

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN GOVERNANCE AND  
PUBLIC POLICY

# Interpreting Governance, High Politics, and Public Policy

Essays Commemorating *Interpreting  
British Governance*

Edited by Nick Turnbull



ROUTLEDGE  


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# Abbreviations

ADP	Automatic Data Processing
BPT	British Political Tradition
CSO	Central Statistical Office
DES	Department of Education and Science
EC	Executive Council
FA	Football Association
FoIA	Freedom of Information Act
GRO	General Register Office
HIP	Hillsborough Independent Panel
LEA	Local Education Authority
MRC	Medical Research Council
MH	Ministry of Health
MPNI	Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance
NCCL	National Council for Civil Liberties
NHS	National Health Service
NHSCR	National Health Service Central Register
NI	National Insurance
NR	National Register
O&M	Organisation and Methods
PAYE	Pay as You Earn
PMDU	Prime Minister's Delivery Unit
PMSU	Prime Minister's Strategy Unit
PSA	Public Service Agreement
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SYP	South Yorkshire Police
SYPF	South Yorkshire Police Federation
TNA	The National Archives
UK	United Kingdom



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# Introduction

## Interpreting Governance, High Politics, and Public Policy

*Nick Turnbull*

Interpretive approaches to political analysis have gained significant ground over the last decade. Not yet mainstream, interpretivism, conceived broadly, is a perspective that has sought to challenge many established conventions of political science. Interpretive political science takes quite a different view from the most common approaches, both in theory and method. It highlights contingency in its explanations, working from alternative philosophical traditions to reject the logic of cause and effect. It seeks to offer a more holistic view, claiming to produce more comprehensive and more relevant explanations of social reality. It places great emphasis on meaning, articulating the myriad ways in which language and ideas construct the political world and how these are always in competition with alternative readings. It uses different methods, aimed at revealing everyday political practice and uncovering the effects upon it of culture and tradition, amorphous concepts but nonetheless vital contributors to the texture of political life. In short, interpretivists have put forward a serious case for an alternative analytical approach to political science. This approach has been applied across the many subdisciplinary areas of politics, but most notably in governance and public policy, the subject of this collection.

Interpretive social science has been around a long time. But in the United Kingdom (UK), the interpretivist flag in political science has been carried most prominently by Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes, who, since the publication of *Interpreting British Governance* in 2003, have made great strides in building their vision of interpretive political analysis. They have developed a rigorous and wide-ranging interpretive approach, from theory to methodology, through a research programme that aims to articulate a fresh understanding of government and governance. The scope of their published research is testament to their rigorous scholarship and unbounded enthusiasm. And few scholars have been so willing to engage in direct debate with critics.

This edited collection on their work marks ten years since that publication, a milestone in interpretive studies of governance and public policy in the UK. It is the product of the Interpretive Political Science Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association of the UK, arising from a series of panels held at the 2013 Conference at Cardiff University. But this book is no *Festschrift* for Bevir and Rhodes. Rather, it continues the critical engagement with their work by both fellow-travellers and critics, with a determined eye towards the future contribution

of interpretivism to governance research. The authors in this collection engage with Bevir and Rhodes's ideas about governance, high politics and political history, and public policymaking, reflecting on them, criticising them and going beyond them to ascertain what interpretivism contributes to other perspectives as well as to develop further the interpretive analytical framework. It is neither a summation nor an end point, but instead a marker for the future, setting out continuing controversies as well as new avenues of inquiry for interpretive political science.

