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Interpreting Territory and Power

TO INTERPRET SOMETHING IS TO BRING OUT ITS MEANING SO AS TO understand or explain it. Interpretive theorists argue that the human sciences characteristically, and unlike the natural sciences, are about interpreting interpretations. The human sciences understand or explain texts, actions and other such objects by bringing out the meanings, intentionality or beliefs of the relevant actors, where these meanings, intentionality and beliefs are themselves attempts to understand or explain the world. To interpret or explain people's actions and so the practices to which they give rise, we have to grasp their interpretations of the world, that is, the conscious, subconscious and unconscious reasons, beliefs and desires on which they act.

In this article I offer just such an interpretation of both *Territory and Power* (the book by Jim Bulpitt) and territory and power (the main objects studied in that book).[1] An interpretive approach suggests that to understand texts, actions and social practices we need to grasp the meanings that animate them, where these meanings are inherently contingent and historical, rather than epiphenomena of given interests, social norms or cultural and institutional patterns.[2]

The first two parts of this article interpret Bulpitt's text by locating it respectively in its historical and contemporaneous contexts. I argue there that Bulpitt's text belongs in a broader movement to rethink the state in a way that accommodates the rise of new behavioural

[1] J. Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom: An Interpretation*, reissued edn, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2008.

[2] For a brief overview of my view of interpretation see M. Bevir and R. Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance*, London, Routledge, 2003, chapter 2. For a longer philosophical analysis see M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

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topics while defending modernist empiricist approaches to institutions and other mid-level topics against the positivism and general theories of behaviouralism.

Later the final part of the article will point to an interpretive approach to the state as an alternative to the behaviouralism and institutionalism that lurk behind Bulpitt's ideas. A thoroughly interpretive approach would decentre territory and power, revealing them to be contingent and shifting products of struggles over meanings, struggles in which cultures and institutions are continually interpreted anew as the beliefs and discourses of some actors come to dominate, obscure and even obliterate those of other actors.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The study of politics long centred on the state conceived as a sovereign authority. This concept of the state arose gradually and contingently through the Renaissance and Reformation, culminating in the great texts of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes.[3] However, once this particular concept of governance – the state as sovereign authority – had arisen, it proved remarkably powerful and resilient. It inspired political actors to remake the world in its image, most famously in the Treaty of Westphalia, which enshrined it as a principle of international relations. Moreover, as it became more and more entrenched in political life, so many students of politics began to take it for granted, or at least to treat it as a natural development. Even in the early twentieth century, Max Weber influentially defined the state as possessing a monopoly over legitimate physical violence within a well-defined territory.[4]

Bulpitt's *Territory and Power* both echoes and challenges this concept of the state. Territory appears less as a monolithic sovereignty but rather as a complex network of intergovernmental relations. Power is there but almost entirely shorn of the normative tones associated with legitimacy and authority. Bulpitt's challenge to the

[3] Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

[4] M. Weber, 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', in M. Weber, *Political Writings*, ed. P. Lassman and R. Spiers, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

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concept of the state arose as a relatively late expression of the new modernist and behaviourist agendas of the twentieth century.

The Theory of the State

The concept of the state dominated much of political science in the nineteenth century. In America and much of Europe the central role given to the concept of the state was both a response to and a catalyst of various forms of state-building. Yet the central role of the state also reflected its standing as a key principle in the developmental historicism that then dominated the social sciences. The state made sense of historical developments; statehood was the consummation of the history of nations that were held together by ties of race, language, character and culture. The state played this role in traditions as diverse as Hegelian idealism, Comtean positivism, evolutionary theory and even Whig historiography. Proponents of all these forms of developmental historicism typically agreed on several key points. First, the state expressed, or at least could express, the common good of a people bound together by pre-political ties. Second, social science grasped the character of any particular state through a historical understanding of the emergence of a pre-political nation. Third, representative institutions, perhaps together with a constitutional monarchy, enabled citizens to hold accountable political actors who embodied, acted on and safeguarded the common good of the nation.

Johann Kaspar Bluntschli is a neglected figure. Yet his account of the state was arguably the single most influential work on the subject in the nineteenth century, acting as a founding text for the rise of political science not only in Germany but also America. Bluntschli adopted a form of developmental historicism, defining the state as a 'moral and spiritual organism'.[5] He offers a critical account of other concepts of the state before turning to detailed discussions of representative democracy and constitutional monarchy. In both cases, he traces the historical development of a set of political institutions that appear as the expression of the moral organism, and he pays particular attention to their relationship to the historical culture of specific nations.

[5] J. Bluntschli, *The Theory of the State*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1885, p. 54.

