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Comparative Governance: Prospects and Lessons” (with R.A.W. Rhodes & Patrick Weller)

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This article revisits the country case studies and seeks to answer two questions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of an interpretive approach? What lessons can we draw from our analysis of public sector reform? To assess an interpretive approach, we discuss: the issues raised in identifying beliefs; the meaning of explanation; how to select traditions; the shift from prediction to informed conjecture and policy advice as storytelling. To assess the lessons, we outline our preferred story of public sector reform. We seek to show that an interpretive approach produces insights for students of public administration. We argue it remains feasible to give policy advice to public sector managers by telling them stories and providing rules of thumb (proverbs) to guide managerial practices.

Introduction

The contributors to this special issue have explored the changes in the ‘governance’ of the ‘state’ and the stories that informed the actions of national elites in initiating these changes. In particular, the articles focus on the effects of the multiple, competing governmental traditions that underpin these narratives and the dilemmas to which actors responded. In this concluding article, we survey the ground covered in the case studies and seek to answer two questions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of an interpretive approach? What lessons can we draw from our analysis of public sector reform?

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Interpretive approaches to political science have a long lineage. The labels vary -
ethnography, social constructivism, hermeneutics but all analyse the meanings, beliefs
and culture behind social and political practices (see for example Bevir and Rhodes 2003:
chapter 2 and citations). They concentrate on interpreting beliefs, rather than on the
statistical correlations sought by behavioural political scientists, the deductive models
favoured by rational choice theorists, or the laws and norms of the new institutionalism.
Yet this distinction between interpretive and other approaches is not an absolute one.
Many supporters of an interpretive approach will accept that correlations, models, and
definitions can play useful roles in advancing an understanding of political practices.
Also, behavioural political scientists, rational choice theorists, and proponents of the new
institutionalism can accept that correlations, models, and definitions can do explanatory
work only if they can be unpacked to the beliefs of the relevant actors.

Most advocates of interpretive approaches share beliefs about governance. To begin with,
they usually use the term governance to refer to a pattern of rule characterized by
networks that connect civil society and the state. On occasions, they view this pattern of
rule as a novel product of the reforms to the public sector in advanced western
democracies over the last twenty-five years. At other times, they view governance as a
general account of all resource allocation and co-ordination systems, including markets
and networks. However, many political scientists, and not just proponents of an
interpretive approach, use governance to refer to a pattern of rule through networks
(examples of mainstream approaches include Kooiman 1993; Rosenau and Czempiel
1992; and for a survey see Rhodes 1999). What distinguishes an interpretive approach is
an overlapping set of theoretical views about how to study and make sense of governance.

Interpretive approaches take seriously the meanings embodied in political activity. Typically, they believe that political practices arise out of actions and we can explore actions adequately only by unpacking the meanings behind them. We cannot properly understand a political practice solely by its legal character, its class composition, or the patterns of behaviour associated with it. Rather, all of these things, like the practice itself, can be understood only as meaningful human activity. This view is common to most varieties of an interpretive approach. However, during our workshop deliberations, this focus on meaning raised important questions.

How can we identify beliefs?

Can interpretation produce explanation or just understanding?

Which traditions and dilemmas do we select for study?

Can we develop operational concepts?

Can we predict?

Can interpretive studies produce policy advice?

We grappled with all of these questions while writing and revising the case studies. In what follows, we now discuss them. Of course, we do not expect to resolve them. Apart from anything else, the participants in the workshops seesawed between two positions. At one extreme, we rejected the iron embrace of positivism with its misplaced faith in pure
facts, scientific rigour, and prediction. At the other, we encouraged developing clear, recognisable techniques that would make interpretive studies more readily transferable and relevant. While participants occupied different points on this spectrum, everyone wrestled with the same questions.

The Prospects

Interpretation is necessary because we cannot read people’s beliefs from their social backgrounds. We also cannot equate people’s beliefs with what they say they believe. Individuals may not be fully aware of why they act the way they do, and even if they were, it is unlikely they would be willing to own up to all the beliefs that inform their actions. People’s public statements will provide a gloss – a sense of direction – but of course they may not be accurate reflections of their beliefs. On the contrary, people make public statements with an objective in mind. They seek to persuade, to justify, or to excuse, and these desires can lead to deception. People express beliefs for effect rather than because they sincerely hold them (and for an analysis of various forms of distorted belief see Bevir 1999: 265-308). We cannot claim a one-to-one correspondence between people’s beliefs and their actions. Many actors support or comply with a policy that is inconsistent with, even opposed to, their beliefs. They may be members of a group and outvoted. They may be too scared to present their view. They may see political advantage in acting contrary to their beliefs and be willing to live with the results. Beliefs are not given as pure facts any more than anything else. Rather, they are, at least in part, constructs of the investigator just like institutions, social categories, or models of
rationality. The question thus arises, how can political scientists uncover people’s beliefs?