### **Interpretivism and Theory in British Political Studies**

The interpretive political science research programme of Bevir and Rhodes can be read in two main ways. First, it can be interpreted as an endeavour to do something interesting and innovative in British political science, particularly in the often dry field of governance, public policy, and public administration. Bevir and Rhodes introduced new theoretical concepts and an innovative methodology to paint an altogether original picture of the everyday life of government, aiming to liven up the field and free it from the strictures imposed by an empiricist tradition. Second, their work can be read as an altogether more challenging and confrontational effort to establish interpretivism as an analytical framework, one which rejects some of the established and valued aspects of British political science. In this reading, Bevir and Rhodes propose interpretivism to be a superior perspective to other analytical frameworks, which they criticise as representing the conventional practices of positivism or modernist empiricism, which are argued to be weaker on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Here, they situate themselves in a broad, if loose, family of interpretive approaches they class as anti-foundational (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). The varied reactions to their work hinge on which way critics lean in regard to these two interpretations of the contribution of interpretivism in British political studies. Both readings are represented in this collection.

Perhaps the main impact of interpretivism has been to prompt scholars of British government to take theory more seriously. A decade before the interpretive controversy, Gamble (1990) made a strong case that British political science had for a long time, to its great detriment, eschewed theory in favour of a conservative reliance upon accepted concepts, fused with a strong empiricism. He noted that theoretical developments were opening up the field to a diversity which provided exciting critical possibilities. *Interpreting British Governance* subsequently became part of that trend towards a new emphasis on theory, particularly within the field of public administration. Bevir and Rhodes injected a measure of theoretical depth and originality to public administration scholarship, taking it beyond what some regarded as the 'mindless empiricism' of much research and a journalistic approach which offered little in the way of critical analysis (Marsh, 2011). Interpretivists asked new questions about governance, transcending the tired approaches and breathing new life into the discipline. Even the much disputed claim of an empirical shift in the British state from 'government to governance', put forward by Rhodes before his interpretive

work, is also best seen in this light – to question, to innovate, to generate new ideas and approaches, to be radical and shake things up. Anyone who has seen Rhodes present his research in person will understand this about his character. Hence, although depicted as travelling a road to Damascus upon meeting Mark Bevir and ‘converting’ from institutionalism to interpretivism, we should not be surprised that he was looking to make further innovations. Seeking out this trajectory is, for him, crucial in rendering the subject of public administration interesting for students as much as it is for himself as a researcher. *Interpreting British Governance* reflected the new plurality of positions on political analysis and Bevir’s and Rhodes’s subsequent work has contributed vitally to the sea change in theorising governance and public administration.

Interpretivism has thus generated new conversations that rarely took place 20 years ago. It has painted a picture of the governance world that is rich in meaning, animated by individuals working in collective cultures, rather than merely described in terms of institutional boxes. Throughout the many levels of governance, these individuals are engaged in a continuous dialogue of ideas, generating narratives to explain themselves and their policy responses to political problems. This cultural approach is also grounded in a political history, explaining continuity through the various competing traditions to which elected officials and civil servants refer when interpreting and responding to political events. It gives us fresh ways to explain governance processes and to understand what they mean for the individuals concerned. This is, importantly, a conception that these individuals are always acting in time, located in a context that renders each problem and each response different. The impact of this picture can be seen in how strongly it resonates beyond academia for practitioners themselves, as a realistic account of governing practice far more relevant to them than academic explanations based in institutional rules or rationalist conceptions of political action, and presented as schematic models of the policy process. Interpretivism asks new questions about governance by seeking to understand the meaning of problems for the actors, how they interpret the questions they face and how the ideas found in shared culture impact upon their responses, beyond the instrumental-rational conception of goal-seeking behaviour or institutionally driven action. In short, interpretivism aims to bring forward the contingency of political life and the agency of individuals in responding to it.

In terms of the novelty of interpretive empirical research, it is certainly the case that interpretive accounts of governance look very different from conventional depictions. Drawing on ethnographic methods in particular, Bevir and Rhodes drew dramatic pictures of the everyday life of government, told as stories about ministers, civil servants, and special advisors negotiating daily political and administrative problems. From travelling in cars with Ministers to frantic meetings preparing for a grilling by a parliamentary committee or late night strategising, their research brought governing to life as an activity. Interpretive governance is animated. These accounts are more reminiscent of the television dramas *Babylon*, *The Thick of It* and *Yes Minister* than conventional political science. But drama, as a narrative medium, has always spoken to us more effectively than the sciences because human societies are constructed

through narrative accounts. So we should not be surprised at the resonance of interpretive accounts of political life for readers, including political insiders themselves. Ethnographic methodology to uncover and explain narratives is thus a key component of the interpretive approach. Given the richness of this interpretive data, along with other interpretive analyses of policymaking conducted at close quarters (see, for example, Shore and Wright, 1997), it would now be difficult to develop theory that leaves out a place for the cultural dimensions of the state and policy networks as important aspects of scientific explanations of governance processes and outcomes.