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Modernism and New Empirical Topics

Bluntschli's decline from a pre-eminent voice to a neglected one reflects two overlapping but separate trends in political science. Although these two trends tended over time mutually to reinforce one another, each had had its own roots, and participation in one did not necessitate participation in the other. The first saw modernist empiricism replace developmental historicism as the dominant mode of knowledge in the social sciences. Developmental historicism had located actions, cultures, institutions and the like in broad temporal narratives governed by largely fixed principles such as those of liberty, reason and statehood. This developmental historicism was challenged initially by the rise of new forms of logic and only slightly later by the crisis of faith in reason and progress associated with the First World War. These challenges led to the rise of a modernist empiricism that turned away from historical explanations towards formal classifications, correlations and appeals to synchronic systems and the location and function of units within them. We can see a clear example of this modernist empiricism in political science in the way Herman Finer and Carl Friedrich began to abstract from nation-by-nation presentations, proposing more general categories as guides to comparative analyses of institutions and politics across modern nations.[6]

The early twentieth century witnessed a second, overlapping, trend in political science: the rise of new empirical topics. By then several political scientists had begun to look beyond topics associated with institutional history, constitutional law and the theory of the state. They believed that these older agendas reflected a pre-democratic Europe and were insufficient to the mass-based politics that had developed with the extension of the suffrage. In their view, modern societies could be understood only if the dynamics of policy-making, mass-based political parties and public opinion were studied alongside formal government institutions. They wanted to study how policy-making, parties and public opinion actually worked. The most important such study was James Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*, which moved relatively quickly through historical and legal issues in

[6] H. Finer, *Theory and Practice of Modern Government*, 2 vols, London, Methuen, 1932; C. Friedrich, *Constitutional Government and Politics*, New York, Harper, 1937. These two books dominated education in comparative government well into the 1950s.

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order to devote hundreds of pages to parties and public opinion.[7] Bryce's work inspired other political scientists, including most notably Harvard's A. Lawrence Lowell, who later repaid the transatlantic debt with *The Government of England*.[8]

The Critique of the State

Bryce and Lowell introduced new empirical topics associated with mass-suffrage societies, but they typically continued to conceive of the state in terms of the sovereignty of a collective will. This concept of the state began to lose ground to pluralist alternatives only after the First World War. The new trend again arose through transatlantic exchanges, for while American discussions of pluralism later developed a distinctive hue, they owed much to British scholars, especially Harold Laski who spent several years lecturing at Harvard and then Yale. Laski brought the term 'pluralism' and British debates about sovereignty into the American academy. Equally, his time in America made it central to his democratic theory.[9]

Although the concept of the state had been at centre-stage of political thinking and inquiry in the nineteenth century, it became a target of criticism in the first decades of the twentieth century. The new empirical topics and pluralism combined to transform the concept of the state. The older concept of the state as a sovereign authority became less popular. In its place, there arose studies of pressure groups within which sovereignty and authority were dispersed among various organizations. A string of future presidents of the American Political Science Association (APSA) built their careers on studies of pressure groups – Peter Odegard, Pendleton Herring and E. E. Schattschneider.[10] By the 1950s, the concept of a pressure

[7] J. Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 3 vols, London, Macmillan, 1888.

[8] A. Lowell, *The Government of England*, 2 vols, New York, Macmillan, 1908.

[9] J. Gunnell, 'Making Democracy Safe for the World: Political Science between the Wars', in R. Adcock, M. Bevir and S. Stimson (eds), *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007, chapter 7.

[10] P. Odegard, *Pressure Politics: The Story of the Anti-Saloon League*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1928; P. Herring, *Group Representation before Congress*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1929; E. Schattschneider, *Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1935.

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group was being applied to British politics by the recent Harvard PhDs Samuel Beer and Harold Eckstein, alongside W. J. M. Mackenzie (one of the British scholars most attentive to American political science) and S. E. Finer (Herman Finer's younger brother).[11]

By the end of the interwar period empirical research on public opinion, parties and pressure groups was coming to be known collectively as the study of 'political behaviour'. The state of the discipline volume put together by the APSA in the 1940s not only stressed the pervasiveness of this phrase, but even went so far as to hold that 'political behavior has largely replaced legal structures as the cardinal point of emphasis among political scientists.'[12] Even if this claim was an overstatement, it rightly suggests that the study of political behaviour was prominent in American political science before the onset of the 'behavioural revolution'.

Behaviouralism

The behavioural revolution thus represented less a change in empirical topics and more the rise of a new theory that stood in some contrast to modernist empiricism as well as developmental historicism. To specify what was new about behaviouralism, we must remember that new empirical topics had arisen long before. Many behaviouralists had substantive interests in public opinion, pressure groups and other phenomena outside formal government structures, but these interests simply extended an intellectual trend dating from the turn of the century. Likewise, when behaviouralists such as David Easton argued that the state was a dubious and empirically unknowable entity and so of no real scientific interest, they were echoing and extending the complaints earlier made by the pluralists. Again, while behaviouralism got much support from the Committee on Political Behavior (CPB), which was established in 1949 by the Social Science

[11] S. Beer, 'Pressure Groups and Parties in Britain', *American Political Science Review*, 50 (1956), pp. 1–23; S. Beer, *Modern British Politics: A Study of Parties and Pressure Groups*, London, Faber, 1963; H. Eckstein, *Pressure Group Politics*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1960; W. Mackenzie, 'Pressure Groups in British Government', *British Journal of Sociology*, 6 (1955), pp. 133–48; S. Finer, *Anonymous Empire: A Study of the Lobby in Great Britain*, London, Pall Mall Press, 1958.

[12] E. Griffith (ed.), *Research in Political Science*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1948, p. 224.

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Research Council, the main goals of the committee were not, despite its name, to promote the study of behavioral topics. Rather, the common theme of articles that arose from the CPB was the demand that political science become 'systematic'.[13] The focus was on *how* to study politics, not *what* topics to study.

The CPB had two declared goals: 'development of theory' and 'improvement in methods'.[14] Although behaviouralism is often remembered for the second goal, the first was as important. The failure of the specific theories advanced by behaviouralists in the 1950s and 1960s to win lasting support should not obscure the revolutionary impact of behaviouralism on conceptions of the character and role of theory, above all in American political science. Behavioural theory was positivist, ethically neutral and oriented to empirical science more than political practice. Most dramatically, the SSRC's Committee on Comparative Politics (CCP) aspired to forge an abstract general set of concepts that could bring comparative studies of all countries within a single framework. This quest for a general theory was pitched at the macro-societal level, bringing together functionalism and systems theory.[15]

BULPITT AND INSTITUTIONALISM

Much confusion arises from assimilating the new empirical topics to the general theories of the behavioural revolution. Greater insight comes from distinguishing between, on one hand, a modernist empiricism that generally pursued mid-level classifications, correlations and the like as ways of making sense of both formal institutions

[13] A. Leiserson, 'Systematic Research in Political Behavior', *Social Science Research Council Items*, 5 (1951), pp. 29–32; O. Garceau, 'Research in the Political Process', *American Political Science Review*, 45 (1951), pp. 69–85; D. Truman, 'The Implications of Political Behavior Research', *Social Science Research Council Items*, 5 (1951), pp. 37–9; S. Eldersveld, A. Heard, S. Huntington, M. Janowitz, A. Leiserson, D. McKean and D. Truman, 'Research in Political Behavior', *American Political Science Review*, 46 (1952), pp. 1003–45.

[14] 'Committee Briefs: Political Behavior', *Social Science Research Council Items*, 4 (1950), p. 20.

[15] G. Almond, 'A Functional Approach to Comparative Politics', in G. Almond and J. Coleman (eds), *The Politics of Developing Areas*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960.

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and the new behavioural topics that arose in the early twentieth century, and, on the other hand, a behaviouralism that was committed to positivist general theories that could be further developed, often through large-N statistical studies of the new behavioural topics. This distinction enables us to locate Bulpitt's work against the background of a modernist empiricism that was rethinking the state less in terms of the formal, legal and normative concepts of sovereignty and authority, and more in terms of behavioural concepts such as territory and power. Bulpitt's commitment to behavioural topics and modernist empiricism parallels much contemporary mid-level political science. He is far more unusual in combining these commitments with Tory historiography.

Reading Bulpitt

In *Territory and Power*, Bulpitt brings together behavioural topics, modernist empiricism and Tory historiography. His focus on behavioural topics is a clear reaction against the dominance of studies of the institutions of the Westminster model. Much British political science still focused on central and local institutions, treating Ireland, Scotland and Wales as separate topics from Westminster and Whitehall. Studies of central–local relations concentrated on the legal and institutional mechanisms by which the centre exercised a uniform authority over local governments. Bulpitt's work differs notably from these studies. He explicitly rejects the languages of 'constitutional designs' and 'formal powers and functions', complaining they neglect 'political process'.[16] He advocates instead more behavioural concepts and foci. Territory and power replace the state as sovereign authority. Centre and periphery replace other institutions defined by more formal borders.[17] Political codes and statecraft replace constitutional and administrative laws and rules. Elites and brokerage replace formally defined roles and relationships. Even when Bulpitt discusses formal offices or institutions, he typically sets them firmly in the context of his dominant behavioural concepts. He tells us, for example, that 'all sorts of people have behaved as the local representatives of the Centre; local councillors and officials, local

[16] Bulpitt, *Territory and Power*, p. 57.
[17] Ibid., pp. 61–2.