**How do we identify beliefs?**

Any interpretive approach believes that all experiences, not only beliefs, are theory-laden. We construct their content through the prior theories we bring to bear on them. Political scientists play an active role in constructing the meanings, actions, and practices of people, so we cannot describe them as mere recorders of a given external world. All too often nowadays, this insistence on the constructed nature of experience gets assimilated to a postmodern denial of any object outside the ‘text’. Postmodernists tend to think that, since we cannot passively record the world, we must be trapped within a world of texts and so cannot appeal to any objects outside texts, such as beliefs and practices. We deny we are trapped in texts and use philosophical reasoning to defend our commitment to the existence of general classes of beliefs and practices. We argue all experiences, and so all concepts, are laden with theories in a way that precludes taking them as passive representations of a given world. Nonetheless, whenever we act, we commit ourselves to certain beliefs. For example, if we use a pen to fill in our tax form, take it to the tax office, and pay by cheque, we commit ourselves to beliefs about the existence of certain objects – such as forms and money – and about the nature of these objects – for example, that paying tax avoids interest and even fines for late or non-payment, and that others accept authorized cheques as discharging our liabilities. Also we can act for reasons of our own. For example, I may believe in prompt payment as a citizen’s duty or in using tax evasion to delay or avoid payment. Philosophy can go to work on the beliefs underpinning these actions. It can analyse the implications of these concepts to provide
an account of the classes of objects with which we populate the world and the forms of reasoning appropriate to such objects. For example, our acceptance of tax forms and use of pens suggests we populate the world with physical objects; our convictions about the utility of money suggests we populate the world with objects that acquire significance through intersubjective beliefs; and in acting for reasons of our own, we populate the world with many beliefs.

While philosophical reflection on the concepts embedded in our actions provides us with good reasons for proposing the existence of beliefs, actions, and practices, it cannot justify assuming particular beliefs, actions, or practices in any particular case. Our approach suggests we have access only to our interpretations of beliefs. Nonetheless, we can justify ascribing particular beliefs to people by claiming that doing so best explains facts on which we agree. Although political scientists do not have direct access to people’s beliefs, they can justify ascribing beliefs to someone by saying that doing so best explains, or makes sense of, the evidence. For example, philosophical reasoning gives us grounds for assuming British politicians and civil servants held beliefs about how to reform the public sector. This assumption raises the question of what were these beliefs. Political scientists can answer this question by saying that ascribing, for example, beliefs about effective service delivery to them makes sense of the agreed facts. In short, we infer from the best explanation that we are justified in attributing particular beliefs to political actors.

Although we can thus justify appeals to beliefs, we still have to recognise the theory-laden, and so provisional, nature of any knowledge we claim to have of them. Our knowledge cannot be certain; it is not based on appeals to pure facts. It must be
provisional. It is justified by an anthropological epistemology that provides criteria with which to compare different interpretations. In other words, political scientists conceive of objective knowledge as a normative standard embedded in a practice of criticising and comparing rival accounts of ‘agreed facts’. The rules of intellectual honesty provide criteria for comparing theories or narratives. The first rule of intellectual honesty is that objective behaviour requires a willingness to take criticism seriously. The second rule is that objective behaviour implies a preference for established standards of evidence and reason. The third rule is that objective behaviour implies a preference for speculative theories that open avenues of exploration (and for a detailed account see Bevir 1999: chapter 3).

Mainstream political scientists might complain that this anthropological epistemology does not produce certainty and without certainty our interpretations lack the rigour they expect of empirical science. But such a complaint misses the point. As anti-foundational critiques make clear, such certainty is lacking in all of our knowledge – even the natural sciences – not just in our interpretations of beliefs, actions, and practices. For our interpretive approach, therefore, the issue of rigour arises most strikingly around the notion of explanation.

Can interpretation produce explanation or just understanding?

Proponents of an interpretive approach have no particular difficulties identifying or describing the objects they study but, at first glance, they might have more difficulty with explanation. The more they stress the contingency and particularity of political practices, the harder it becomes to explain these practices by reference to broad social processes.
Thus, they are often described as offering only an understanding, as opposed to an explanation, of the political practices. However, the distinction between understanding and explanation is ambiguous. Sometimes the distinction matches ordinary language. Typically we take questions of understanding to ask what beliefs people expressed in their actions, and we take questions of explanation broadly to ask why people believed what they did and so acted as they did. At other times, however, the distinction between understanding and explanation presupposes a narrow concept of explanation defined as the form of explanation that incorporates the scientific notion of causation in contrast to a concept such as understanding or narrative (see Wright 1971). This way of making the distinction implies that meanings or beliefs are bubbles on the surface of political life. To explain these bubbles, we allegedly need to invoke the deeper currents of interests, economic forces, or social structures. Explanation, in this view, requires a causal link that demands greater precision than we can possibly provide through an interpretation of meanings.

Our response to the question of explanation is ambiguous in part because of the difference between these narrow and broad concepts of explanation. On the one hand, we reject any intent to offer explanations akin to those of the natural sciences: we regard such a form of explanation as unsuitable for political science and public administration. On the other hand, we have invoked the concepts of tradition and dilemma to give content to the notion of explanation that operates in the narratives appropriate to political science and public administration (Bevir et al above pp. xx). Our core claim is that we can explain beliefs, actions, and practices, by reference to traditions and dilemmas.
However, deploying tradition and dilemma as explanatory concepts raises important questions.

**Which traditions and dilemmas do we select for study?**

To explain why people held the beliefs they did and sustained the practices they did we need to invoke traditions. But, which traditions should we explore? There is, of course, in any society a multiplicity of traditions, even if some command acceptance more than others. Indeed, our concern to avoid essentialist accounts of tradition implies that we should think of an undifferentiated social context, rather than a series of discrete and identifiable traditions. Investigators slice a particular tradition out of this undifferentiated background to explain whatever set of beliefs or actions happen to be of interest to them. Traditions are essentially artefacts, always interpreted by the observer. We select a topic, in this case changes in governance and public sector reform, and we ask which are the relevant traditions for explaining these changes. To take an example, the chapter on Britain asks what traditions had an impact on Whitehall elites when they introduced public sector reform. Exclusions may be contested. Do the assemblies in Scotland and Wales, or the impact of feminism on appointments and promotions, justify treatment as a separate tradition? Does the emphasis on Whitehall make it an English narrative, rather than a British one? These are legitimate questions. Nevertheless, given the many ways in which we might slice the undifferentiated social background and the need to make each study manageable, any analysis will require that we highlight some traditions more than others. The justification for constructing traditions the way we do lies in the claim that doing so best explains what is of interest to us, not in the claim that such traditions are given or natural.
We can construct traditions in several ways. In several of the case studies, they have reflected the political divides of the time, so there are traditions of the left and the right (France and Britain). At other times, traditions reflect continuing beliefs broken into historical periods but not based on political parties or distinctive ideologies (Australia). On occasions, cataclysmic events break traditions and reshape the entire political environment (Germany). If the beliefs of elites about the state change uniformly, they can be divided into historical periods (Norway). And traditions can cut across both time and traditional cleavages reflecting a general attitude to politics and public sector reform (USA). A tradition may include, besides, two or more of these strands simultaneously.

Traditions are, therefore, a flexible vehicle for explaining beliefs, actions, and practices. That is their strength as a tool for analysis. However, it is also a possible weakness. Their flexibility and porous nature make them hard to use with the rigour so often prized in positivist approaches to political science. We would be hard-pressed to develop operational forms of such flexible concepts as traditions if we sought to unearth causal laws.

**Can we develop operational concepts?**

To discuss the issue of rigour is to confront the tension between our philosophical rejection of the positivist notion of causal laws in political science and our wish to make an interpretive approach more transferable and relevant by developing clear, recognisable, useful techniques. It must be obvious that an interpretive approach challenges the appropriateness of a search for causal laws in political science. For anthropology, as Inglis (2000: 112) points out, there has been a lethal attack on positivism and physicalism alike. He asserts vigorously that the work of such Anglo-
Saxon philosophers as Charles Taylor, Peter Winch and Alasdair McIntyre – to which we would add Richard Bernstein and Richard Rorty – means that using the methods of the natural sciences in the human sciences is ‘comically improper’. Thus Geertz (1973 and 1983) views ethnography as a soft science that guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. And it is still possible to generalise. Theory provides a vocabulary with which to express what symbolic action has to say about itself. It is not about prediction. But if students of anthropology have confronted the invasion of post-positivist philosophies - and they are not alone (see Smith 1999 on International Relations) – students of political science and public administration have barely begun to do so (Rhodes 2002). The subject needs to recognise that developing operational concepts and searching for causal laws is at best just one way of doing social science.

Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word ‘cause’ to describe a relationship between the objects they study. When they do so, they rarely tell us anything about the nature of the connections between these objects. Rather, they use the word ‘cause’ to signify the relationship that characterises explanation in their discipline (and for an analysis of the different senses of the word cause, see for example, Collingwood 1940: 285-343). Positivists, in contrast, reduce the diverse types of connections that might characterize causal links to a uniform monolith. Their faith in the universal applicability of the scientific form of explanation inspires them to reduce matters of human belief and action to general laws.

Surely, however, political scientists should not treat their discipline as a branch of a universal science? On the contrary, the nature of beliefs means that political scientists
must adopt a form of explanation different from that of natural science. Beliefs make up an understanding of the world, so political scientists who consider beliefs, and the actions and practices they inspire, necessarily deal with products of human thought. Political scientists strive to understand the ways in which other people have made the world intelligible. They struggle to understand the ways in which other people have understood their world. They try to explain the ways in which other people have explained things. The natural sciences, in contrast, offer us explanations of physical events that are not products of intelligence; for example, an apple falling to the ground or a lake freezing over. Scientific explanation, therefore, does not have the same double-layered nature as explanation in political science. Natural scientists seek only to explain physical events. They do not try to explain explanations. Political scientists use concepts appropriate to phenomena that are the products of mind. The natural sciences use ideas appropriate to purely physical objects. We should not let the success of natural science exclude other forms of explanation.

We cannot explain the existence of beliefs, actions or practices by presenting them as the determined outcome of law-like relations. We cannot do so because a scientific concept of causation has no place in folk psychology. Folk psychology consists of the cluster of concepts that refer to human attitudes to states of affairs or propositions – concepts such as fear, belief, desire, and pleasure. When we discuss beliefs, actions, and practices we use a folk psychology that commits us to seeing them as products of reason and we cannot avoid so doing (see Rudder 1987).

To say that people hold a belief is, for example, to say that they fashioned it in accord with their reason, no matter how conscious, subtle, or distorted their reason might have
been. To explain a meaningful practice, we must refer to the reasons people had for acting in the way they did. Also, when we explain a practice as a product of reason, we suggest the people concerned could have reasoned differently and, if they had done so, the practice would have been different. If beliefs and practices depend on the reasoned decisions, or choices, of people, we must explain them as the product of those decisions. We cannot explain them as an outcome of a law-like process because choices would not be choices if a causal law fixed them. We can conclude, therefore, that folk psychology prevents our explaining meaningful beliefs and practices using the natural science version of causation.

So, if proponents of an interpretive approach do not believe that political science should seek the sorts of causal laws that characterize natural science, they have little reason to develop operational concepts. However, operational concepts and causal laws are not our main concern. Rather, we seek to draw comparative lessons from the case studies. Obviously we cannot properly discuss here the manner and extent of a rapprochement between an interpretive approach and quantitative techniques, formal models, and the like. But we can generalise about what traditions and dilemmas tell us about governance (see below).

**Can we predict?**

An interpretive approach can aim at understanding and explaining our political practice for its own sake. For example, ethnographers offer ‘thick descriptions’ to clarify the beliefs and actions of those they observe. Other versions seek to understand political practices to challenge them. They highlight the meanings that make a practice possible so
they can reveal the contingency and contestability of those meanings and prompt new thinking about alternative practices. They understand governance as a web of intersubjective beliefs about human nature, right conduct, social inquiry and the public good. These intersubjective beliefs are more or less taken for granted by the participants in the relevant mode of governance. Interpretive accounts unpack such webs of beliefs to reveal their historical contingency and contestability. They try to show how beliefs arose in a particular tradition. To offer such critiques however, does not mean it is possible to offer useful advice to political actors. On the contrary, critics argue that an interpretive approach cannot produce policy advice because it does not seek causal laws and does not concern itself with prediction. This issue of policy advice reveals the tension between our critique of a positivist notion of scientific expertise and our wish to develop transferable, relevant, useful techniques.

Before addressing the issue of policy advice directly, however, we must confront the notion that scientific expertise and prediction are the right way of thinking about the advice students of public administration might offer to practitioners. We oppose the possibility of prediction – defined in contrast to the looser idea of informed conjecture (Morton 1966) – because we think that it is incompatible with the idea of creative agency embedded in our concepts of tradition and dilemma. In our view, change is a product of the ways in which people modify inherited traditions and practices, and the ways in which they do so are open-ended and so not amenable to prediction.

People can resolve dilemmas by creatively using their current beliefs (see Bevir et al above pp. xx). To follow passively a set of existing beliefs would fix the way in which one resolved the dilemma. But webs of belief, traditions, and practices cannot fix the
ways in which people extend them to deal with novel circumstances. Whenever people confront a dilemma, they necessarily apply their existing beliefs to it but these beliefs do not settle how people will respond or the results of that response. Any existing web of beliefs provides hints on how to continue but it is always possible to ignore such hints. People’s existing beliefs will suggest several ways of resolving any dilemma. The only way they have of checking whether their modified beliefs and practices are acceptable is to ask other people if they are content with the changes.

Because traditions and practices do not fix the ways in which people might develop them when confronted with new circumstances—such as, new laws, rules, or policies—we cannot know in advance how people will develop their beliefs and actions in response to a dilemma. Therefore, political scientists cannot predict how people will respond to a dilemma. Whatever limits they built into their predictions, people always could arrive at new beliefs and actions outside those limits. Political scientists cannot make predictions. All they can offer are informed conjectures or narratives that explain practices and actions by pointing to the conditional connections between actions, beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas. And their conjectures are stories, understood as provisional narratives about possible futures.

**Can interpretive studies produce policy advice?**

At this point we can now directly address the issue of how an interpretive approach can produce policy advice. Most policy-oriented work on governance seeks to improve the ability of the state to manage the markets, bureaucracies and networks that have flourished since the 1980s. Typically this work treats hierarchies, markets, and networks
as fixed structures that governments can manipulate using the right tools. An interpretive approach undercuts this idea of a set of tools we can use to manage governance. If governance is constructed differently, contingently, and continuously, we cannot have a tool kit for managing it. It is not uncommon for critics to talk of the ‘impossibility’ of a ‘positive contribution’ to policy analysis from an interpretive approach because it is ‘descriptive rather than evaluative or critical’ (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987: 171). We demur from this judgement.

An interpretive approach encourages us to foreswear management techniques and strategies but, and the point is crucial, to replace such tools with learning by telling stories and listening to them. While statistics, models, and claims to expertise all have a place in such stories, we should not become too preoccupied with them. On the contrary, we should recognize that they too are narratives about how people have acted or will react given their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigour or expertise we bring to bear, all we can do is tell a story and judge what the future might bring.

We are not alone. Although the label varies – the argumentative turn, narratives, storytelling – there is now a growing literature on ‘the interpretive turn’ in organization studies, policy analysis and public administration (and for reviews of the literature see Morgan 1997; and van Eeten et al. 1996). The behavioural revolution in the social sciences marginalized storytelling but it is being rediscovered in several disciplines – law, psychology, even economics. In policy analysis, as Dryzek (1993: 222) points out, there are many social science frames of reference. Each frame:
treats some topics as more salient than others, defines social problems in a unique fashion, commits itself to particular value judgements, and generally interprets the world in its own particular and partial way.

And this multiplicity of ‘incommensurable analytical frames’ dealt a ‘devastating’ blow to the ‘authoritative ambitions’ of policy analysis (see also Bobrow and Dryzek 1987). Instead of such ambitions, we have policy analysis through dialogue. Thus Schram (1993: 252) argues for:

those approaches to examining policy which emphasize how the initiation, contestation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation of any policy are shaped by the discursive, narrative, symbolic practices which socially construct our understanding of problems, methods of treatment and criteria of success.

In similar vein, van Eeten et al (1996) record the rediscovery of storytelling in the subfield of public administration. They distinguish between storytelling by administrators and storytelling by scholars to make the important point that this latest intellectual fashion has its feet firmly on the ground. In both public and private organizations managers use stories not only to gain and pass on information and to inspire involvement but also as the repository of the organization’s institutional memory (see also Czarniawska 1998).

For Rein (1973: 74-5), for example, advice to policy makers is based:
on social understandings and depends on the use of illustrative stories, or accounts from past experience, which suggest how the future might unfold if certain actions were taken.

In his view, policy narratives present a chronology or sequence of linked events, using a few major characters, and each step in the story ‘causes’ the next step. There is a storyline or, if you will, a beginning, middle and end (although, of course, that ‘end’ is the start of the next story). The central element in the story is the metaphor (or making the unfamiliar analogous to familiar situations). ‘The simplest stories are proverbs and parables, used to justify policy relevant stories’ (Rein 1976: 266) and so there is usually a moral to the tale. The validity of stories is assessed by rules that are ‘partly aesthetic and partly logical’. The story should be ‘the simplest, most comprehensive, internally consistent explanation we can offer’. We should also ask if the explanation in the story could be generalised. The task of the policy analyst, therefore:

is to invent objectively grounded normative stories, to participate in designing programmes of intervention based upon them and to test the validity of stories that others commend. Invention, design and criticism are all crucial for storytelling. (268)

For students of public administration, we have come full circle because we return – Herbert Simon notwithstanding - to the proverbs of administration, the repudiation of which begat the behavioural revolution and heralded the much-trumpeted, but ne’er seen, science of administration.
So, as advocates of an interpretive approach, we are suspicious that an excessive concern with prediction bolsters inappropriate claims to ‘scientific expertise’. Nonetheless, we recognise the appeal of useful techniques as ways of making interpretive studies relevant to policy makers. Indeed, we wanted to explore public sector reform in part to try to draw out policy implications from interpretive studies. So, we adopt the device of storytelling to build bridges between theory and practice. In the next section, we move beyond the general defence of our approach and draw out the lessons of our interpretive analysis of public sector reform for public administration and policy analysis.

The Lessons

In an interpretive approach, to generalise means to diagnose and make informed conjecture. We cast conjecture in the form of narratives or stories. Policy analysis is a form of storytelling. So, for an interpretive approach to produce policy advice, we must tell stories. What stories do we tell? What is the plot of our story? Who are the leading characters? What are the informing metaphors? What proverbs do we use? Several storylines (or conjectures), characters, metaphors, proverbs and morals recur in the case studies. We discuss the insights for the storyteller – the public administration scholar – and the strategies for the listener – the public administrator (Morgan 1993: 305).

Insights

For students of public administration, we offer a 12-point interpretation of reform.
First, the basic building blocks for our story are the identifiable beliefs of elite actors, the traditions in which they were socialised and the dilemmas they confront. To recap, the beliefs and practices of elite actors originate in the traditions they have inherited. They construct issues or dilemmas out of experiences infused with these traditions. Thus, for each country, we draw on primary sources to illustrate the beliefs and practices of elite actors. Such data are the core building blocks of our accounts. Thus, all the case studies describe the ways in which their governmental traditions shape reform and most identify the dilemmas, problems and issues, variously constructed, which prompted the search for new practices.

Second, there are no law-like generalisations. Stories represent an idiographic approach that stresses the particularistic, the unique. However, we can generalise because we can show the pattern in events, albeit provisionally, and how similar problems and dilemmas can be handled in different situations. As Jann shows the reunification of Germany was a unique event but public sector reform in the former East Germany was constructed within West German tradition. And uniqueness lies not only in cataclysmic changes. The imperviousness of French elites to public service reform may lack the grandeur of unification but it exerted a powerful influence for all that. Also, we should be careful when making such judgements. Are France and Germany the outlying cases? It is as plausible to argue we are comparing antipodean exceptionalism with European traditionalism.

What shines through most clearly is the contrast between European parliamentary systems and Westminster systems. All the Westminster systems share a tradition of strong executive government that could force through reform in response to economic
pressures. In the Netherlands, despite ostensibly similar economic pressures, the reforms hinged on coalition governments operating in a tradition of consensual corporatism. In France, the combination of departmental fragmentation at the centre, coupled with the grand corps tradition and its beliefs about a strong state, meant that public sector reform rested on the consent of those about to be reformed. It was not forthcoming. European traditions shaped reforms, often decisively. Not so in the Antipodes.

How do we account for Antipodean exceptionalism? The answer, for New Zealand as well as Australia, lies in the way elite actors constructed the dilemmas they faced. They saw their country as acutely vulnerable to the pressures of globalisation. To be competitive in the international economy, the state had to do less. The nation could no longer afford the supportive statism of yore. It was not driven by the ideas of the new public management. Leaders of the reform often deny they had much influence. Rather they raided the current Zeitgeist for any ideas, especially economic ideas that looked likely to help. The changes came from within as without. There was an agreed response to a shared definition of the economic dilemma facing Australia and New Zealand.

Where traditions count is in the speed of the reform. Westminster systems with executives subjected to few constraints can legislate almost at will - ‘the fastest law in the west’, as one wit (later prime minister of New Zealand) had it. The great danger with an analysis rooted in tradition is that one tends to focus on continuities. The notion of dilemma allows us to explore why and how rapid change came about (Rhodes and Weller 2001).

Third, as a result, there is no tool kit applicable within or across countries. Governance is constructed differently and continuously reconstructed so there can be no one set of tools.
The battery of reforms masquerading under the single label of the New Public Management illustrates the point. It is conventional to divide NPM into two sets of reforms: managerialism and marketisation. Each of these labels can be further subdivided into specific tools including, for example:


And even these specific reforms have different meanings in the case studies. Thus, while ostensibly similar, marketisation reforms in Australia and Britain have distinctive emphases with marketisation covering privatisation and contracting, and contracting coming in many guises from the classic spot contract to relational contracting. Like Humpty Dumpty, reformers may be able to assert that ‘When I use a word it means what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less’ but the outcome for public sector reform is many meanings (Carroll 1965: 269). If proponents of an interpretive approach are sceptical about the universal validity of NPM’s tools, nonetheless we can tell stories and the point about these stories is not only that they replace tools but they also unpack the several meanings.

Fourth, there is no universal process of globalisation driving public sector reform because that store of ideas, called loosely the New Public Management, is variously understood, differentially implemented with disparate outcomes. The notions of globalisation and the New Public Management are widely used but, to adapt Wildvasky’s aphorism about planning, ‘if NPM is everything, maybe it’s nothing’. Both terms are now used so loosely, and encompass so many discrete beliefs and practices, it is tempting to view
them as myths. However, no matter that academics think globalisation is a myth, if the elite of Britain’s New Labour or of Australia’s Coalition government believe in globalisation, it might well pose a dilemma for their view of governance (and on the self-fulfilling nature of beliefs see Hay 2002: chapter 7). What matters, in other words, is the subjective, or more usually, intersubjective understandings of political actors. Our task has been to recover the shared (or intersubjective) dilemmas of the relevant actors.

However, there are shared beliefs - ideas whose time has come - and, fifth, they are variously understood, interpreted and accommodated to traditions. Every country study illustrates the point whether the example is American anti-statism, Australian pragmatism, British gradualism, Dutch consensual corporatism, French statism, the German classical tradition or anitpodean exceptionalism.

So, sixth, reform is a continuous, contingent, political process in which the meaning of change is contested. And again, whether the object was to reform the public sector or to avoid such reform, all the case studies illustrate this point. Thus as Werner Jann points out for Germany, we can only grasp the administrative politics of reform if we focus on the interplay of ideas. Political competition creates the demand for new ideas but, and of central importance to the arguments of this special issue, narratives of the public sector change first and new party-political coalitions follow. Similarly, the ideas of New Labour arose not only out of party competition with a Thatcherite Conservative Party but also out of competition between New and Old Labour for control of the party. In responding to the ideas of the New Right, the Labour Party became a battleground of ideas.
Seventh, the central characters are central agencies – the elite of the elite – most commonly in the disguise of a ministry of finance or a prime minister’s department. Although ministers sought to exert greater control, it was not uniquely a party political driven reform. Reform was led by their respective civil services - the Treasury in New Zealand, Finance and PM&C in Australia, the Council of Permanent Secretaries in the Netherlands, and Cabinet Office in Britain. And, although their proposals were resisted by administrative elites in France, prime ministers Balladur and Rocard instigated reform.

Eighth, the extent and outcomes of reform are also contested. Standard reform packages are transmuted when implemented. Elite actors may launch reform, but other actors changed it markedly, constructing and reconstructing its meaning within their several traditions. Thus, Tom Christensen reports that an attitude survey of Norwegian civil servants found they were reluctant reformers who stuck to traditional political and professional norms. A survey of 1900 British civil service trade union members reported much dissatisfaction with more than 80% of respondents believing reform was badly managed and undermining unity of the civil service (British Public Opinion August 1995: 3-4; and for evidence about continuing concerns over job security see Wooldridge 2001: 11).