While interpretive political science has aimed to establish itself as a general approach to political science, it has most of all, in the field of public administration, directly targeted the relevance of the Westminster model as an explanation of British government. Smith has described well the persistence of this concept as the 'eternal return' of the Westminster model (Smith, 1999). He noted that this traditional idea has been so dominant that the teaching of government has lagged far behind reality, with textbooks on British governance haunted by the Westminster model ghost, leading them to pursue a descriptive rather than analytical course, insulated from conceptual developments in research. Indeed, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) have used the term 'governance' as a general signifier of an alternative to the Westminster model, in that it not only offers a theory of governing through networks but also through interpretive practices. In the 'new governance', characterised by a 'differentiated polity', they argue that the unitary state and integrated administration have been replaced by 'a maze of institutions and a complex pattern of decentralized functions. Governance is thus fragmented between organizations that cover different territories or deliver different functions. It occurs in and through networks composed of the relevant governments, departments, agencies, and other social and political actors' (Bevir, 2007: 227). In this environment, the production of meaning is also pluralised and more difficult to manage, such that exchanges between competing interpretations become more widespread. The differentiated polity is thus said to offer a more accurate organising perspective of the British system of government than the Westminster model, and interpretivism brought in as an analytical framework to study it.

Non-British readers of interpretive research often fail to appreciate the pervasiveness of the Westminster model as an entrenched historical ideal – Bevir and Rhodes may advance their programme internationally by doing more to extend their frame of reference beyond the British case to the analysis of dominant traditions in other polities – but entrenched it is, both in textbooks on British politics and in the corridors of Whitehall itself as an explanation of what government is about. Interpretivism takes on this shibboleth, aiming to explain both its redundancy as an analytical construct and its survival as an internal narrative within the civil service by reinterpreting it for its role in governance practice; it is a historical tradition for civil servants, one that tells them how to interpret and act in response to events, even when those events fail to conform to the Westminster ideal. However, it is not a good explanation of governance activity itself, which looks quite different when examined at close quarters. Of course, this depiction of radical change has been contested. Marsh *et al.* (2003)

argue that Bevir and Rhodes's differentiated polity model is inherently pluralist and propose an alternative that builds in structured power imbalances, the 'Asymmetric Power Model'. Bell and Hindmoor (2009) argue that governance does not necessarily mean decentred power, rather that the state has developed new strategies to enhance its capacity to govern. The nature of the state in the age of the new governance remains in question, and the interpretive theory of it is explored further in the chapters in this collection.

This conceptual shift is typical of interpretivism: to reject the Westminster model as a theory of governance and, instead, theorise it as a tradition. In other words, it historicises governance in order to show its contingency, its use in practice, and the possibility of alternatives. Although a novel claim, this historicisation resonates well with the classical conception of British politics as grounded in a historical approach (see Gamble, 1990), in contrast with the formal models common to American political science. Here, we can see the 'Britishness' of Bevir and Rhodes's interpretivism, and how its apparent radicalism for traditionalists may indeed be exaggerated. From this viewpoint, Bevir and Rhodes are simply doing differently what has always been a key aspect and strength of British political studies. Under interpretive scrutiny, the Westminster model is rendered contingent, but *one* tradition, set in competition with others.