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part organisations and their elites and pressure group leaders'; and yet these 'centrally appointed officials may escape direct control and supervision from the Centre, be colonized by local interests and behave as quasi-autonomous local notables'.[18]

Bulpitt describes a territorial politics in which the centre tries to use its power to obtain autonomy over foreign and economic affairs while generally leaving administrative matters to the periphery. He points to 'a structure of territorial politics in which the Centre is prepared to allow considerable autonomy to peripheral governments and political organisations, so long as they do not challenge its autonomy in matters of high politics'.[19] His focus is on the behaviour of central elites – the strategies, decisions and informal moves by which they promote their interests. This focus inspires an account of British politics very different from the formal institutions of the Westminster model. The central elite is often insular, complacent and arrogant, and it lurches from crisis to crisis with little ability to impose its will directly on the periphery. For example, he explains that the centre adopted indirect rule over the periphery because, despite involving some patronage, it was generally cheap, and yet this pattern of indirect rule left the periphery to administer itself, thereby resting 'the sort of policies the Crown could pursue' and fostering 'greed, corruption, and internal feuding amongst the collaborative elites involved'; it resulted in 'the inability, or unwillingness, of the English court to support its peripheral agents during periods of trouble or follow consistent policy over time'.[20] Local elites can even capture representatives of the centre, thereby undermining the centre's formal authority over them. Indeed, Bulpitt explicitly argues that 'few local elites, even the most servile, are completely assimilated to the Centre's norms.'[21] Thus, 'local elites are often administratively ineffective, they stand between the ordinary citizens and the central authorities, and since they have their own interests to defend, there may be certain policies of the Centre which they refuse to execute.'[22] Britain thus appears less as a unitary state than as a complex matrix of diverse and negotiated patterns of rule.

[18] Ibid., p. 63.
[19] Ibid., p. 68.
[20] Ibid., p. 85.
[21] Ibid., p. 65.
[22] Ibid., p. 65.

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While Bulpitt adopts the new behavioural topics, he has little time for the general theories of the behavioural revolution. To the contrary, he argues that approaches derived from the general sociology of organization have 'not been very successful', and he then describes his task as 'conceptual repair' rather than the creation of new methodologies or general theories.[23] In the absence of a general theory, Bulpitt oscillates between two forms of explanation. First, his focus on elites pursuing their interests inspires a style of explanation that sometimes appears (rather misleadingly) to parallel rational choice. He implies that political actors have fixed interests that explain their actions: central elites have an interest in securing autonomy over foreign and economic policy and this interest governs their actions. Second, Bulpitt's modernist empiricism inspires explanations that sometimes appear to echo systems theory and even structural functionalism. He vaguely evokes a system that consists of parts whose existence and nature are explained by their synchronic functions in the larger whole. It is important to add that neither of these two forms of explanation is properly historicist. Bulpitt appeals to history less as a form of explanation than as a source of case-studies to illustrate an ideal type built out of Tory historiography.

Both Bulpitt's account of the interests of the central elite and the particular behavioural topics on which he focuses reflect his debt to a Tory tradition. He draws in particular on historians such as Lewis Namier and Jack Plumb, treating their portrait of the eighteenth century as an ideal type applicable to the whole of British history. This Tory moment provides him with his distinctions between court and country and high and low politics.

> A distinction was made, or attempted, between 'High' and 'Low' politics. The former were regarded as essentially matters for the executive or court, and to be settled, as far as possible, independently of outside, particularly territorial, interests. The latter were seen as part of the wider game of political management and could properly be settled by bargaining between the executive and interests involved. What counted as a matter of 'High Politics' varied, but defence, foreign affairs, and taxation were obvious candidates for attempted permanent inclusion.[24]

A Tory historiography also informs Bulpitt's focus on central and local elites. It lies behind his vision of politics as being all about elites pursuing their interests, where interests are defined as political power

[23] Ibid., p. 58.
[24] Ibid., p. 82.

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and influence more than economic wealth and social status. It is a vision of politics that characteristically downplays socio-economic and cultural topics, including those that, even when he wrote, dominated most histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain – industrialization, class, ideology and popular cultures and resistance.

Bulpitt's debt to Tory historiography may be unusual, but the combination of behavioural topics and modernist empiricism is widespread. Commentators on Bulpitt are quick here to assimilate him to the new institutionalism, but that is at best half the story.[25] On the one hand, Bulpitt's focus on behavioural topics made him wary of institutionalism. On the other hand, his rejection of positivism locates him alongside mid-level political scientists in America who tried to repulse behaviouralism by appealing initially to the state and later to institutions. Bulpitt's work thus resembles the new institutionalism only because the phrase 'new institutionalism' is in fact a misleading term for mid-level approaches that fuse behavioural topics with modernist empiricism.

A Return to the State?

The positivism of behaviouralism with its aspirations towards universal theory had many critics. Leading figures of the older generation voiced early concerns. Friedrich in particular responded to an early CCP report by arguing that comparative politics should concentrate on problems that were historically specific to certain countries at certain points in time, and that the field would lose contact with such problems if it pursued 'excessive abstraction'.[26] Similarly, some members of the younger generation found that their initial excitement about general theory gave way to disenchantment. A good example is Samuel Beer, America's leading scholar of British politics. In the late 1950s Beer extolled a 'structural-functional' theory of the 'political system' as the pole star guiding the way to a general

[25] J. Bradbury, *'Territory and Power* Revisited: Theorising Territorial Politics in the United Kingdom after Devolution', *Political Studies*, 54 (2006), pp. 559–82; P. John, 'Introduction: *Territory and Power* and the Study of Comparative Politics', in Bulpitt, *Territory and Power*.

[26] C. Friedrich, 'Comments on the Seminar Report', *American Political Science Review*, 47 (1953), pp. 658–61.

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comparative political science.[27] But in the early 1960s he changed his mind and began to take aim at the 'dogma of universality' and the 'utopia of a universal theory'.[28]

Opposition to general theory involved a repudiation of abstract sociological concepts such as 'system'. Various political scientists began to look to mid-level categories that highlighted more concrete similarities and differences across societies. In the mid to late 1970s a generation of scholars, working in a range of literatures, thus rallied round the concept of the state, where the state was conceived at least as much in terms of the new behavioural topics as the older concept of a sovereign authority.[29] In February 1982 a conference at Mount Kisco, New York, considered the 'Research Implications of Current Theories of the State'. The conference led to the formation of a Committee on States and Social Structures that was to promote the state as both an orienting concept and a subject matter of empirical research. The committee was chaired by two conference participants, Theda Skocpol and Peter Evans; the six other participants being Charles Tilly, Ira Katznelson, Stephen Krasner, Peter Katzenstein, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Albert Hirschman. Revised versions of papers from the conference form the bulk of the committee's first publication, *Bringing the State Back In*, which appeared in 1985 under the editorship of Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol.[30] The introductory chapter offers the image of an 'intellectual sea change', with scholars rejecting 'society-centered ways of explaining politics

[27] S. Beer, 'The Analysis of Political Systems', in S. Beer and A. Ulam (eds), *Patterns of Government: The Major Political Systems of Europe*, New York, Random House, 1958.

[28] S. Beer, 'Causal Explanation and Imaginative Re-Enactment', *History and Theory*, 3 (1963), pp. 6–29; S. Beer, 'Political Science and History', in M. Richter (ed.), *Essays in Theory and History: An Approach to the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1970.

[29] C. Tilly, 'Reflections on the History of European State-Making' and 'Western State-Making and Theories of Political Transformation', in C. Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 3–83 and 601–38; P. Katzenstein, 'International Relations and Domestic Structures: Foreign Economic Policies of Advanced Industrial States', *International Organization*, 30 (1976), pp. 1–45; S. Krasner, 'State Power and the Structure of International Trade', *World Politics*, 28 (1976), pp. 317–47.

[30] P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol, 'Preface', in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (eds), *Bringing the State Back In*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. vii–x.

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and governmental activities' and converging 'on complementary arguments and strategies of analysis' that take seriously the role of states as actors.[31]

The neostatists were right that their analytic approach broke with behaviouralism, but the break was more limited than they implied. They rejected structural-functional theorizing and, more broadly, the whole project of crafting general theories, and they were wary of cross-national comparative work that took the form of large-N statistical analysis. But they retained the goal of developing theory that was empirical (in the sense of being independent of normative commitments), and centred on generating and testing hypotheses about recurring relations between prior conditions and outcomes. What they preferred to large-N statistical analysis was a programme of small-N studies hedged in by 'context', but also sufficiently 'analytical' to generate and test 'mid-range theory'. Here *Bringing the State Back In* advocates a modernist empiricist strategy of crafting mid-range theory by using analytic categories to generalize inductively from small-N comparisons and case-studies.[32]

The New Institutionalism

Much of the confusion enveloping 'the new institutionalism' is already present in the article that popularized this phrase. James March and Johan Olsen there lift the new approaches to institutions in organizational sociology and rational choice out of their intellectual contexts so as to narrate them as exemplars of a generic paradigm shift that also encompasses other recent agendas, including neostatism. But, as we have seen, although *Bringing the State Back In* thereby became anointed as a key exemplar of the new institutionalism; it had not framed itself in such terms.

