terms of the notions of reason and agency. Some philosophers believe the individual is autonomous - able to avoid the influence of tradition. Yet, once we reject a naive faith in pure experience, we must give up this idea of autonomy. We necessarily make sense of our experiences by drawing on prior theories. So, we cannot arrive at beliefs through experiences unless we already have a prior set of beliefs. Our experiences can lead us to beliefs only because we have already been socialised in the traditions of our community.

Other philosophers adopt a strong version of this conclusion, arguing that social structures, institutions, or paradigms limit or even fix not only our actions but also our beliefs and preferences. We have difficulty with this argument. Indeed, we would argue we must allow for agency because we cannot individuate beliefs and actions by reference to the social context alone. Different people adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the same social structure. There must be, therefore, an undecided space in front of these structures where individuals decide what beliefs to hold and what actions to perform. So, we insist on the fact of agency. Doing so is not incompatible with our insistence on the unavoidable nature of tradition. On the contrary, we can combine a rejection of autonomy with a defence of agency by saying individuals always sets off against a social background that influences them but they then can reason and act in novel ways so as to alter this background. Here our use of tradition allows for individuals extending and modifying the traditions they inherit. Just because individuals inherit tradition does not imply they cannot go on to change it. Rather, the ability to modify tradition is an integral feature of our responses to the world. We always confront slightly novel circumstances in which we need to apply

tradition anew, and no tradition can stipulate how it is applied (cf. Wittgenstein 1972 on using rules).

When unpacking the idea of tradition, we must not reify traditions. Tradition is a starting point, not something that fixes or limits later actions. Tradition is not an unavoidable influence on all we do, and to assume it is would be to leave too slight a role for agency. So, we think of tradition as an initial influence on people that colours their actions only if their agency has not led them to change it. Every strand of a tradition is in principle open to change. We should also be wary of essentialists who equate traditions with a fixed set or core of beliefs against which they then assess variations (see for example Greenleaf 1983). No doubt there are circumstances when we can identify core ideas that persist through time. But, alternatively, we might identify a tradition with a group of ideas widely shared by several individuals although no one idea was held by them all. Or we might identify a tradition with a group of ideas passed from generation to generation, changing a little each time, so no single idea persists across all generations. Finally, we should be careful not to hypostatise traditions. We must not claim a Platonic existence for them independent of the beliefs and actions of individuals. Traditions are not fixed entities. They are not given, sat in a philological zoo, waiting for people to discover them. They are contingent, produced by the actions of individuals. The carriers of a tradition bring it to life. They settle its content and variations by developing their beliefs and practices, thereby adapting it to new circumstances while passing it on to the next generation. We can only identify the beliefs making up a tradition by looking at the shared understandings and historical connections that allow us to link its exponents with one another.

Rather than reifying traditions, we should define them in ways relevant to the events and actions we want to explain. Scholars can construct traditions in a way appropriate to explaining particular actions. They move from individual beliefs and actions to traditions made up of linked beliefs and actions as handed down from generation to generation. What the scholar should not do, and many problems with the idea of tradition arise because scholars do so, is to make this shift by comparing the beliefs and actions of the individual with a reified tradition. Just as we rejected an essentialist analysis of tradition, so we must abstain from the temptation to place individuals in a tradition by comparing their beliefs and actions with a checklist of core ideas. Because traditions are not fixed entities, we cannot situate people in one by comparing their beliefs and actions with its allegedly key features. Rather, traditions are contingent products of the ways in which people develop specific beliefs, preferences and actions. So, we must identify the tradition by looking at the background against which people come to hold their beliefs and by tracing the relevant historical connections.

In rejecting all reified and essentialist views of tradition, we are saying scholars can locate an individual in various traditions depending on what questions they seek to answer. Because there are no essentialist traditions, the scholar's task cannot be to place the individual in one of a finite set of fixed traditions. Rather, scholars identify the tradition against which someone believed or did something by tracing the relevant connections through time. The precise content they give to the tradition will depend on the particular beliefs or actions they hope to explain. If they want to explain someone's set of beliefs and actions, they will define the relevant tradition in one way. If they want to explain only one belief or action, they may well define it differently. In this sense, scholars construct traditions for themselves. They pick out the beliefs and

actions of the individuals they are studying by using criteria of relevance drawn from their own interests. But this scholarly role is not a matter of concern. Any abstraction by any scholar depends on a principle of classification that gets its justification from the purposes underlying his or her research. Scholars may construct traditions but that does not mean traditions are unacceptably subjective. Whether an account of a tradition is judged objective depends on the adequacy of our understanding of the components and links by which we define that tradition. An account of a tradition must identify a set of connected beliefs and habits that intentionally or unintentionally passed from generation to generation at some time in the past.

The explanatory value of traditions lies in the way they show how individuals inherited beliefs and practices from their communities. Thus, the wider our definition of a tradition, the weaker its explanatory power. If we select monolithic epistemes, then we have to define them as the beliefs and actions shared by everyone in an epoch. So when we try to explain the beliefs and actions of particular individuals, we will be able to explain only why they held these beliefs, not other, more specific beliefs. The narrower the definition of a tradition, the greater will be its explanatory power. Scholars select traditions to explain specific features of human life. The value of the selected tradition stems from its explanatory power; from the scholars ability to provide evidence for the conceptual and historical links between the beliefs and actions which make up the tradition. The more exact the account of these links, the more fully we will be able to grasp the nature of the tradition, so the more explanatory work it will be able to do. Historical or temporal links show how the relevant beliefs and practices passed from one generation to another, explaining why the beliefs persisted through time. Conceptual links show us how the relevant beliefs and

practices form a coherent set, explaining why they persisted together as a loose knit whole rather than as isolated beliefs brought together by mere chance.

THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

In this section we decenter the notion of tradition by showing it can be used at various levels of analysis and by exploring the problems which arise at each level. The first example compares the governmental traditions of Britain and Denmark. By so doing, we can identify and highlight the defining characteristics of the British governmental tradition broadly understood, but at a price. The key problems are reification and the loss of explanatory power when traditions are defined so broadly.

<u>Comparing Britain and Denmark</u>

A governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government. Loughlin and Peters (1997: 46) distinguish between the Anglo-Saxon (no state) tradition; the Germanic <u>rechtsstaat</u> tradition; the French (Napoleonic) tradition; and the Scandinavian tradition which mixes the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic. Thus, in the Germanic tradition state and civil society are part of one organic whole; the state is a transcendental entity. The Anglo-Saxon pluralist tradition draws a more distinct boundary between state and civil society with contract rather than natural law as the basis to the state. Civil servants have no constitutional position. The Napoleonic tradition sees the French state as the one and indivisible republic, exercising strong central authority to contain the hostile relations between state and civil society. The Scandinavian tradition is also 'organicist', influenced by the ideas of the <u>rechtsstaat</u> tradition, but differs from the Germanic tradition in being a decentralised unitary state with a strong participatory ethic. By comparing these traditions we can identify the

distinctive characteristics of any one tradition. So, in this section, we compare briefly the British and Danish governmental traditions to show not only their distinctive features but also how they interpret public sector reform differently and, as a result, the reforms have different aims, measures and outcomes. Figure 1 summarises these differences.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

We distinguish between beliefs about central constitutional structures; political-bureaucratic relations; and state-civil society relations, especially government-interest group links (adapted from Christensen 1995). Administrative reform in Britain and Denmark differs because of significant differences in these beliefs.

Strong executive vs. negotiated consensus.

The British tradition of majority party government underpinning a strong executive means the government can drive through its reforms whereas such reforms have to be agreed by a multi-party coalition in Denmark and then negotiated with other affected parties. Privatisation illustrates the difference. Britain had a comprehensive programme of reform designed to create the minimalist state. Privatisation was the flagship policy. Privatisation is a pragmatic policy in Denmark. Multiplying state owned enterprises (SOEs) may be distinctive but it is an intermediate solution to changing the boundaries of the public and private sector; a means of preserving the state (Jensen 1998: 60).