Ninth, storytelling is not the preserve of academics. Practitioners also learn through the stories they hear and tell one another and such stories are a source of institutional memory, the repositories of the traditions through which practitioners filter. We discuss storytelling as a managerial strategy in more detail in the next section.
Tenth, there is no one story of reform but the several stories told within the various traditions, all of which are provisional, constantly modified in the telling. Thus, in Britain Bevir and Rhodes argue governance is conceived of as intermediate institutions, marketising public services, reinventing the constitution, and trust and negotiation. For the USA, Richard Stillman identifies four reform traditions: namely, reform by meritocrats; by the efficient; by entrepreneurs; and by equalizers. Since 1945, the history of German public sector reform can be interpreted as a conflict between the classical Staatswissenschafte and the democratic, liberal and Marxist-Socialist traditions.

Eleventh, the core metaphor running through this analysis is ‘domesticating chaos’. Elites confront dilemmas they do not how to resolve and outcomes they did not intend and tell two kinds of stories: about efficiency to persuade others to accept change; and about the success of reform to persuade volatile electorates that they are in charge. So, public service reform plays a key symbolic role for the elite. It is a token of authority as much as an indicator of change. To reform hospitals is to suggest you are in charge without necessarily delivering any change in the service provided. It is an ‘institutional fix’ substituting for policy improvements.

Twelfth and finally, we came across many aphorisms and proverbs in accounts of reform. One set reflect the elite’s conviction that reform will work. Thus, when asked why they like their job, they will reply because ‘We can make a difference’. Or, when confronted by criticisms of the reforms because they make ministers more powerful, the oft-chanted mantra is ‘responsiveness is not politicisation’. And as a final example, the word ‘vision’ provides an all-purpose gloss on change. Thus, senior civil servants provide leadership and integral to that leadership is their vision for the department. The language and
phrases are purposive and positive: ‘courageous decisions’. The other side of this coin are
the cries for help of those being reformed. The several responses to unwelcome reforms
are well-known and need little comment. They include ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’; ‘if it
can go wrong, it will go wrong’; and ‘what goes around comes around’. The language
and phrases are passive, evasive and defensive.

Strategies

Now if we were policy analysts or senior civil servants advising a minister on public
service reform, what rules of thumb, what dos and don’ts, could we derive from an
interpretive approach in general and from our story of reform? The case studies provide
historical accounts of public service reform. They do not describe their implementation in
any detail, nor were they intended to do so. But an interpretive approach that has no
purchase on such problems would command little attention. Fortunately, we do not need
to travel far a field to show that storytelling has practical relevance.

Although ‘imaginization’ must be a candidate for one of the ugliest neologisms ever
(why he did not use the more obvious ‘thinking in metaphors’, or even just plain
‘storytelling’, is a mystery)- Morgan’s (1993) analysis is instructive and grounded in a
thoroughgoing interpretive framework (buried as Appendix A but accessible for all that).
Imaginization is about creating new metaphors, new stories, with which to understand an
organisation. It aims to: improve our abilities to see and understand situations in new
ways; find new images for new ways of organising; and create shared understandings that
empower people and develop their capacities for self-organization (Morgan 1993: 2-19).
Imaginization is ‘the art of framing and reframing’. It uses ‘images, metaphors, readings
and storylines to cast situations in new perspective and open possibilities for creative action.’ Metaphors are central to this process. They use paradox to ‘break the bounds of normal discourse’. They require the ‘users to find and create meaning’. But they work only if they ‘ring true, hit a chord and resonate’ (Morgan 1993: 290). In sum, ‘Organization always hinges on the creation of shared meaning and shared understandings’ (Morgan 1993: 11) and Morgan employs the techniques of action learning (Morgan 1993: Appendix B) to create new meanings and shared understandings.

We can illustrate this process with the cautionary tale of Network (paraphrased from Morgan 1993: chapter 6). We have chosen this example because network steering is a core feature of governance. Through such initiatives as ‘joined-up government’, governments want to manage networks better.

Network runs community action programmes for young people. The problem is that they are spread too thinly, with inadequate resources and have problems in setting priorities. They felt they were not really organized. They were ‘a blob out of water’ and at their most ‘blobby’ when dealing with the church hierarchy; for example, the bureaucracy was irritated by their views on social justice. Morgan helped the staff to come up with new, shared meanings.

They were like the dandelion seeds and supernova. They were like an amoeba and chameleon, changing shape and colour in different circumstances. They operated in a loose, expansive, and at times chaotic style, yet … they were held together …through their strong value base (Morgan 1993: 138).
The disorganization was better seen as flexibility; staff could operate autonomously but in unison. But it was too late. Their ‘blobbiness’ got them. The church hierarchy saw them as too chaotic and closed them down. So the story has four messages. It shows the qualities needed for an organisation to be flexible. It shows how metaphors can create new meaning, how chaos can be reconceived as flexibility. And it shows how an interpretive approach can be applied to helping people run their organisation. It shows the dangers of a clash in organizational styles; most governments, like the church, will find networks fundamentally messy and carp at the mess. As Morgan concludes (1993: 306) such stories will be more or less effective as interventions if they ‘resonate and evoke ideas and personal responses in a wide variety of situations’ (see Morgan 1993: 307-11 for an extended discussion).

Advice to the practitioner is not confined to telling resonating stories. Weick (1995: chapter 8) identifies six rules of thumb to guide the behaviour of practitioners.

1. *Acting and talking*: You will find out what you think by acting.

2. *Words matter*: The stories you tell and the words you use to tell them will affect what you see and how others see you.

3. *History*: ‘Good’ decision makers retrospectively construct a history that appears to have led directly to the decision.

4. *Committees*: meeting more often is good for you; it makes sense of ambiguity, puzzles and the organisation.

5. *Sharing*: tell stories about shared experiences to foster shared meaning.
6. *Reality*: reality is up for grabs and expectations are powerful realities.

Obviously we paraphrase but it is unnecessary to unpack these rules of thumb. We seek to make the simple point that an interpretive approach has techniques (storytelling) which provide guides for managers in the guise of rules of thumb or, if you will, proverbs.

Others still might ask, however, how do you write stories that guide managers? Morgan’s (1993: 301-2) basic protocol is to ‘get inside a situation and understand it as far as possible on its own terms’; adopt the role of a learner, not expert, and let ‘the situation speak for itself’; ‘create a rich description’ of what is said and done; and develop an ‘evolving “reading”’ or interpretation. He collects three kinds of data: the ‘so-called objective facts of a situation’; the social constructions of reality; and the researcher’s social constructions of reality. The resulting knowledge can be generalised in two ways. First, it provides ‘insights that capture the pattern of event and problems’. Second it provides ‘strategies and tactics through which similar problems … can be tackled elsewhere’.

In a similar vein, Weick (1995 chapter 8), suggest that action research studies practices in context; relies on participants’ definition of what they are doing and why; observes people at work; generates patterns, not hypotheses; judges patterns by their plausibility, not against prior theories or models; writes thick descriptions; and concentrates on meanings, not statistical frequencies. An interpretive approach enjoins us to unpack individual beliefs and the traditions from which they stem. Morgan and Weick practice ethnographic research, which is one of the many ways of recovering meanings. For present purposes, however, it is enough to show that an interpretive approach has its own
techniques (of stories and metaphors) and tools (based on participant and non-participant observation) and that its findings can be translated into practical advice to decision makers.

Given that much of our argument is general, it is important to bring it down to earth with a thud. Most if not quite all policy advisers will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Such phrases as ‘Have we got our story straight?’ and ‘Are we telling a consistent story?’ or even ‘What is our story?’ abound. The basis for much advice is the collective memory of the department, its traditions if you will. It is an organised, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Advisors explain past practice and events to justify recommendations for the future. In short, our stress on storytelling is not an example of academic whimsy. We ground our approach in both an explicit epistemology and in the everyday practice of advisors.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show not only that an interpretive approach adds new dimensions to our knowledge of governance but also that it can be of use to practitioners. We have answered two questions. What are the strengths and weaknesses of an interpretive approach? What lessons can we draw from our analysis of public sector reform?

In assessing the prospects of an interpretive approach, we have defended the philosophical analysis of the beliefs underpinning actions and argued for an
anthropological approach to objectivity. We have also argued that we can explain beliefs and practices using the notions of traditions and dilemmas. In assessing the lessons, we have argued that policy advice can take the form of storytelling and we have outlined our preferred story of public sector reform. We have shown that an interpretive approach produces both insights for students of public administration and the means for giving policy advice (stories) to policy makers and rules of thumb (proverbs) to guide managerial practices.

We believe our story offers a more accurate and comprehensive account of the agreed facts about governance. We argue it offers an open account by identifying new avenues of exploration. For example, an interpretive approach pushes us toward both decision-making through dialogue and bottom-up approaches to public policy. It implies that policy is likely to be more effective if it is based on an engagement and negotiation with the concrete activities and struggles of governance in the field. An interpretive approach wedded to the precepts of democratic debate would have critical purchase on normative issues. For example, Dryzek (1993: 228) argues:

Dialogue in the ideal speech situation is free from deception, self-deception, domination, strategizing, and any exclusion of participants or arguments. The only power remaining is that of better argument. Though impossible to achieve fully, the precepts of ideal speech can be used to expose unjustifiable practices (see also Dryzek 1990; 2000; and for a critique see Elster 1986).

Such matters were not discussed at the workshop and it is always dangerous to trail new ideas at the end of any article. But it is also important to show that an interpretive
approach is not only descriptive in that it produces distinct and distinctive accounts of the familiar, it is not only relevant in that it produces stories and proverbs for practitioners, but that it is also critical in that it can provide normative evaluative criteria for judging both the stories we tell and the outcomes of policies. The prospects for an interpretive approach are that it could provide, critical, thick descriptions about and for public administration.
References