The notion of promoting a general approach to institutions first appeared among the neostatists with Krasner's review article, 'Approaches to the State'. Krasner here interprets several neostatist

[31] T. Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research', in Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*, pp. 3–4.

[32] Skocpol, 'Bringing the State Back In'; and P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, 'On the Road Toward a More Adequate Understanding of the State', in Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*.

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works as being oriented around a common question: 'how do institutional structures change in response to alterations in domestic and international environments and then in subsequent time periods influence these environments?'[33] His appeal to institutions then enables him to highlight the parallels between the neostatists and others who were exploring institutional and behavioural topics using macro-qualitative styles of analysis. Krasner's article was just one sign that by the mid to late 1980s the initial excitement associated with the concept of the state had faded. Neostatists, such as Katzenstein and Peter Gourevitch, now qualified or questioned the explanatory potential of ideas such as state autonomy.[34] As the novelty of a statist agenda wore off, the relation between neostatism and other strands of scholarship opened up for reshaping. Krasner's article located Stephen Skowronek's *Building a New American State* alongside the work of Samuel Huntington and Louis Hartz.

As the state ceased to act as a rallying point for mid-level explanations, so the vague term 'institutionalism' came into vogue. Institutionalism too could serve as a way of defending a mid-level modernist empiricism against general theory while extending its empirical range from the state to a far wider range of formal and informal institutional and behavioural topics. In the mid to late 1980s, following Krasner's turn to the discourse of institutionalism, and March and Olsen's christening of her work as an example of it, Skocpol came to identify her approach with new institutionalism.[35] By then, most of her work was on American political development, and when in 1986 Skowronek and Karen Orren launched the new journal *Studies in American Political Development* they explicitly located it as part of the ongoing rise of a new institutionalism.[36]

[33] S. Krasner, 'Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics', *Comparative Politics*, 16 (1984), p. 224.

[34] P. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1985; P. Gourevitch, *Politics in Hard Times: Comparative Responses to International Economic Crises*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1986.

[35] Skocpol was using the language of new institutionalism by early 1987. See the comments on her talk to the 1987 Midwest Political Science Association in M. Levi, 'Theories of Historical and Institutional Change', *Political Science*, 20 (1987), p. 687.

[36] K. Orren and S. Skowronek, 'Editor's Preface', *Studies in American Political Development*, 1 (1986), pp. vii–viii.

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AN INTERPRETIVE ALTERNATIVE

Bulpitt offers a British version of the new institutionalism. He rethinks the state to foreground more behavioural topics. And while he studies historical cases, he still rejects historicist explanations for appeals to modernist ones couched in terms of atemporal categories, classifications, correlations and systems. Whether the label 'institutionalism' is applied to him or his American counterparts, it is thus little more than a misnomer for a continuing adherence to mid-level studies of both political institutions and political behaviour using modernist forms of explanation.

The problem with mid-level approaches is that they remain at best vague and at worst confused about the logic of their explanations. Like Bulpitt, they oscillate between appeals to the apparently given interests of political actors and appeals to modernist categories such as system, institution or structure. Their refusal of general theories and micro-level analyses means that they often reify both interests and institutions. Political scientists will avoid such reification only when they break with modernist empiricism, adopting an interpretive approach characterized by decentred theory, new aggregate concepts and new empirical topics.

New Theory

Political scientists often use terms such as 'system', 'institution' or 'structure' to elide questions about how their explanations work. These terms lure political scientists to an unthinking determinism, reification and foundationalism. Consider, for example, the widespread claim that institutions possess an inertial tendency or stickiness. This claim leads to an unthinking determinism. It implies that there is a causal mechanism that fixes the content or development of an institution, albeit by fixing the agency of the relevant people: if agency was not fixed in this way, then the stickiness would appear only when the relevant people happened to act in a certain way, so stickiness would be merely a descriptive term to be applied to such cases, not a term capable of doing explanatory work. What is more, when institutionalists try to make sense of the idea of institutional stickiness, they often fall into the traps of reification or foundationalism. They appear to commit to reification when they imply that the

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mechanism or feedback process operates independent of intentionality. Alternatively, if they describe the mechanism as a feedback process operating through intentionality, they imply that the relevant people hold correct or rational beliefs about the nature of the institution or about the costs of change in a way that appears to commit them to foundationalism.

It is no accident that mid-level modernist empiricism so often leads to an implicit reification and determinism. Mid-level approaches neglect the micro level of individual beliefs and actions precisely because they treat social facts as governed by apparently fixed norms, rules, processes or structures. Likewise, modernist empiricists neglect historical contingency because they appeal to atemporal correlations, classifications and other such causal logics. No doubt appeals to institutions or structures can be shorthand for appeals to clusters of contingent actions and beliefs. But the worry still remains that institutionalists are bewitched by their shorthand, forgetting to treat it as something that needs unpacking in terms of contingent actions and beliefs. Political scientists will break with reification, determinism and foundationalism only when they escape from mid-level modernist empiricism, analysing social life in terms of individual beliefs and actions, and explaining beliefs and actions in historicist terms.

Most interpretive approaches seek to explain social life by reference to historical meanings, and especially the beliefs of actors. Interpretivism encourages political scientists to decentre concepts such as institution, territory, power and operating code. To decentre is to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is generally to reveal the contingent and conflicting beliefs that inform the diverse actions that constitute what otherwise may appear to be a reified practice, institution or social structure. Thus, for example, a decentred study of a pattern of territorial politics shows how it is created, sustained and modified through the beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals in many arenas.

New Concepts

Decentred theory points to a disaggregating of concepts such as institution, network or territory in terms of micro-level analyses of individual actions based on an individual's beliefs. While such stories

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are interesting as cases, there are times when we want to tell more general stories. To do so, interpretivists will need new aggregate concepts that overtly refer to common meanings rather than to apparently formal patterns. Perhaps it will help if I give examples of such aggregate concepts, analysing them in relation to contingent meanings and actions, and indicating where institutionalists often diverge from those analyses.

Practice. A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Practices often give us grounds for postulating beliefs, for we can ascribe beliefs to people only in interpreting their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions since people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about the practice, and, of course, these beliefs need not be accurate.

There is a sense in which practices can constitute the consequences of actions. The effects of actions often depend on the responses of others. So, if we equate a practice with the set of actions by which others respond to an act, then, by definition, that practice constitutes the consequences of the act. Still, we should remember here that the practice is composed solely of the contingent actions of individuals. Hence, it is these actions in their diversity and contingency that constitute the consequences of the action, and we explain these actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, rather than by reference to the practice itself.

When political scientists appeal to 'institutions', they often evoke something akin to a practice, while ascribing to it a constraining power greater than my analysis allows. If they do want to ascribe such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practices constrain actions. Clearly practices – or at least the actions of others – constrain the effects, and so effectiveness, of an action. What remains unclear is how practices could constrain the actions people might attempt to perform.

Power. An interpretive approach should avoid a concept of power that refers to social relations based on interests that people allegedly have outside the particular traditions by which they make sense of the world; it should do so because people always construct their

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understanding of their interests against the background of a tradition. Yet, there are other ways of conceiving of power. For a start, power can refer to the way in which traditions affect individuals' beliefs, thereby helping to define them, their actions and so the world. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving us our beliefs and actions, and so in making our world. An interpretive approach is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contingent beliefs formed against the background of traditions. In addition, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what we can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as elected politicians, senior civil servants, doctors, police officers and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, an interpretive approach shows how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. Interpretive studies can show how local actors – Whitehall bureaucrats, doctors and police officers – are able to draw on their own traditions to resist policies inspired by the narratives of others in the policy cascade.

Tradition. A tradition is the ideational background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs. It influences (without determining or – in a strict philosophical sense – limiting) the beliefs they later go on to adopt. The philosophical justification for this definition of tradition derives from a postfoundational rejection of autonomy with a defence of situated agency. Traditions help to explain why people hold the beliefs they do; and because beliefs are constitutive of actions, they also help to explain actions. They cannot fully explain actions, partly because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and partly because people are agents capable of innovating against the background of a tradition. While a tradition explains why an agent adopted an initial web of beliefs, it consists solely of the beliefs of other actors. Because institutionalists have been relatively slow to concentrate on meanings, I am unsure how they would conceive of traditions, but if they unpack them as systematic extra-individual level meanings, then they need an analysis of how meanings can exist apart from for individual subjects.

Dilemma. A dilemma is any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit

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as a tradition. It combines with the tradition to explain (although not determine) the beliefs people go on to adopt and so the actions they go on to perform. Dilemmas and traditions cannot fully explain actions both because actions are informed by desires as well as beliefs and because people are agents who respond creatively to any given dilemma. Although dilemmas sometimes arise from experiences of the world, we cannot equate them with the world as it is because experiences are always theory laden. Like meanings in general, dilemmas are always subjective or intersubjective. Institutionalists sometimes adopt concepts such as dilemma or pressure to refer to the sources of change, but they appear then to equate such pressures with objective facts about the world rather than the subjective beliefs of policy actors; if they are to define pressures in this way, they need an analysis of how these pressures lead people to change their beliefs and actions – they need to argue either that people are bound to experience a pressure as it is, or that a pressure leads to new actions (and so presumably beliefs) even though the actor has no subjective awareness of it.

New Topics

An interpretive alternative to Bulpitt's modernist empiricism counters the Toryism lurking in his narrative of British territorial politics. An interpretive approach may retain the emphasis on behavioural topics rather than on formal institutions, and it may thus reinforce the image of Britain as far more differentiated than the straightforwardly unitary state of the Westminster model. However, an interpretive approach entails a concern with contests among diverse and contingent meanings. This concern may lead to an increasing focus on new empirical topics, including elite narratives, governmentalities and popular resistance.[37]

Elite Narratives. Bulpitt's modernism and Toryism alike lead him to treat elites as having given interests that inspire their statecraft. An

[37] For examples see respectively Bevir and Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance*; M. Bevir, *New Labour: A Critique*, London, Routledge, 2005; and M. Bevir and F. Trentmann (eds), *Governance, Consumers, and Citizens: Agency and Resistance in Contemporary Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007.

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interpretive approach suggests that political scientists should pay more attention to the traditions against the background of which elites construct their worldviews, including their views of their own interests. Moreover, the central elite need not be a uniform group, all the members of which conceive of their interests in the same way and so pursue a similar type of statecraft. An interpretive approach suggests that political scientists should ask whether different sections of the elite do not draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about the world, their place within it and their interests and values. In Britain, for example, the different members of the central elite are inspired not only by the Tory narrative on which Bulpitt focuses, but on a Whig narrative that typically upholds the Westminster model, and also liberal and socialist narratives. The dominant narratives in the central civil service used to be Whiggish, but a liberal managerial narrative has clearly made headway in recent years.

Governmentality. Even as the central elite may well conceive of the world using diverse narratives, so they often turn to forms of expertise to define specific discourses. Nowadays different traditions of social science influence public policy. An interpretive approach draws our attention to the varied governmentalities that inform policies across different sectors and different geographical spaces. Governmentality refers here to the scientific beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct; it captures the ways in which governments and other social actors draw on knowledge in order to construct policies and practices, especially those that regulate and create subjectivities. Britain, like much of the developed world, has witnessed the rise of governmentalities based on neoliberal knowledge of the markets and more recently institutionalist knowledge of society, networks and political legitimacy. Yet political scientists could also study the different forms of social science on which various political actors draw in their attempts to govern territorial politics. What expertise inspires patterns of devolution, the institutions created and the strategies for managing and steering those institutions?

Popular Resistance. Bulpitt's neglect of social topics means that he gives the impression that patterns of territorial politics arise exclusively from the strategies and the interactions of central and local elites. Yet other actors can resist, transform and thwart the agendas of elites. An interpretive approach draws attention to the diverse

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traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policy cultures are sites of struggles not just between strategic elites, but between all kinds of actors with different views and ideals reached against the background of different traditions. Subordinate actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by consuming them in ways that draw on their local traditions and their local reasoning. For example, police officers are often influenced by cultures and traditions that encourage them to prioritize combating crime in ways that may lead them to neglect community policing even when it is supported by elite policymakers. Likewise, citizens may continue to act on territorial loyalties and identities that bear little resemblance to the administrative units crafted by policymakers.

CONCLUSIONS

Bulpitt's *Territory and Power* remains an inspiring read. His commitment to Tory historiography and new behavioural topics produces an iconoclastic assault on the pieties of Whiggism and the Westminster model. The Tory themes may seem inappropriate. But there remains much to champion in his appeal to all kinds of behavioural topics in contrast to formal norms and institutions, and in the resulting account of Britain as a differentiated polity. However, while Bulpitt successfully broke with old institutional topics and the resulting Westminster model, he remained a modernist empiricist whose work constantly falls into reification and even determinism.

Exciting new agendas for political science arise if we continue to pursue the shift from institutional to behavioural and cultural topics but adopt an interpretive alternative to modernist empiricism. The interpretive alternative reconceives territorial politics not in terms of elites pursuing fixed interests through their statecraft, but as a contest among diverse groups promoting different narratives and policies inspired by different traditions and responding to various dilemmas that change over time. And the interpretive approach thereby raises new topics for political scientists to explore, including the different narratives that inspire elites, the role of social science in constructing knowledge and policy, and the local traditions in terms of which street-level bureaucrats and citizens respond to policies and even remake them.

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