

# UC Berkeley

## UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

### Title

Interpretation as Method, Explanation, and Critique: A Reply" (with R.A.W. Rhodes)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wb0g2tq>

### Journal

British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 6

### Author

Bevir, Mark

### Publication Date

2004

Peer reviewed

# **Interpretation as Method, Explanation, and Critique**

By Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes

## CONTACT DETAILS

Mark Bevir  
Department of Political Science  
University of California  
Berkeley  
CA 94720-1950  
USA  
Phone: (510) 642 4693  
[mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu](mailto:mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu)

R. A. W. Rhodes  
Research School of Social Sciences  
Australian National University  
Canberra  
ACT 0200  
Australia  
Tel: 61 (0)2 6125 2117  
[Rhodes@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:Rhodes@coombs.anu.edu.au)

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Mark Bevir** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley.

**Rod Rhodes** is Professor of Political Science and Head of Program in the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra.

## **Interpretation as Method, Explanation, and Critique**

Interpreting British Governance aims, first, to outline an interpretive approach to political science, and, second, to use this approach to provide a decentered narrative of governance. How ambitious are these aims? Keith Dowding contrasts an earlier piece, in which we suggested that understanding British governance required an interpretive approach, with the hope expressed in the book that our narrative is edifying. There is no ambiguity here. We defend an interpretive approach on philosophical grounds. The logic of our concepts implies that an interpretive approach alone is adequate to understanding human life.<sup>1</sup> We would quickly add, however, that while an interpretive approach is necessary, it is not sufficient. So, our use of such an approach does not guarantee the objectivity of our narrative. Because we are sceptical of claims to objectivity outside a comparison with rival narratives, the most we can hope for our decentered account of governance is that it proves edifying – accurate, comprehensive, and fruitful – when compared with others.

Given that objectivity arises from comparisons, the edifying nature of our account of governance will depend, in part, on its relation to, say, rational choice, institutionalism, and poststructuralism. We are grateful to Keith Dowding, Colin Hay, and Alan Finlayson for posing questions that allow us to clarify our arguments, address specific issues, and make comparisons. In short, Dowding, Hay, and Finalyson ask that we expand on issues of method, explanation, and critique.

### Method

We agree with Dowding that accounts of the physical world are interpretations, and that our accounts of the social world rely on folk psychology. However, an account of a physical event is just an interpretation. In sharp contrast, an account of a human action in terms of folk psychology is inevitably an interpretation of an interpretation. In other words, to describe people's beliefs is to interpret their interpretation of the world. An interpretive approach recognises that the human sciences offer interpretations of interpretations. So, we concentrate on spelling out the meanings – the beliefs, traditions, or discourses – embedded in human actions.

An interpretive approach rests on a philosophical analysis of the meaningful nature of human action. Later we will consider how this analysis inspires certain forms of explanation. For now, we want to emphasise the differences between a philosophical analysis and the “methodological toolkit” with which Dowding associates it. To argue the human sciences offer interpretations of interpretations is not to favour any particular methods. On the contrary, human scientists can construct their interpretations by using data generated by many methods. They can use participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, and mass surveys, as well as reading memoirs, newspapers, and official and unofficial documents. An interpretive approach rests on a philosophical analysis. This analysis does not prescribe a particular method of creating data. Instead, it prescribes a particular way of treating any type of data. Interpretive approaches argue that human scientists should treat data in ways consistent with the philosophical analysis of their task as one of interpreting interpretations. They should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. They should not try to bypass meanings or

beliefs by reducing them to given principles of rationality, fixed norms, or social categories.

We disagree with Dowding in our analysis of how the human sciences should treat data. Indeed, we would argue an interpretive philosophy leads to a rejection of the idea of a “methodological toolkit”. The differences are all too plain in Dowding’s discussion of marriage. An interpretive approach implies that studies of statistical changes in the rate of marriage make sense only in the context of an interpretation of that term. Dowding thinks that this implication is widely accepted; statisticians would define their variables by specifying, say, whether to include same sex marriages. Yet his argument misses the point of our philosophical analysis of the human sciences, which suggests that we can make sense of statistical data about rates of change only if we treat this data as evidence about the beliefs that do or do not lead people to get married. Perhaps, then, a change in the rate of marriage might arise because of altered beliefs about whether same sex partners can or should get married. More generally, marriages can be contracted only within a whole set of meanings drawn from theology, law, and morality. If human scientists operationalise marriage by treating it as a variable and specifying its content, they risk obscuring these important meanings, which can vary dramatically across time and place. In effect, they would impose their definition of marriage on those they study in a way that would fail to do justice to others’ beliefs. We do not deny that statistical studies of changes in marriage rates produce useful data. We insist only that such data be treated as evidence of people’s beliefs, rather than as a variable in objectified models, norms, or categories.

Suppose the data provided by models, formal constitutions, or large-scale surveys leads us to attribute a set of beliefs to a group of people. Because such data typically abstracts from individual circumstances to find common patterns, it elides differences between people, even lumping together people who act in broadly similar ways for different reasons. Hence we argue for more detailed studies of the beliefs of the relevant people using textual analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Much present-day political science seems to denigrate such methods, preferring abstract models, typologies, and correlations. So, while an interpretive approach does not require an exclusive use of any one type of data or method, it does redress the balance in favour of the qualitative analysis more often associated with anthropology and history than with political science.

Our case for anthropological and historical studies should not be confused with the claim that we must accept actors' own accounts of their beliefs or the claim that actors' beliefs are always conscious and reasoned ones. Obviously people's statements about what they believe offer significant evidence about what they do believe. Equally, however, people can be deliberately misleading. They can act on subconscious and unconscious beliefs. So, we might explain an action using beliefs other than the stated beliefs of the actors. Obviously too people sometimes act on political commitments they have agonised over. However, people also act on habitual, unreflective beliefs about the nature of the world and about what is right in a given context. So we will do well to draw out the whole worldview of actors in our efforts to explain their actions.

### Explanation

An interpretive approach uses all sorts of data to recover the meanings or beliefs embodied in actions. One distinctive feature of such analysis is the need to treat data as evidence of beliefs and desires. A second distinctive feature is the importance of a narrative form of explanation. We argue that when the human sciences recover the beliefs and desires embodied in actions, they do not just understand the action but also explain it. We agree with Hay, therefore, about the importance of challenging the false dichotomy between understanding and explanation.

The philosophical analysis informing our interpretive approach suggests that the human sciences rely on a distinct form of explanation. We accept Donald Davidson's argument that when we explain actions in terms of the relevant beliefs and desires, we rely on a concept of choice and criteria of reasonableness that have no place in the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> It is important not to confuse the claim that the natural and human sciences use a different concept of causation with the idea that the human sciences are not interested in causal analysis. Rather, the human sciences explain actions and practices in narratives that point to the beliefs and desires that cause them.

We disagree with Hay about the form of explanation suitable to the human sciences. In our view, the human sciences require narrative explanations in which we unpack actions and practices by reference to the relevant beliefs and desires. Models, typologies, and correlations can do explanatory work only if they are unpacked as narratives. So, when Hay complains that we fail to identify the precise links between meanings and causal analysis, we think he misses the point of our analysis of explanation in the human sciences. For us, to recover the beliefs that inform actions is to provide a causal explanation of those actions. Hay appears to think of ideas as "ideational

variables” to which he wants to give a prominent role alongside others. In contrast, we would argue that other variables only do explanatory work when unpacked as ideas or beliefs. Our analysis of a narrative form of explanation suggests correlations between variables never do any explanatory work. They point to a relationship. We need to adopt a narrative to explain that link. We disagree with Alexander Wendt, then, in a way that Hay does not mention. Wendt and Hay believe that constitutive and other causal logics apply to the human sciences, disagreeing only about whether these different logics are incommensurable. In sharp contrast, we believe that constitutive logics are causal, and we reject the idea that other causal logics apply to human actions.

Narratives are the way we explain actions and practices. They thus play a dual role in our work. First, when we offer an interpretation of British politics, we offer a narrative. Second, the actors in our narratives have their own interpretations of their actions and practices, and these accounts also include narrative explanations. We deliberately use narrative to describe both what we offer and what we study. To say that we offer narratives of narratives is merely to restate our philosophical analysis of the human sciences as interpretations of interpretations given our claim that narratives are the way to explain human action.

When we argue that the human sciences explain actions by reference to meanings or beliefs, we raise the question of how we should explain these beliefs. In Interpreting British Governance, we explain webs of belief by reference to traditions and dilemmas. Dowding and Hay complain that we do not specify the explanatory mechanisms at work here. They want us to specify precise links between independent objects or variables. They worry that our understanding of a tradition depends on the actions that constitute it.



They argue that because the two are not independent of one another in the way they should be within an explanation, all we can offer is redescription. Yet our interpretive approach is rooted in a philosophical analysis of the human sciences that rejects the methodological rigour they urge on us. Our philosophical analysis suggests that because people are not autonomous, they necessarily gain their beliefs against the background of an inherited tradition. The manner in which they get them can and does vary, but they always so inherit beliefs.<sup>3</sup> This philosophical argument provides the causal mechanism at work in our explanations. Moreover, it suggests belief and tradition – agency and practice – are entwined. Thus, when human scientists try to specify them independently of one another, they are misled by a spurious concept of scientific rigour into adopting a form of explanation that is inappropriate for human action.

Perhaps we do not differ much from Hay. He concentrates on arguing that ideas matter. We want to go on from this argument to analyse why people hold the ideas they do. Hay argues that ideas matter by showing that a thesis of hyperglobalisation can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. We would agree. But whereas Hay leaves the matter there, we would try to explain why people hold the hyperglobalisation thesis by reference to traditions and dilemmas.

### Critique

An interpretive approach offers interpretations of interpretations, accommodates many types of data, and uses a narrative form of explanation. Finlayson wants us to go further. He urges us to explain what does and does not become part of a tradition using a

theory of power. His comments raise two related questions. How should we explain traditions? Can narratives act as critiques?

We distinguish tradition as an inevitable background to human beliefs and actions from the specific traditions human scientists slice out of this background to explain certain beliefs and actions.<sup>4</sup> The content of tradition derives from individual agency. Tradition and agency stand in a dialectical relationship to one another. Tradition has no existence apart from the beliefs and actions of individual agents, and yet individuals always reach beliefs and attempt actions against the background of tradition. When Finlayson asks whether we see traditions as exercising a kind of power over actors or actors as making traditions through their choices, we would say we do both; they are not incompatible.

At times, our difference with Finlayson appears to be a matter of choice of words. After all, we could use power to describe the influence tradition inevitably exerts on individuals. We do not do so only because if we did we would deprive the concept of power of all critical force: if power is everywhere, to point to its presence in a given case fails to provide any critical or explanatory leverage. At other times, Finlayson appears to have more substantive concerns about our analysis of tradition as individual agency undertaken against the background of tradition. He seems to want to distance himself from our analysis of agency. We argue that individuals are not autonomous since they always experience and reason against the background of tradition, but they are agents who have the capacity to modify and reject any aspect of a tradition. We are unsure whether Finlayson opposes agency as well as autonomy. If he does, we would argue against him

that it is a mistake to treat traditions, discourses, or languages as being reified quasi-structures that somehow limit the beliefs people can come to hold.<sup>5</sup>

Can narratives act as critiques? Finlayson associates ideological analysis with contestation. His main worry is that our concept of tradition leads us to adopt an uncritical stance. Finlayson's contrast between tradition and ideology also appears to be a matter of words. We do not believe that tradition is ever uniform. Rather, we must decenter it into its conflicting strands. Nor do we think it is ever natural. Rather, we show that it arises as a contingent product of struggles over different ways of conceiving of and responding to constructed dilemmas. And we do not believe that political conflicts and contests over interpretations are confined to government. Indeed, we use the word governance to stress that such contests take place throughout society, whether in the civil service, hospitals, or media. Because we so conceive of tradition, we often intend our narratives to be critiques. Our narratives often unmask the partiality of a political interpretation by showing that it arose against the background of a particular tradition. And our narratives often unmask the contingency of traditions and their interpretations by showing them to be one among several historical possibilities.

Interpreting British Governance includes such critiques. So, whereas liberals define governance as the inherent rationality of market reforms, whereas Whigs think it evolved out of existing practices, and whereas socialists define it as joining-up, we narrate each of these perspectives as the contingent product of a particular tradition. If Finlayson wants critique to reveal the contingency and contestability of narratives that present themselves as natural and fixed, then we can only express disappointment that he did not find this in our work.

## Conclusion

Interpreting British Governance offers a decentered narrative in which the broad contours of governance are explained by reference to four traditions and the dilemmas they faced. In brief, British governance arose from actions inspired by Tory beliefs in wrecked intermediate institutions and the need to preserve authority, a liberal commitment to using markets to roll back the state, a Whig faith in evolutionary changes to an organic constitution, and a socialist belief in joined-up governance as a redefinition of the bureaucratic state. Dowding, Hay, and Finlayson have prompted us to discuss issues of method, explanation, and critique – how they appear in our approach, and what role they play in this narrative. In doing so, we distance ourselves from those varieties of political science that seek to avoid interpreting meanings or beliefs by appeal to models, typologies, or correlations. Yet we have also tried to show that the boundaries between these approaches are fuzzy. The key questions are about how we treat data as much as the methods used to collect it. They are about how we explain beliefs as much as whether to ascribe causal efficacy to them. They are about whether we regard people as agents as much as how to theorise power.

---

Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> M. Bevir, The Logic of the History of Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> D. Davidson, Essays on Actions and Events (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> We do not develop this argument here since it can be readily found in M. Bevir and R. Rhodes, Interpreting British Governance (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 32-35; and in even more detail in Bevir, Logic, pp. 187-199.

<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, we explicitly reject conceptions of traditions as reified entities. We do not think of explanation, as Hay implies, as a matter of ‘demonstrating consonance between a previously identified or hypothesised tradition . . . and the beliefs and practices of specific actors’. Rather, we think traditions are defined pragmatically in the light of the questions we seek to answer.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of where we stand in relation to other interpretive approaches see: M. Bevir, ‘Interpretation and Governance: What are the Implications of Postfoundationalism?’, Public Administration (2004).