Parliamentary sovereignty vs. constitutional state.

Although parliamentary sovereignty is a shared constitutional principle, Britain's uncodified constitution means there are few if any constraints on Britain's strong executive. In Denmark, the historical strength of local government, entrenched in the constitution, means it can effectively resist central government and its powers have increased. The opposite is true in Britain where parliamentary sovereignty meant local authorities were subjected to ever more strict central controls. Contracting-out is one obvious example; it was imposed. In Denmark, the national associations of local government defended local institutions against this policy. It was not imposed. The centre had to rely on example and persuasion. There was little or no increase in contracting for goods and services in local government. The Danish approach is less programmatic and contracting is an invitation to negotiate, although it can still stir the political emotions of both Left and Right. In Britain contracting was a central belief of the New Right for two decades; a tool for creating the minimal state.

Party vs. minister.

British ministers are powerful. As in Denmark, they are individually accountable to parliament. But they are always subject to party discipline and collective cabinet accountability. Public sector reform was not at the discretion of individual ministers. It was an programmatic, party driven, co-ordinated change. There is no equivalent to the Danish tradition of independent ministers. The Danish system of ministerial government means effective public sector reform depends on political co-operation between ministers. Each minister can decide on the preferred reforms for her or his ministry. There is no overall control of the reform process. No political-bureaucratic system can work without trust and pragmatism which are the essential currency of co-ordination in Denmark.

Generalists vs. professional autonomy.

Generalist civil servants in Britain are political-administrators. They fire-fight for ministers to keep them out of trouble in parliament and elsewhere. They draw together and interpret specialist advice for ministers who are rarely experts in their field of responsibility. By tradition they are a source of 'institutional scepticism' about policies but, once the decision is made, their job is to give ministers what they want; nowadays they are described as 'can do' civil servants. So, they delivered public sector reform.

There are no generalist civil servants in Denmark. All are specialists, whether lawyers or the professional experts of the welfare state, and they play a key role in policy formulation and design as well as implementation, providing 'integrated advice' (Ministry of Finance 1998). So, public sector reform in Denmark displays a 'pragmatic tool orientation' (Greve and Jespersen 1998: 14), a 'technocratic-rational' conception of the reforms (Jensen 1998: 60); and is driven by bureaucrats, not politicians, most notably the Ministry of Finance. So, SOEs reflect the practical, technocratic Danish tradition because they are an intermediate reform; neither privatised nor state run.

Freedom to manage vs. political control.

Parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial accountability mean both governments face a similar problem of bureaucratic accountability. Politicians and top bureaucrats in both countries distinguish between policy and management, justifying the reforms with the argument that it gives managers the freedom to manage and deliver public services efficiently. Ostensibly, there is an obvious contrast between British

agencification and Danish de-agencification. So, British reforms sought to increase the freedom to manage whereas Danish reforms sought to increase political control, a course of action which undermines the rationale of the reforms. Any such conclusion is misleading. Agency reform in both countries seeks to increase political control of the bureaucracy. NPM is sometimes said to take apart hierarchy. But several strands clearly aim to reinforce hierarchical control. De-agencification is one example; it is an attempt to make hierarchy work And Britain faces the same tension between deconcentration and political control. The (then) Conservative Home Secretary, Michael Howard, sacked Derek Lewis, chief executive of the Prison Service, who complained bitterly about the Home Secretary's extensive interference in operational matters. He alleged Howard 'invented a new definition of the word 'operational' which meant 'difficult'. He commented that Howard's attempt to 'use the distinction between policy and operation was no more than a political fig leaf which was so small as to be grossly indecent' (cited in Barker 1997). Control is an objective common to politicians in both countries whether direct as with de-agencification or indirect as with agency framework documents and contract steering.

Allegiant-deferential vs. participation.

At the most general level, the difference between Britain and Denmark is between an allegiant-deferential or passive political tradition and a participative tradition characterised by associational politics. This difference obviously underpins the distinctive decentralising strand in Danish public sector reform.

Exclusive vs. inclusive

Public sector reform in Britain was an attack on collectivism and a reassertion of the libertarian strand in the British governmental tradition. It attacked policy networks which it castigated as examples of producer and trade union power. Thus, Henney (1984: 380-81) sees 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. Each network builds a 'cultural cocoon' rationalising their interests with the public interest. Privatisation and marketisation aimed to destroy the cocoons. Union participation was curbed but many British networks are based on professional interests concerned with allocating resources through welfare state networks. They persist and, because of service fragmentation, have multiplied and grown stronger in a localised form. In Denmark, formal institutionalised participation remains a characteristic of Danish democracy and does not systematically seek to exclude important interests.

Consumer vs. citizen.

Danish reforms to strengthen user and citizen roles in public sector service delivery are distinctive. The description 'self-organising' is apt and the consumer reforms in Britain are no parallel. Such reforms are distinctively Scandinavian and there is no reason to associate them with the NPM which never envisaged democratisation as a means of delivering services let alone improving efficiency. We almost might say that while other reforms were 'interpreted' through the lens of Danish political traditions, the citizen reforms are a product of that tradition.

So, there are differences in the aims, measures and outcomes of public sector reforms in Britain and Denmark; differences which we explain by the differences in the governmental traditions of the two countries. But this analysis has its problems.

The comparison of public sector reform in Britain and Denmark poses questions about the danger of reifying traditions or defining them in an essentialist way. For example, Greenleaf (1983:15-20) describes the British political tradition as a dialectic between two opposing tendencies: libertarianism and collectivism (but cf. Beer 1965). Libertarianism stresses four things: the basic importance of the individual; the limited role of government; the dangers of concentrating power; and the rule of law. Its opposite, collectivism, stresses: the public good; social justice; and the idea of positive government. These strains exist in both political parties. They set the boundaries to political debate. Our view of tradition differs. His opposing tendencies are ahistorical. Although they come into being in the nineteenth century, they remain static, acting as fixed categories, ideal types, into which he forces individual thinkers and texts, even different parts of the one text or different utterances by the one thinker. Tradition is a starting point, not a destination, and instances cannot be constructed by comparison with the features of a tradition. Traditions do not constitute the beliefs that people come to hold or the actions they perform.

Also the explanatory value of traditions lies in how they account for the processes by which people pick up beliefs and practices. The broader our definition of a tradition, the less it can explain. So, for any country, we need to move beyond broad comparisons to explore the multiple traditions and who voices which tradition. Thus, for Denmark, such notions as *rechtsstaat*, parliamentary sovereignty, welfare state professionalism and ministerial accountability are open to many interpretations. And

the story of public sector reform can be told several ways. In Denmark, there is the Ministry of Finance's NPM reform strategy; a coherent narrative of orderly change where the key dilemma is weak central co-ordination vs. ministerial autonomy. So, the reforms provide 'a simple, coherent narrative that reinforces human belief that change can be domesticated and controlled' (Jensen 1998: 65). There is the 'slow revolution' narrative which sees change continuously translated through the beliefs and actions of actors socialised into the traditions of Danish government (Olsen 1983). There is the democratic revolution narrative built around the active citizen. An understanding of change starts with conflicting beliefs. The beliefs about the freedom to manage in the public sector reforms simply point up these conflicts because they bump into beliefs about professional autonomy and ministerial accountability. Individuals set out from within a tradition but they can extend, vary and at times reject that tradition. The different stories, the colliding ideas and the dilemmas posed by conflicting ideas become the wellspring for yet more change.

In short, the idea of tradition can be defined so broadly, can become so abstract, that it becomes indistinguishable from the idea of an institution. There is a potential conflict between an idea of tradition which permits cross-national comparison and one which allows us to unpack institutions and explore the beliefs and practices that construct them.

Varieties of 'Thatcherism'.

If this broad notion of tradition has limited explanatory value, we need to unpack - decenter - it and identify some of the constituent traditions. In this 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 its narratives of 'Thatcherism'. We then explore the associated problems of essentialism and identifying traditions.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The Tory Tradition

The Tory tradition is elusive and all too often defined more by what it isn't. Gilmour (1978: 121-43) argues the Conservative party is not averse to change (ibid.: 121), not a pressure group (ibid. 130), and not ideological (ibid.: 132). More positively, '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 raconteurs of Tory narratives. Ian Gilmour (1978: 92-100; and 1992: 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'. 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: 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: 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: 272).
Nonetheless Gilmour (1978: 236) accepts that some state intervention will often be
convenient, practical politics, essential to preserving the legitimacy of the state.

One Nation Toryism is one 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.: 271). Thatcher is not a 'true Conservative ruler' because she bullied people into
conformity with her view of Britain as an enterprise association (ibid.: 273). The
economy was not transformed. Markets are not always right. 'The state cannot desert
the economic front' (ibid.: 276). 'Much social damage was also done'. 'British society
became coarser and more selfish' (ibid.: 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: 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: 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: Ch. 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. But '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: 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.: 47). Also 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.: 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.: 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.: 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.: 61). State intervention stultifies. Competition improves performance: 'Free markets are … the route to prosperity' (ibid.: 136).

So the narrative in the Liberal tradition stresses markets and its storyline is 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: 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: 409; Johnson 1975: 276-7). It highlights 'how institutions and ideas react and co-operate with one another' (Greenleaf (1983: 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: 411); 'convinced that change needed to be evolutionary'; and celebrated 'the practical wisdom embodied in England's constitutional arrangements' (Gamble 1990: 409 and for recent examples see: Hennessy 1995; Norton 1996). In this tradition, 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' (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: 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 free markets and create the enterprise society. He concludes the government was 'radical and successful' (ibid.: 241); 'reversed the direction of previous post-war administrations' (ibid.: 209); and that its policies, which appeared far-fetched in 1978, such as privatisation, are no longer exceptional (ibid.: 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.: 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: 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.: 243; 272; 276; 318). Of course, 'we are 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: 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: 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.: 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 which 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.: 145). Britain failed to become an adaptive, developmental state because of a: 'political culture suffused with the values and assumptions of whiggery'. 'The whole notion of public power, standing apart from private interests, was … alien' and so a developmental state could not exist (ibid.: 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.: 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 also the inability of both to deal with the crisis of maladaptation (ibid.: 72-81). In short, the liberal solution deals with the consequences 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.: 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, 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, there are several overlapping but competing constructions of Thatcherism each rooted in a distinct and distinctive tradition. But this use of tradition is also not without its problems. Our account raises 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 were shared by 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 which interest them and 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.

New Labour and Joined-up governance

A notion like the socialist tradition can be too static to explore how specific ideas changed through time. If we want to describe the beliefs of New Labour and explain how they differ from Old Labour, we will have to explore how the Socialist tradition has been adapted.

New Labour has invoked a succession of visions, from the stakeholder society to 'the third way', all of which mark its distinctive response to dilemmas such as state-overload. Blair (1998) declares the Labour Party under his leadership as 'new in our means, but Labour in our aims'. The same theme is picked-up by Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Tony Wright, a Labour Member of Parliament, when they express their continuing faith in 'fundamental socialist values' that have 'an enduring quality' even though particular policies have to 'change in the light of new problems, knowledge and circumstances' (Brown and Wright 1995: 13 and 29). The third way represents an attempt to keep many strands of the social democratic vision while accepting a need for new policies. Far from simply copying the neo-liberal doctrines of the New Right, it draws on traditional social democratic ideas to condemn them. We illustrate this point by examining New Labour's construction of joined-up governance and the ways in which it differs from both traditional social democratic policies and those associated with the New Right.

The New Right argued the minimal state required marketization and the new public management. These changes are not given as brute facts. They are ideas that people

construct as they experience the world and these experiences depend on their existing beliefs, or tradition, as well as on what is objectively out there. So, the social democrats of New Labour see the dilemma of state-overload significantly differently from the New Right. Social democrats traditionally believed in fellowship, enshrined in a bureaucratic state providing universal welfare. The New Right promoted individualism, with social relations based mainly on contracts and the market. New Labour favours a society of stakeholders enabled by a state that forms with them partnerships and networks based on trust (see Figure 3).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

New Labour changed the Labour Party's attitude to delivering public services. They reinterpreted the concerns highlighted by the New Right from within the socialist tradition. The Old Labour model resembled a top-down, command-style bureaucracy based on centralised rules. The Party became associated with hierarchic organisation with co-ordination secured by administrative orders. The New Right rejected this model, arguing that it was both inefficient and eroded individual freedom. The Thatcher governments tried to make public services more efficient through privatisation, marketization, and the new public management. Citizens became consumers able to choose between an array of public services. Although command bureaucracy remains a major way of delivering public services, privatisation, the purchaser-provider split, and management techniques from the private sector have become an integral part of British governance (Rhodes 1997a: chapter 5).

New Labour's third way embodies a critique of the New Right's model of public service delivery. It suggests the New Right has an exaggerated faith in markets. New

Labour believes individuals are not just competitive and self-interested but also co-operative and concerned for the welfare of others. So, public services should encourage co-operation while continuing to use market mechanisms when suitable. For example, David Clark (1997), then the Minister for Public Services, explained that policies such as market testing 'will not be pursued blindly as an article of faith' but they 'will continue where they offer best value for money'. New Labour insists that markets are not always the best way to deliver public services. They can go against the public interest, reinforce inequalities, and entrench privilege. Besides, much of the public sector simply is not amenable to market competition. Indeed trust and partnership are essential. With no market, one has to rely on either honest co-operation or specify standards in absurd detail. Far from promoting efficiency, therefore, marketization can undermine standards of service quality (Rhodes 1997b).

On the other hand, New Labour does not defend the command bureaucracy associated with Old Labour. Rather, we can identify a shift in the social democratic tradition inspired in part by the New Right's concerns with market efficiency and choice. For example, Mandelson and Liddle (1996: 27) explicitly reject the 'municipal socialism' and 'centralised nationalisation' of the past. They insist New Labour 'does not seek to provide centralised 'statist' solutions to every social and economic problem.' Instead New Labour promotes the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnership held together by relations of trust. New Labour's concern with networks based on relations of trust does not exclude either command bureaucracy or quasi-market competition. Rather, New Labour proposes a mix of hierarchies, markets, and networks, with choices depending on the service under consideration. So, government policy is that 'services should be provided through the sector best placed to provide

those services most effectively', where 'this can be the public, private or voluntary sector, or partnerships between these sectors' (Cm 4011 1998). Even a simple service is liable to display a mix of structures, strategies, and relationships.

The Labour government uses networks to institutionalise its ideals of partnership and an enabling state. Blair (1998) stated the aims succinctly: 'joined-up problems need joined-up solutions' and this theme runs through the Modernising Government White Paper with its frequent references to 'joined-up' government and 'holistic governance' (Cm 4130 1999: 6, 7, 10-11, 15, 16, 20, 23, 24, 27, 32, 33, 40, 45, 46 53 and 56; see also Cabinet Office 1999a). So services must be effective and co-ordinated and the principles of joined-up government apply also to voluntary and private sector organisations. The Cabinet Office takes the idea further by setting standards for 'modernised' policy making which include joining-up (Cabinet Office 1999b: chapter 9; and Annexes A and B).

Joining-up takes various forms. For example, there are area-based programmes or 'action zones' (26 in health, 25 in education) linking central and local government, health authorities, the private sector and voluntary organisations; and group focused programmes such as the 'Better Government for Older People' pilot (Cm 4130 1999: 18, 26-7 and 29). The state is an enabling partner that joins and steers flexible networks and public servants must adapt. Already the jargon breeds - diplomats, boundary spanning roles, reticulists - but whatever the label, the task is to build bridges between the organisations involved designing policies and delivering services.

New Labour's emphasis on individual choice and involvement may draw on themes developed by the New Right; for example promoting customer-focused services

(Cabinet Office 1998). However, New Labour does not adhere strictly to the New Right's vision of the new public management. The third way stresses developing networks to promote co-operation and these networks are supposed to be based on trust. Blair describes such trust as 'the recognition of a mutual purpose for which we work together and in which we all benefit' (Blair 1996: 292). Trust matters as we are interdependent social beings who achieve more by working together than by competing. Quality public services are best achieved through co-operative relations based on trust. Blair talks of building relationships of trust between all actors in society. Organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors should exchange information about their practices to improve co-operation. Trust is promoted inside organisations by allowing individual responsibility and discretion to replace rigid hierarchical structures. Individuals should be trusted to decide and implement policies without following strict procedures.

The Labour government bases the delivery of public services on networks embodying trust between providers and users. The Cabinet Office (1998) tells us, moreover, that such networks depend on 'balancing rights and responsibilities': it sees the Service First programme as a moral partnership between users and providers. The rights of the users of services include those to clear information about what is on offer, well-defined procedures for complaint, and fair treatment. Service providers have a responsibility to ensure such rights are honoured. The responsibilities of the users of services include extending courtesy to staff and promptly providing accurate information when needed. Service providers have a right to expect such behaviour from users.

The New Right portrays governance as made up of policies, such as marketization and the new public management, which are the fated outcomes of global economic pressures. But such pressures are not given as brute facts but constructed as different dilemmas from within various traditions. It suggests the policies a state adopts are not necessary responses to given pressures, but perceived solutions to one particular conception of these dilemmas. Also adopting a set of solutions is a contingent outcome of a political contest.

In Britain, New Labour constructed the dilemma of state-overload significantly differently from the New Right. These pressures do not have a given, inevitable content. They are identified, understood, and explained differently by people from within various traditions. New Labour has a different conception of the problems facing the British state, it has devised a set of administrative reforms different to those promoted by the Thatcher government. The New Right's concern to roll back the state has been replaced by a concern to transform the state into an enabling partner. And the New Right's belief in markets and competition within the public sector has been replaced by a broader emphasis on networks based on trust.

New Labour's vision is the outcome of a contingent, political struggle. To explore any set of ideas in the Socialist tradition, therefore, means we have to explore the processes through which ideas such as joined-up governance are created. There is no ineluctable, inevitable process behind the new patterns; no abstract model of natural selection about capital mobility and competition between states. We need to highlight the political contests, including the use of coercion, that surround choosing and implementing policy. This shift of concern and emphasis would alter the research agenda, replacing the straightforward New Right assumption of convergence between

states with a recognition of the possibility of continuing diversity. New Right writers typically understate variations in styles of governance because they see them as less important than the shared characteristics imposed by global economic forces. Our approach asks whether similar diversity does not appear in the aims methods and outputs. Are the public sectors of different states becoming more and more similar, or are they becoming more similar in some respects but more diverse in others, or are they even becoming more diverse? Or, and despite our emphasis on diversity, are there dominant traditions? Unpacking the idea of traditions and their associated practices in several countries should not blind us to the use of force, whether overt or sedimented in institutional practices.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our three illustrations explore what a pragmatic idea of tradition entails. A broad notion which lets us compare national governmental traditions may help us to describe the differences between countries but it runs into the problems of reifying traditions and a loss of explanatory power. If we decenter the notion of a governmental tradition and identify the main variants then we can explore the conflict between ideas and see how traditions change but we meet the problems of essentialism and constructing traditions out of appropriate webs of beliefs through time. Change occurs as the individual modifies the traditions he or she inherits. So our final example focused on how the elite actors in New Labour have transformed the socialist tradition, especially with their idea of joined-up governance. The key question posed by this decentered approach is 'whose story within which tradition'.

Our approach is distinct because we answer our question by constructing narratives. In effect, we argue for political ethnography: studying individual behaviour in everyday contexts; gathering data from many sources; adopting an 'unstructured' approach (that is, 'data is collected in a raw form' not to a preconceived plan); focusing on one group or locale; and, in analysing the data, stressing the 'interpretation of the meanings and functions of human action' (paraphrased from Hammersley 1990: 1-2; see also Geertz, 1973: 20-21).

The reference to 'everyday contexts' does imply micro-analysis but it does not necessarily imply a bottom-up approach. The analysis is not restricted to any one category of actor. Thus, we can explore the rules of statecraft, or operating code, of central political elites. The key aims of statecraft are to achieve governing competence and to preserve the centre's autonomy in 'High Politics' (for example, foreign, defence and trade policy, although increasingly the term also covers macro-economic policy). The approach invites the historical analysis of the beliefs and actions of elite actors. Equally, we know street-level bureaucrats can make and remake policy. We know users experience of services can differ markedly from the expectations of the service provider. And yet, after over a decade of public sector reforms, there is no study of the beliefs and actions of employees (or even middle level managers) in response to these (allegedly) dramatic changes. The political ethnography of government invites us to build a multifaceted picture of how the several actors understood such changes as public sector reform and 'Thatcherism'. Ideally, we should tell the story through the eyes of the political and administrative elite and show how the various constructions of reform or Thatcherism or governance arise out of the multiple narratives legislators, bureaucrats and others have come to adopt by adapting

traditions to meet specific dilemmas. Their version of the story is only available to us as part of the historical record and not through academic accounts. To explore traditions we need to move beyond academic accounts to create historical 'constructions of other people's constructions of what they were up to' (modified from Geertz 1973: 9).

We also need historical accounts of the public sectors of different states. We must highlight the ways in which different traditions prompt people to construct these processes and their implications differently both within and between states. For example, belief in a powerful executive is a long-standing feature of the British governmental tradition. Why did Britain develop the tradition of a strong executive when other north European monarchies did not? We need to ask why this tradition is dominant, why in this country, and why today? We have to open-up the black-box of an institution to see how it and its effects arise out of complex political contests over meanings. We need to become sensitive to the continuing struggles between different traditions as people change them to resolve dilemmas.

FIGURES

Figure 1. <u>Governmental Traditions: Britain and Denmark</u>

	Britain	Denmark
Beliefs about the constitution	(i) Strong executive underpinned by two-party system. (ii) Parliamentary sovereignty.	(i) Negotiated consensus underpinned by multi-party coalitions. (ii) Constitutional State
Beliefs about the bureaucracy	(i) Generalists'. (ii) Individual and collective accountability (iii) Freedom to manage	(i) Specialists with professional autonomy (ii) Ministerial autonomy (iii) Political control
Beliefs about state-civil society relations	(i) Allegiant-deferential (ii) Exclusive networks (iii) Citizen as consumer	(i) Participation (ii) Inclusive networks (iii) Active citizen

Figure 2: <u>Traditions and Thatcherism</u>

	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

Figure 3. <u>New Labour and Governance</u>

	New Labour	Old Labour	New Right
Public Philosophy	Stakeholding	Fellowship	Individualism
Service Delivery: i) Characteristic organisation	Network	Bureaucracy	Market
ii) Characteristic relationship	Trust	Command	Competition

AUTHORS' NOTE

(1) A version of this was paper was presented to the Workshop on 'Narratives Of Governance: Interpreting the Changing Role of the Public Sector in Comparative and Historical Perspectives', University of Copenhagen, 29-30 June 1999. There are numerous theoretical analyses of tradition (Collingwood 1993; Gadamer 1979; Shils 1981). Many of these deploy the phenomenological and hermeneutic ideas that typically inspire interpretative approaches to the human sciences (Bauman 1978; Berger and Luckman 1971; Geertz 1973). Bevir 1999a; chapter 5 provides the detailed analysis behind our use of tradition as an intermediate position between autonomy and structuralism, and we do not repeat that analysis here. Bevir 1999b relates our decentered approach to another. Bevir and Rhodes 1998a, 1998b and 1999 and Rhodes 1997a apply the approach to British government. The three illustrations are paraphrased from Rhodes 1999; Bevir and Rhodes 1998a; and Bevir and O'Brien 2000 and Rhodes 2000 respectively.

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