This is where the strong view of interpretivism enters, as an epistemological programme. Much of the interpretive controversy has concerned Bevir and Rhodes's definition of the status quo. They label a broad swathe of public administration research as 'modernist empiricism' or 'positivism', to the chagrin of those so labelled, ranging from those who feel this misrepresents them to those who see the representation itself as a straw man depiction. A core element of interpretive scholarship has been to engage in philosophical debates about the basis of political science explanations, particularly in the advocacy of 'anti-foundational' epistemologies. Nevertheless, the nature of Bevir and Rhodes's interpretivism has perhaps not been entirely clear to scholars of public administration, who are sometimes quite unfamiliar with, if not resistant to, varieties of interpretive thought. Debates persist as to how much of Bevir's and Rhodes's work is derived from analytic philosophy and how much from continental thought. For example, they have been described as putting forward a 'hermeneutics' of public administration, given that they do use this term (Hay, 2011; see also Finlayson, 2007). But they themselves reject this classification. This is made clear by Bevir (1999: 17) in his major philosophical work, the *locus classicus* of interpretivism, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, and later explained by both Bevir and Rhodes in regard to other interpretive approaches (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). Others have described their approach as another version of idealism, along with its requisite limitations (McAnulla, 2006a). But Bevir and Rhodes have rejected this characterisation as well. Their work might also be understood as akin to post-structuralism, given their anti-foundational philosophy and references to social theorists such as Foucault. In this regard, although they stress that it is important to engage with post-structuralist accounts, they explicitly reject the radical epistemology of post-structuralism as irrational (Bevir, 1999: 6) and post-structuralists have distanced themselves in turn



(Glynos and Howarth, 2008). To add to this, Bevir and Rhodes's extensive use of ethnomethodology has interpretive–pragmatist origins in American symbolic interactionism. However, Smith (2008) points out that, in fact, they implicitly reject much of the conceptual toolkit of this strand of interpretive sociology.

Despite some similarities with all these perspectives, the philosophical basis of their work is quite different and quite specific: it is grounded in 'post-analytic' philosophy. So, although hermeneutics and phenomenological methods have influenced them, Bevir and Rhodes reject continental approaches and remain firmly post-analytic. While such an epistemological orientation is clearly at odds with many political scientists' natural instincts, it does situate them within a strong and influential current of contemporary thought, one which is practised in philosophy departments around the world and which has produced many significant recent philosophers, including Hilary Putnam, Donald Davidson, W. V. Quine, John Rawls, and Sheldon S. Wolin.

### The Interpretive Analytical Framework of Bevir and Rhodes

It is their post-analytic philosophy and origins in the History of Ideas school that make Bevir and Rhodes's approach a uniquely British interpretivism, distinct from other interpretive perspectives in political science. This specificity stands out most of all in their strongly individualist ontology, which demarcates them sharply from constructivist approaches in the continental *verstehen* tradition – which I note is hardly marginal in the social sciences, given that Weber (1978) unproblematically describes social science as interpretive in the subtitle and very first pages of *Economy and Society* – as well as variants of post-structuralism, which similarly take a more holistic approach to the analysis of discourse. This is not to say that Bevir and Rhodes do not use aggregate concepts – they refer conventionally to cultures, narratives, and traditions as the source of shared meaning (2005). It is just that they do so with remarkable caution and concern about reification (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010: 88), always returning home to their central theme of explaining political action in terms of the *beliefs of individuals*. From the very beginning, with the publication of *Interpreting British Governance*, it was this claim that proved controversial, with Keith Dowding raising significant objections to it at the time (Finlayson *et al.*, 2004). And it continues to be what separates Bevir and Rhodes from their constructivist cousins, such as Hay, and others who are more sociologically or at least holistically inclined (6, 2014a; see also Leggett, 2011; Smith, 2008). Their entire approach is built upon this central philosophical precept and they have consistently maintained it, despite modifying various aspects of their framework over time through critical encounters with other scholars.

To locate them within a broader perspective, one can affirm that, in general, while interpretive approaches come in many colours, all 'Interpretive approaches to political science focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). Bevir and Rhodes's work thus sits within the larger family of interpretive political science, but their interpretivism is distinguished by the particular claim that: