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## **Governance and Interpretation: What are the Implications of Postfoundationalism?**

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## ABSTRACT

Interpretive approaches to governance include poststructuralism, constructivist institutionalism, practical philosophy, and democratic pluralism. All of these interpretive approaches share a focus on meanings, sympathy for bottom-up studies, and an emphasis on contingency. All of them also confront theoretical issues that have arisen from the postfoundational turn within philosophy. They face questions about the nature of the meanings we study, the possibilities for recentring given an emphasis on diversity, and the normative and policy implications of their approach. Although poststructuralists have made the running in addressing these questions, their answers are ambiguous or even misleading. They often appear, in particular, mistakenly to renounce situated agency along with autonomy. This essay seeks to provide alternative answers to these theoretical questions and thereby to provide a more robust theoretical framework for interpretive approaches to governance.

## **Governance and Interpretation: What are the Implications of Postfoundationalism?**

Theoretical and empirical students of public administration have spoken to one another all too little during the last 30 years. In the 1960s and 1970s, they fought over the scientific pretensions of behaviouralism, agreed only to differ, and then went their separate ways. Today, however, issues of governance are bringing a few of them into dialogue once again, while postfoundationalism is undermining the apparent dichotomy between them. Governance refers broadly here to public administration in a context in which the state can exercise power only by acting in and through other actors.

Theoretical and empirical students of public administration have become interested in governance for rather different reasons. Empirical students typically use governance to describe the semi-sovereign, hollowed out state they believe has arisen as a result of recent changes in the world (Rhodes 1997; Mayntz 2003). They argue that contemporary states govern in and through increasingly complex organizational forms, including public-private partnerships, policy networks, and transnational groups. They unpack the concept of governance in terms of the rise of a public administration in which co-ordination is achieved through networks as opposed to markets or hierarchies. Often they then go on to ask how public officials can cope with this new form of public administration as networks. Initially their advice presupposed the top-down perspective of the state itself: they asked how public officials could steer networks so as successfully to develop and implement policies (Kickert *et al.* 1997). More recently, however, some of them have adopted bottom-up approaches in an attempt to respond to the widespread policy failures that arise from the recalcitrance and resistance of non-state actors within the policy process (Bang and Sørensen 1999).

Theorists turned to governance and governmentality, in contrast, as a result of recovering the interest of early modern thinkers in the different techniques that are appropriate to conduct in a wide range of practices (Foucault 1977; Skinner 1978; Foucault 1991; Bartelson 1995). The early moderns explored the specific rationalities that they believed applied to families, populations, trade, prisons, and nations. Often the early moderns were less interested here in a politics in which the state acted through law than in a politics in which various techniques mobilized and shaped individual capacities and

conduct. For theorists too, then, governance refers to a politics beyond the institutions of the modern state, a politics in which power also operates in and through non-state practices and actors. Governance evokes a world in which power and administrative rationality are dispersed among diverse practices and technologies. This idea of a dispersed power within civil society helps to explain, moreover, why some democratic pluralists deploy governance as a concept to express their aspiration for a more diverse, participatory, and porous politics (Hirst 2002; and, for a more jaundiced view, Bartelson 2001). Theorists thus use the concept of governance not only as descriptive of past and present but also sometimes to convey a vision of a more democratic politics.

Although empirical and theoretical students of public administration have turned to governance from different perspectives, both groups typically use the concept to refer, in very broad terms, to a politics that operates through disparate practices located partly within civil society. They define governance in terms of practices that often form loose networks based on dialogue and shared resources. Even this broad definition of governance points to general contrasts between it and two other approaches to the study of public administration. One contrast is with rational choice theory in so far as it analyses public administration in terms of autonomous, rational individuals whose actions are coordinated by an invisible hand. The other contrast is with the old institutionalism in so far as it analyses public administration in terms of centralized organizations acting on top-down commands.

Much governance theory deploys an interpretive alternative to rational choice and the old institutionalism. It analyses public administration in relation to meanings or culture, rather than deductive models or legal settings. Of course, the distinction between interpretive and other approaches is not an all or nothing affair: sensible interpretivists will allow that models, correlations, and the like can play a useful role in advancing our understanding of governance; and sensible rational choice theorists, behaviorists, and the like will allow that their models and correlations can do explanatory work only in so far as we can unpack them in terms of the actual beliefs and desires of the relevant actors. However, we still can distinguish a family of interpretive approaches to governance that stand out in that they focus on meanings, beliefs, or culture. This overlapping family

includes poststructuralism, constructivist institutionalism, decentered theory, practical philosophy, and democratic pluralism (Tully 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Bang 2003a).

Clearly issues of interpretation and governance cover a potentially vast terrain. I want to make that terrain more manageable in two main ways. First, I want to narrow the scope of interpretive approaches by recalling that my concern lies specifically with recent studies of governance rather than public administration more generally. Whereas earlier interpretive approaches took inspiration from such diverse philosophical sources as hermeneutics, phenomenology, and social constructivism, interpretive studies of governance almost always draw on more recent philosophies that are embroiled, at least to some degree, with the unsettling effects of the postfoundational turn within these earlier ones (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 17-44). To restrict our terrain in this way is to forego explicit discussion of the well-known treatments of interpretation by scholars such as Peter Berger, Alfred Schultz, and Max Weber. Yet postfoundationalism is itself a remarkably broad category, covering much (but not all) postmodernism as well as recent developments in pragmatism and post-analytic philosophy. Secondly, then, I want to narrow the scope of postfoundationalism by recalling that my concern lies specifically with studies of governance rather than postmodernism more generally. To restrict our terrain in this way is to forego any explicit engagement with the well-known treatments of postfoundationalism by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty and also with many of the attempts – often inspired by them – to define a postmodern public administration (Bogason 2001).

Because interpretive approaches to governance are embroiled with the issues raised by postfoundationalism, a crucial question is: what are the implications of postfoundationalism for interpretive approaches to governance? We can go some way towards answering this question by identifying positions that are shared by those who have brought interpretive approaches to bear on governance and by showing how postfoundationalism might support these positions. Here I will suggest that a focus on meanings, a sympathy for bottom-up approaches, and a stress on contingency are positions shared by Anglo-Foucauldians (Burchell *et al.* 1991) such as Mitchell Dean (2003), constructivist institutionalists including Chris Ansell (2000, n.d.), practical

philosophers such as James Tully (2000, 2002), and democratic pluralists including Henrik Bang (2003b) and Paul Hirst (2002), as well as – although this is less relevant to our restricted terrain – by most of those who advocate a postfoundational approach to public administration more generally, including David Farmer (1997), Charles Fox and Hugh Miller (1995), C.O. McSwite (1997), and Camilla Stivers (2002). Each of these shared positions then raises a question over which there does not seem to be any such consensus. I will thus further identify the implications of postfoundationalism for interpretive approaches to governance by proposing tentative answers to these questions: How should we analyse meanings? How can we recenter accounts of governance? Do we have grounds for ethical judgements?

### Cultural Governance

Several positions unite those who bring postfoundational interpretive approaches to bear on governance. To begin, they use the concept of governance or governmentality to refer to a pattern of public administration that is characterized by networks connecting various aspects of civil society and the state. Sometimes they view this pattern of public administration as a novel product of the reforms introduced within the public sectors of western democracies over the last 20-30 years. At other times they view it as a general account of all power and coordination including markets and hierarchies as well as networks. Yet all sorts of students of public administration, not just postfoundational interpretivists, use governance to refer to just such a pattern of rule through networks. What differentiates postfoundational interpretivists is an overlapping set of theoretical views about how to study governance so understood. Postfoundational interpretivists share, most obviously, a concern to take seriously the meanings or beliefs that are embodied in administrative practices. Typically they believe that administrative practices arise out of actions, where we can adequately explore actions only by reference to the meanings or beliefs that animate them. In this view, we cannot properly apprehend an administrative practice solely in terms of its legal character, its class composition, or the patterns of behaviour associated with it. Rather, all of these things, like the practice itself, can be adequately understood only in terms of meaningful human action.

The conception of human action that informs postfoundational interpretivism is, at least in some respects, rather commonplace. Our standard way of explaining actions is by reference to the beliefs and desires of the actors. What distinguishes postfoundational interpretivism is an insistence on carrying this standard form of explanation into the study of public administration. Students of public administration often remain indebted to a positivist programme of explaining human activity in terms of allegedly objective social facts. Although many positivists accept that people act on their beliefs, they attempt to avoid direct appeals to beliefs by reducing them to intervening variables between social facts and actions. Positivists allow institutional location, class, and other social facts to stand as markers for the beliefs and desires of actors. They thereby imply that having an institutional location or belonging to a certain class defines one's beliefs and desires and so the actions one performs. Interpretivists reject this view.

Postfoundationalism provides interpretivists with one reason for denying that we can reduce beliefs and meanings to intervening variables. The elder philosophical bases of interpretivism – hermeneutics, phenomenology, and pragmatism – exhibit a concern with the ways in which we actively construct our experiences. Even positivists, I suspect, would now be suspicious of overt appeals to pure experience. Certainly once we accept a postfoundational rejection of the possibility of pure experience and pure reason, we thereby erode the positivist program of reducing beliefs and meanings to intervening variables. When we say that someone X in a position Y has beliefs or interests Z, we use our particular theories to derive their beliefs and even to identify their position. Thus, if X had different theories from us, X might take his or her position to be A, rather than Y, or see his or her interests as B, rather than Z. Hence postfoundational interpretivists conclude that we cannot deduce people's beliefs from our knowledge of their location. Instead we have to explore the theories, meanings, and beliefs through which people construct their world, including their view of their location, the norms that affect them, and their interests.

A second theme shared by postfoundational interpretivists is sympathy for bottom-up forms of inquiry. This sympathy has strong links to the postfoundational rebuttal of positivism. A rejection of pure experience implies that people in the same social situation could hold very different beliefs if only because their experiences of that



situation could be laden with very different prior theories. Hence we cannot assume that people in a given social situation will act in a uniform manner. Aggregate concepts, such as a class or an institution, cannot be adequate markers for people's beliefs, interests or actions. Such aggregate concepts can stand only as abstractions based on the multiple and complex beliefs and actions of the individuals we locate under them. Postfoundational interpretivists often conclude, for these reasons, that administrative practices require bottom-up studies of their constitutive beliefs and actions. No doubt constructivist institutionalists are more willing than poststructuralists to bypass bottom-up studies in order to focus on the ways in which institutions operate and interact in given settings. Nonetheless, even when constructivists postulate institutional unity, they often conceive of it as an emergent property based on individual actions in the context of intersubjective norms which at least in principle could be contested. Postfoundational interpretivists favor bottom-up studies of the ways in which administrative practices are created, sustained, and transformed through the interplay and contest of the beliefs and meanings embedded in human activity.

A third theme shared by postfoundational interpretivists is an emphasis on the contingency of social life. This theme too has strong links to the postfoundational rebuttal of positivism. Once we accept that people in any given situation can interpret that situation and their interests in all sorts of ways, we are pressed to accept that their actions are radically open. In other words, no practice or institution can itself fix the ways in which its participants will act, let alone the ways in which they will innovate within it in response to novel circumstances. Our practices are radically contingent in that they lack any fixed essence or logical path of development. This emphasis on contingency explains why postfoundational interpretivists often denaturalize alternative theories. In so far as other students of public administration attempt to ground their theories in allegedly given facts about the nature of human life, the path-dependence of institutions, or the inexorability of social developments, they tend to efface the contingency of administrative practices; they represent aspects of these practices as natural or inexorable. Postfoundational interpretivists then try to expose the contingency of those aspects of administrative practices that these others represent as natural or inexorable; they expose

as images what these others represent as real (Kass and Catron 1990; Farmer 1995 and 1998d; Fox and Miller 1996; Stivers 2002).

The overlapping positions shared by postfoundational interpretivists help to explain the content they characteristically give to the concept of governance. As we have seen, postfoundational interpretivists follow other students of public administration in using governance to refer to a pattern of rule characterized by networks operating at the boundary between state and civil society. However, postfoundational interpretivists then depart from many other students of public administration in ways that reflect their distinctive theoretical positions. For a start, they explore the rise of networks and markets in relation to changing patterns of meaning or belief (Bevir *et al.* 2003). In addition, a sympathy for bottom-up studies prompts them to explain the origins and processes of modes of governance by referring not only to the central state but also to multifarious activities in civil society: they have examined the operation of governance in practices such as child-care and accountancy (Parton 1991; Armstrong 1994). Finally, they stress the contingent and contested nature of all modes of governance; they explore the diversity of our beliefs and discourses about techniques of rule, they trace the historical roots of different traditions, they examine the varied policy prescriptions associated with discourses, and they ask about the relations of power by which certain techniques come to dominate (Bevir *et al.* 2003; and for an earlier era see Stivers 2002).

Advocates of postfoundational interpretive approaches to governance share the theoretical and substantive positions just identified. However, this shared framework is an extremely broad one that leaves a number of questions unanswered. Three theoretical issues – corresponding to the three shared positions – appear to be particularly important here. These issues are: the composition of governance, the recentering of governance, and the policy orientation of postfoundational interpretivism. It is important to recognize both that postfoundational interpretivists rarely discuss these issues explicitly and that the dividing lines between their implicit views are often blurred. In very broad terms, however, we might distinguish two tendencies within postfoundational interpretivism with respect to these issues. The first derives from the strong hostility to humanism and agency that many commentators argue structuralism has bequeathed to poststructuralists (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Harland 1988; Gutting 1989). It also has influenced some

interpretivists by way of systems theory (Bang 1998). Among students of governance, it is associated with Anglo-Foucauldians such as Dean (2003), while among those who study public administration more generally, it is associated with people inspired by Derrida, such as Farmer (1997). The second draws more on an intentionalism and action theory derived from hermeneutics and pragmatism. Among students of governance, it is associated with constructivists such as Ansell (n.d.) and practical philosophers such as Tully (2002), while among those who study public administration more generally, it is associated with people inspired by pragmatism such as McSwite (1997). In what follows, I want to defend positions closer to the second tendency than the first.

### The Question of Composition

Postfoundational interpretivists agree on the need to approach governance through a study of the meanings that inform it. However, they at best disagree, and at worst are confused, about the nature of meaning. ‘There was no agreement on the role of the individual’, as Peter Bogason (2001, p. 173) writes about postfoundational approaches to public administration more generally. Whereas some poststructuralists appear to suggest that meanings derive from quasi-structures that possess a semiotic logic or that respond to random fluctuations of power (Foucault 1972; Foucault 1980), other postfoundational interpretivists portray meanings in intentionalist terms as the beliefs of individuals with discourses being nothing more than clusters of intersubjective meanings (Skinner 1988; Bevir 2002). These two views of meaning embody different analyses of the relationship of conduct to context. Whereas the structuralist legacy in poststructuralism sometimes appears to generate an apparent ambition to avoid all appeals to human agency by reducing it to discursive contexts, the debt interpretivists owe to hermeneutics and pragmatism often inspires an overt concern with the intentionality of conduct conceived as situated agency.

We should be clear that the question of composition – of whether meanings derive from quasi-structures or situated agency – arises against the background of a general repudiation by postfoundational interpretivists of the idea of the autonomous individual. Postfoundationalism undermines the notion of autonomous individuals who are prior to their social contexts; once we accept that all experience and all reasoning embodies

theories, we surely will conclude that people always adopt beliefs against the background of a prior set of theories, which, at least initially, must be made available to them by a social tradition. However, although almost all postfoundational interpretivists reject an autonomous view of the individual, this need not entail a rejection of situated agency. On the contrary, we can accept that people always are situated against the background of a social tradition, and still conceive of them as agents who can act in novel ways for reasons of their own so as to transform both themselves and this background. Situated agency entails only the ability creatively to transform an inherited tradition, language, or discourse. It does not entail an ability to transcend social context. To say that people are situated agents is thus to say only that their intentionality is the source of their conduct; they are capable of using and modify language, discourse or traditions for reasons of their own. It is not to say that their intentionality is uninfluenced by their social context.

Postfoundationalism strongly suggests that individuals are always situated within social contexts, but this leaves open the possibility that they are situated agents who can innovate against the background of such contexts and even thus constitute themselves and their contexts. In other words, even after postfoundational interpretivists reject autonomy, they still confront the question of composition, that is, the question of whether we should conceive of people as situated agents or as the passive constructs of discourse. At times they depict people as situated agents who utter words to express their intentions, whether these be conscious or not, so that to understand the meaning of their utterances we need to recover these intentions. At other times they appear to imply that epistemes or practices of power-knowledge constitute or at least limit the intentions people can have so that to understand the meaning of a text we need rather to reconstruct the internal – albeit unstable – logics of the relevant episteme or power/knowledge. Poststructuralists sometimes seem to want to straddle these surely incompatible positions, writing, for example, of one ‘constituting oneself’ and also being ‘constituted as’ a subject (Dean 2003, p. 123). More often still, they pay-lip service to the capacity for agency while writing empirical studies that concentrate on the ways in which social practices and traditions create forms of subjectivity to the apparent exclusion of the ways in which situated agents create social practices and traditions. For example, although the introduction to an edited collection tells us that techniques of power do not dominate

people so much as operate through their freedom (Gordon 1991, p. 5), the studies that follow include virtually no examples of particular agents applying norms in creative ways that transform power. One way of reading my arguments is then as an attempt to clear up this ambiguity. If readers believe that poststructuralists such as Foucault rejected agency as well as autonomy, they can read my arguments as offering an alternative type of postfoundationalism. If they think Foucault allowed adequately for agency, they can read my arguments as an attempt to provide an account for how he could do so; an account that stands in contrast to those provided by people who think he did not do so.

We can best approach the question of composition by distinguishing between three different ways in which we might conceive of the relationship of context to conduct. First, context might influence people's activity without setting limits to what they can seek to accomplish by that activity. This relationship would not negate situated agency: if context only influenced performance, we could not properly invoke it to explain even the parameters to conduct; rather, we would have to explore the situated agency as a result of which people come to act in a particular way against the background influence of any given context. Second, context might restrict conduct by establishing identifiable limits to the forms it could take without fixing its specific content within these limits. This relationship would sustain only a partial downplaying of situated agency: if context restricted performance, we could invoke it to explain why actions remained within certain limits, but we still would have to appeal to situated agency to explain the ways in which conduct unfolded within these limits. Third, context might determine conduct in each and every detail no matter how small. Only this relationship could imply a rejection of situated agency: if context fixed every feature of conduct, we really could give complete explanations of conduct by reference to context, so situated agency would be irrelevant.

Postfoundational interpretivists often debate the question of composition through discussions of the relationship of the self to language. The poststructuralist tendency to repudiate autonomy gets expressed here in the argument that language constitutes the self. If we interpret language simply as a metaphor for belief, this argument entails only the entirely unexceptionable claim (which even many foundationalists would accept) that people's thoughts and actions embody their beliefs. The postfoundational version of the

argument builds in to it a rejection of autonomy by using the term ‘language’ precisely in order to suggest that people’s beliefs are formed within the context of traditions and discourses. The postfoundational claim is thus that people’s thoughts and actions embody their beliefs, where these beliefs arise against the background of a social context. In my opinion, however, this postfoundational claim reflects the ambiguity over agency that I have just described. To see why I hold this opinion, we need to distinguish two varieties of the postfoundational claim. The first rejects autonomy but not situated agency. It is that people’s thoughts and actions embody their beliefs, where these beliefs arise against the background of a tradition, but where they are situated agents who then can modify the beliefs they thus inherit. The second rejects situated agency along with autonomy. It is that people’s thoughts and actions embody beliefs, where these beliefs arise against the background of a social tradition that determines the beliefs they might go on to adopt. Although postfoundationalism pushes interpretivists to adopt the first claim, they need not necessarily be seduced thereby into defending the second one. On the contrary, postfoundational interpretivists need defend the second one only if they want to use terms such as ‘language’ and ‘discourse’ to invoke quasi-structures that constitute intersubjectivity without also being emergent properties of it.

The question of composition thus comes down to that of whether or not conduct is entirely determined by context. If anyone really wanted to reduce meanings to social discourses defined by the relationships between their semantic units, they would have to argue that our utterances and intentionality are fixed in every detail by such quasi-structures. But, of course, context does not fix conduct in this way. On the contrary, because people can adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the background of the same context, there must be an undecided space to the fore of any given context. There must be a space in which individuals might adopt this or that belief and perform this or that action as a result of their situated agency. Situated agency manifests itself in the diverse activity that might occur against the background of any particular context. Even if a tradition forms the background to people’s utterances and a social structure forms the background to their actions, the content of their utterances and their actions does not come directly from these contexts. It comes, rather, from the ways

in which they replicate or develop these traditions and structures in accord with their intentions.

I am suggesting that we should decide the question of composition in favour of situated agency rather than quasi-structures. Some poststructuralists appear to be tempted to downplay situated agency because they want to deny that intentionality is autonomous; they want to insist on the theory-laden nature of the reasoning and experiences upon the basis of which people form their intentions. However, we have seen that we can deny autonomy without renouncing situated agency. We can say that people formulate the intentions they do through their agency against the background of a social tradition. In this view, people's intentions are the product of local and situated reasoning but not autonomous and universal reasoning.

Some poststructuralists appear to be tempted to downplay situated agency and local reasoning because doing so gives them critical purchase on less interpretive approaches to public administration. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that a rejection of autonomy is quite sufficient to sustain an interpretive critique of alternative approaches to governance. One target of postfoundational interpretivism is the account of the individual implicit within much rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists often imply that individuals are (or at least fruitfully can be treated as) atomized units who have nigh-on perfect knowledge of their preferences and situation and who act so as to maximize their utility. In most rational choice models, neither discourses nor the unconscious interfere in the processes of belief-formation, deliberation, and action. To reject such rational choice theory requires only a repudiation of autonomy. Once we accept that people's views of their interests and contexts are always infused with their particular theories, we undercut the assumptions of rational choice theorists about actors having pure and perfect knowledge of their preferences and situations.

Another target of postfoundational interpretivism is the drift within institutionalism away from the bottom-up stance of constructivism towards a focus on apparently given rules or norms. For some institutionalists, the beliefs and actions of individuals are defined by their social roles or by the norms that govern the institutions in which they participate (March and Olsen 1984). These institutionalists elide the contingent and contested nature of social life by implying that the content and

development of institutions is fixed by rules or a path dependency inherent within them. To reject such institutionalism also requires only a repudiation of autonomy. Once we allow that people's understanding of their world, including the rules and norms that apply to them, is inherently theory-laden, then we open the possibility of different people grasping or applying a rule or norm in different ways, and we thereby draw attention to the contest and contingency that institutionalists sometimes appear to elide.

Postfoundational interpretivists explore human activity in relation to the meanings that animate it. However, they disagree as to whether such meanings should be understood in terms of the abstract, structural relations between them or the situated agency of individuals. Although poststructuralists sometimes appear to adopt the former position, postfoundationalism actually undermines only the notion of autonomy. Interpretivists would be well advised, in my view, to allow for situated agency. To do so, they would not have to give up all reference to social discourses or regimes of power, but only to unpack their references to such things in terms of the beliefs and actions of individuals, where the content of these beliefs and actions would reflect, in turn, the influence on the actors of a contested social inheritance. The main implications of this proposed resolution of the question of the composition of governance concern our treatment of aggregate concepts and our ability to sustain ethical judgements. It is to these implications that I now turn.

### The Question of Recentring

The bottom-up orientation of postfoundational interpretivists encourages them to focus on the multiplicity of conflicting actions and micro-practices that come together to create any contingent administrative practice. Postfoundational interpretivists paint a picture devoid of any inherent logic. They suggest that patterns of governance arise almost accidentally out of all sorts of unconnected activities. In so far as other students of public administration favor parsimonious accounts, they often ask postfoundational interpretivists how they would connect their accounts of governance with more macro-level accounts of social and political life. The disagreements and ambiguities among postfoundational interpretivists on the question of composition reappear in their responses as to how they might recentre bottom-up studies of governance. On the one



hand, just as we have seen that the structuralist legacy in poststructuralism appears to inspire a reduction of situated agency to a semiotic code within discourse, so poststructuralists sometimes appear to use concepts such as power/knowledge or discourse to recentre their accounts of governance. On the other hand, the widespread emphasis of postfoundational interpretivists on contingency and particularity often inspires an overt concern to challenge the validity of all terms of recentering presumably including those of discourse and power/knowledge. Critics thus point to an apparent contradiction between postfoundationalists' use of an 'undertheorised meta-narrative' and their stated opposition to all meta-narratives (Thompson 1993).

Postfoundational interpretivists disagree as to whether they should condemn all totalizing concepts or invoke their own. At times poststructuralists in particular appear to want to straddle these incompatible positions, writing, for example, of the need to replace narratives of governance that appeal to social forces with a focus on 'singular practices' only then to assimilate these singular practices to an apparently monolithic concept of 'individualizing power'. So, although Dean (2003, p. 126) rightly complains that 'the problem with contemporary sociological accounts is that they are pitched at too general a level and propose mysterious, even occult, relations between general processes and events (e.g. globalisation, de-traditionalisation) and features of self and identity', he seems unaware of the extent to which his narrative appears to rely on the equally mysterious, even occult, impact of an overarching 'individualizing power' on the particular practices and actions it allegedly generates. At other times poststructuralists pay lip-service to the importance of contingency and particularity while writing empirical studies that explain the content or existence of a speech-act or practice in terms of an episteme or other quasi-structure that operates as a totalizing concept. Some poststructuralists appear, for example, to portray discourses or regimes of power as contingent particularities only then to present conduct as a manifestation of just such discourses and power-relations rather than as itself being contingent and particular. Today postfoundational interpretivists disagree as to whether they legitimately can recenter their accounts of governance, let alone over what concepts they should use so to do.

In a sense, postfoundational interpretivists like everyone else should use the abstract concepts they believe best describe the world. If they believe that networks are multiplying, they might invoke a ‘network society’. If they believe that people are increasingly dealing with risk through personalized health plans, pension provisions, and the like, they might invoke an ‘individualizing power’. If they believe certain people express similar ideas about freedom, markets, the importance of the consumer, and the need to roll back the state, they might invoke a ‘discourse of the New Right’. All such aggregate concepts describe broad patterns in the world, so the worth we attach to them depends on whether or not we believe that the broad patterns exist. Postfoundational interpretivists have no particular problem in accepting aggregate concepts as descriptions of the world, although arguably they will be more concerned than others to highlight exceptions that do not fit under such concepts. However, the abstract concepts we deploy in this way are purely descriptive; they do not do any explanatory work. Descriptions of forms of life, power, and speech do not necessarily tell us anything about why those forms of life, power, and speech have arisen, or why they have the content they do.

The question of recentring becomes awkward for postfoundational interpretivists with respect to explanatory concepts not descriptive ones. The more we emphasize the contingency and particularity of administrative practices, the harder it becomes to explain them by reference to a broader social process. If we were to deploy discourse and power to do explanatory work, these concepts would be liable to exhibit the failings of too strong a repudiation of situated agency. For example, when discourse purports not only to describe a pattern of belief or speech but also to explain that pattern, it is often conceived as a quasi-structure composed of units whose relations to one another define its content. Meaning thus gets reduced to the allegedly inherent relationships between abstract semantic units as opposed to the diverse and contingent beliefs that agents come to hold against a social background. When people use discourse or power to do explanatory work, they confront a number of problems as a consequence of this neglect of situated agency. For a start, they confront an obvious problem in accounting for change. If individuals arrive at beliefs and even construct themselves solely in accord with a discursive context, they appear to lack the capacity to modify or transform that discourse, which appears to render such transformations inexplicable. (Although poststructuralists

sometimes criticize structuralists for exhibiting just such determinism while implying that they themselves conceive of such transformations in terms of an instability inherent within the structure – an instability that threatens the structure and puts it into contradiction with itself – they thereby elide questions of whether we are to understand such instability, contradiction, and transformation as necessary qualities of a disembodied quasi-structure or as contingent properties and products of situated agents.) In addition, the location of meaning within such discourses is unclear. Meaning appears to be tied to relationships between semantic units, where these relationships are given independently of individuals, their beliefs, and their agency. Surely, however, this disembodied view of meaning contradicts the postfoundational concern with contingency and particularity. Although the rise of a discourse might be contingent, the disembodied view of meaning implies that the content of that discourse is anything but contingent; it is given by the fixed relationships between semantic units. Likewise, although discourses might be singular, the disembodied view of meaning implies that the diverse and particular beliefs people might hold about anything can be assimilated to a single pattern imposed upon them by the necessity of the relationships between semantic units.

At the moment, postfoundational interpretivists struggle to recenter their theories of governance in a way that possesses explanatory power. They might do so, however, by drawing on the contrast between situated agency and autonomy. To reject autonomy is to accept that individuals necessarily experience the world in ways that reflect the influence upon them of a social tradition, discourse, or regime of power. Hence our explanatory concepts should indicate how social influences permeate beliefs and actions even on those occasions when the speaker or actor does not recognize such influence. To accept situated agency is, however, to imply that people possess the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, where these beliefs and actions then can transform the social background. I would suggest, therefore, that postfoundational interpretivists would be well advised to think of the social context in terms of traditions rather than discourses or regimes of power. The concept of a tradition evokes a social context in which individuals are born and which then acts as the background to their beliefs and actions even while they might modify, develop, or even reject much of their inheritance.

How might postfoundational interpretivists fill-out an explanatory concept of tradition? Because tradition is unavoidable only as a starting point, not as something that defines later performances, it is not an inevitable, constitutive presence within all beliefs and actions. Tradition is an initial influence on people. Its content will appear in their later performances only in so far as their situated agency has not led them to change it, where every part of it is in principle open to change. Because tradition is unavoidable only as a starting point, not as a final destination, traditions do not possess a fixed content to which we can ascribe variations. Perhaps there are occasions when we can point to the persistence of a core idea within a tradition over time. Equally, however, we might identify a tradition with a group of ideas that were widely shared by a number of individuals although no one idea was held by all of them, or we might equate a tradition with a group of ideas that passed from generation to generation, changing a little each time so that no single idea persisted from start to finish.

As an explanatory concept, tradition has the advantage over discourse in that it allows properly for situated agency and so provides a means of analyzing social change. Change arises as a result of people's ability to adopt beliefs and perform actions for reasons of their own. To conceive of change in this way is not to suggest that traditions contain an inner logic that fixes their development. It is, rather, to say that the ways in which people change their beliefs or actions depend on their contingent reasoning. Hence our explanatory concepts should indicate how change arises from a type of reasoning that is neither random nor fixed by logical relations or given experiences. I would suggest, therefore, that postfoundational interpretivists would be well advised to analyse change in terms of situated agents creatively responding to dilemmas from within their existing beliefs. A dilemma arises for individuals whenever they adopt a new belief that stands in opposition to their existing ones and so forces a reconsideration of the latter. In accepting a new belief, people pose to their existing beliefs the question of how they will accommodate it. They respond to the dilemma, whether explicitly or not, by changing their beliefs to accommodate the newcomer.

The concept of a dilemma provides postfoundational interpretivists with a way of exploring agency and so change in terms of situated, local, and contingent reasoning. Although dilemmas often come from people's experiences of the world, they also can

derive from reflections on one's existing beliefs. Even when they come from experiences of the world, moreover, these experiences are not simply given but rather constructed in the context of a prior set of theories. While people do respond to the world, while the world impacts upon their beliefs, the concept of a dilemma thus forestalls attempts to read-off people's beliefs and actions from our view of their situation or interests. Indeed postfoundational interpretivists can use the concept of a dilemma to forestall attempts to postulate a rational path of development for traditions, discourses, or practices. The way in which people respond to a dilemma is open-ended in that there are always many plausible ways in which people might modify their existing beliefs so as to accommodate the newcomer.

The concepts of tradition and dilemma provide postfoundational interpretivists with a means to recentre their accounts of governance. They can explain the rise of new patterns of governance by reference to the intersubjective traditions and dilemmas that inform the changing activities of various clusters of situated actors. They might even be able to relate the relevant dilemmas to what they take to be facts about the real world, although equally they might find that they take some dilemmas to be figments of the imaginations of those who responded to them. Nonetheless, because the concepts of tradition and dilemma embody recognition of the contingency and particularity of social life, they can only do so much recentring. These concepts certainly do not constitute mechanisms or large-scale social processes of which governance stands as the mere symptom. Rather, they represent abstractions that do explanatory work only in so far as we can unpack them in terms of contingent, intersubjective beliefs, desires, and actions. As abstractions, moreover, they characteristically enable us to recenter our accounts only at the cost of ignoring or marginalizing those contingent beliefs, desires, and activities that fall outside the dominant patterns they capture. If we forgot this cost, we would neglect the critical perspective provided by postfoundational interpretivism – a critical perspective that I will now examine more closely.

### The Question of Policy

Some postfoundational interpretivists aim at an understanding of administrative practices for its own sake. Ethnographers, for example, often offer thick descriptions almost

wholly to elucidate the activity of those they observe. Others seek to understand administrative practices primarily so as to bring them into question. They highlight the meanings that make a practice possible precisely in order to reveal the contingency and contestability of those meanings and thereby prompt new thinking about alternatives. Postfoundational interpretivists unpack modes of governance as embodying intersubjective beliefs about human nature, right conduct, social inquiry and the good. These intersubjective beliefs are often more or less taken for granted by the participants in the relevant mode of governance; that is to say, they provide the framework in which problems are conceived and addressed. Postfoundational interpretivists then reveal the historical contingency and contestability of these shared beliefs by showing how they arose against the background of a particular tradition. Because postfoundationalist interpretivists believe that any justification for a practice must occur within the framework of a set of prior theories, they thereby portray our practices as devoid of any trans-historical rationality.

Many postfoundational interpretivists adopt a critical perspective because their emphasis on contingency denaturalizes alternative narratives so as to cast doubt on the ethics and policies associated with them. Such critique can be properly effective, however, only when it is conjoined with proposals for alternative beliefs and practices. Because we have to act in the world, we cannot renounce our current activity, no matter how much we may come to doubt it, unless we conceive of an alternative pattern of action as preferable. Yet the disagreements and ambiguities among postfoundational interpretivists on the question of composition reappear in their ethical and policy prescriptions. On the one hand, postfoundational interpretivists often appeal to visions of a situated self, agency, and freedom to defend an alternative ethic (Taylor 1985). On the other, the structuralist legacy in poststructuralism sometimes appears to preclude all appeals to agency, freedom, or the good, so that they are left offering only critique (Brown 1998). Critics thus accuse them of lacking passion and commitment (Goodsell 1996) or lacking any justification for their passions and commitments (Geuras and Garofalo 1996).

Postfoundational interpretivists oscillate between a critique of all visions of freedom and invoking their own. At times they appear to want to straddle these surely

incompatible positions by appealing to critique as a pathway to new thinking and yet not advocating any particular path. They argue that their contestation of other theories of governance ‘might require us to think about how we are asked to constitute ourselves today and how we might think differently about that request’, but they do not propose that we think differently in any particular way (Dean 2003, p. 135). Or they suggest that contestation or an open discourse somehow will remove from the agenda questions such as those of legitimacy (McSwite 1997). At other times they seem to ignore the gap between a meta-ethical recognition of the partiality of all actions and the ethical or political question of how we should act. As Simon Critchley has argued, they confuse recognition of the ubiquity of hegemony with an argument for democratic hegemony, when what is clearly needed for the latter is an account of why we should prefer democratic hegemony to any other form of hegemony (1992, 2004). Today postfoundational interpretivists disagree about whether or not they have epistemic grounds for advocating ethical and policy positions, let alone over the specific positions they should advocate.

One of the lessons of postfoundationalism is surely that no set of philosophical commitments leads unquestionably to any one ethic. Postfoundational interpretivism, like all other approaches to public administration, can support a wide variety of ethics. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the contrast between situated agency and autonomy provides us with the theoretical resources we need not only to sustain a critical practice but also to facilitate our advocating alternatives in the way we have to do if our critiques are to bite.

Many narratives of governance present our beliefs and practices as somehow necessary. In this view, we are compelled by inexorable historical or social forces, the dictates of a universal reason, or even human nature itself, to adopt or to contemplate a limited range of modes of governance. Globalization, for example, appears in many narratives as an inexorable social process that requires states to adopt liberal reforms. In contrast, postfoundational interpretivists can think of modes of governance as the products of situated agents modifying the traditions they inherit in response to dilemmas. Any given narrative or mode of governance is thus contingent and contestable. It is contingent in that people from within other traditions might construct it differently. And

it is contestable in that there are no inherently correct responses to dilemmas even from within a shared perspective. For postfoundational interpretivists, then, narratives that present a mode of governance as necessary are themselves contingent and contestable. When postfoundational interpretivists present their view of these other narratives, they engage in critique. In the first place, they challenge the self-understanding of those who expound such narratives: they reveal to them the contingent, historical conditions of their beliefs, thereby undermining the notion that these beliefs are necessary. In the second place, they thereby open for us the possibility of alternative narratives, actions, and practices: they free us from the dominate modes of thinking and acting that define our current modes of governance in a way that provides us with an opportunity to govern ourselves differently.

Postfoundational interpretivists unsettle assumptions of the naturalness, inevitability, and rightness of our administrative practices. They thereby create a space in which we might think creativity about other ways of understanding our contemporary situation and of responding to it. It is unclear, however, whether or not postfoundational interpretivists provide any moral or practical guidance for our thinking and our responses to our situation. Poststructuralists, in particular, sometimes seem to move from a rejection of agency to the argument that all freedoms are illusory so any guidance would be an illegitimate imposition of power. In contrast, once we adopt the idea of situated agency and local reasoning, then, assuming we regard them as valuable, we can begin to move beyond denaturalizing critique to practical and ethical guidance, although, of course, the guidance we give will be broad and tentative since no set of philosophical commitments leads inexorably to any one ethic.

Most policy-orientated work on governance seeks to improve the ability of the state to manage the markets, quasi-markets, and networks that have flourished since the 1980s. Typically this work treats hierarchies, markets, and networks as fixed structures that governments can manipulate if they use appropriate tools (Kickert et al. 1997). Postfoundational interpretivism undermines the idea of a set of tools for managing governance. Because governance is constructed differently, contingently and also continuously, we cannot have a tool kit for managing it. Interpretivism thus encourages us to forsake alleged techniques or strategies of management for a practice of learning by



telling stories and listening to them (cf. Farmer 1998b, c; Miller and King 1998). While statistics, models, and claims to expertise all have a place within such stories, we should not become too pre-occupied with them. On the contrary, we should recognize that they too are narratives about how people have acted or will react given their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigour or expertise we bring to bear, all we can do is tell a story and judge what the future might bring. This view of expertise combines with the concern of postfoundational interpretivists with diversity and contingency to imply that the fate of policies depends on the ways in which civil servants, citizens, and others understand them and respond to them from within various traditions. Postfoundational interpretivism thus seems to guide us toward dialogic and bottom-up approaches to public policy. Policy is likely to be more effective if it is based on an engagement and negotiation with the concrete activities and struggles of governance in the field.

Postfoundational interpretivism might provide us with ethical as well as practical reasons for promoting dialogic modes of governance. Much of our democratic practice rests on a concept of universal or natural freedom. Political institutions are said to have normative value because they treat individuals as free and equal; they are guided by the rule of law and popular sovereignty conceived as guarantors of freedom. In contrast, postfoundational interpretivists typically describe practices of freedom as the contingent products of the ways in which situated agents responded to dilemmas so as to modify inherited traditions. They portray freedom as dependent on the ways in which the state has come to discipline and regulate its citizens. While interpretivists thus reject the idea of a universal or natural freedom as being tied to that of autonomy, they still could defend an ideal of freedom couched in terms of situated agency. In doing so, however, they would raise the question: what difference would this shift in the ideal of freedom make to public administration?

One difference would seem to be that a focus on agency as situated rather than autonomous reveals freedom to be inherently embedded in particular contexts. Many of our current administrative practices are attempts to protect an autonomy that allegedly exists beyond society. Postfoundational interpretivists, in contrast, often understand freedom in terms of self-government, empowerment, or participation in concrete social practices (Hirst 1994; Foucault 1988; Skinner 1998; Tully 2002) – a vision of freedom

that also pervades postfoundational approaches to public administration more generally (McSwite 1997; Farmer 1998c; and the almost foundationalist appeal to a Habermasian ‘authentic discourse’ in Fox and Miller 1995). While few of them want to repudiate liberal rights and liberties, most of them do believe that these rights and liberties need supplementing. Freedom, we might suggest, is not only abstract rights and liberties under the rule of law; it is, at least as importantly, a concrete practice in particular circumstances. Liberal institutions need supplementing with a political culture of participation and co-operation in partnerships and networks (Bang and Dryburg 2001). Freedom needs to be enacted as a shared project in a community. A postfoundational emphasis on the contingency of our beliefs, actions, and identities implies, moreover, that this project of freedom is a politics of becoming, rather than one that aims at stasis. The role of the state thus cannot be that often ascribed to it by liberals – the protection of a prior autonomy. The state appears, rather, to play the democratic role of enabling and facilitating the participation of citizens in processes of governing. In this way, postfoundational interpretivists might rethink freedom in terms of situated agency and thereby offer ethical as well as practical reasons for adopting a dialogic and bottom-up approach to public policy.

### Conclusion

Some theoretical and empirical students of public administration are coming together in order to study governance using interpretive approaches. Although these are early days for such studies, we can already identify a shared postfoundational agenda here. Governance – whether it is taken to be a new phenomena or ubiquitous – refers to a pattern of public administration through networks. Postfoundational interpretivists explore this pattern of rule through bottom-up studies of the contingent sets of meanings that it embodies. Within this shared agenda, however, several theoretical issues are avoided, debated, or dealt with in a confusing manner. I have suggested that we can resolve these issues by recognizing a capacity for situated agency even while we reject the concept of autonomy. By doing so, we can unpack the composition of governance in terms of the beliefs of individuals, where these beliefs are necessarily influenced by a social inheritance; we can recentre accounts of governance by reference to the traditions

and dilemmas against the background of which people form the beliefs they do; and we can begin to provide both ethical and practical justifications for a more dialogic and democratic style of public administration.

The resulting agenda could expand the dialogue between theoretical and empirical students of public administration even as it challenges any clear dichotomy between the two. Theorists could contribute in part by exploring questions in the philosophy of the human sciences such as those I have been considering. In addition, they could draw on the history of political thought to examine the contingent rise of various sets of meaning and related practices of governance. Empirical students could contribute most obviously by exploring the contingent patterns of meaning and related practices that constitute contemporary governance. In addition, they could examine the possibility of expanding interpretive approaches to incorporate not only the techniques associated with ethnography but also those associated with other approaches to public administration. It is, as they say, good to talk.

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