I'll tell you a story
About Jack a Nory,
And now my story’s begun;
I'll tell you another
Of Jack and his brother,
And now my story is done.

[Anon]

A great writer of fiction both creates a new, unique, individual world – through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable, through commanding forms – and responds to a world, the world the writer shares with other people but that is unknown or miss-known by still more people, confined in their worlds. Call that history, society, what you will. The writers who matter most to us are those who enlarge our consciences and our sympathies and our knowledge.

[Susan Sontag]

This paper elucidates the interpretive approach to public administration that Professor Rhodes and I have developed over the last ten years. It defends the importance of storytelling in governance. The early studies of governance often drew on modernist empiricism and policy network theory to argue that public sector reforms had created a differentiated polity. While this governance literature offered a compelling account of contemporary public administration, it rested on a modernist empiricism that proved vulnerable to questions such as those raised by rational choice theorists about its micro foundations. Professor Rhodes and I thus rejected modernist empiricism in favour of an emphasis on meanings and storytelling. Our interpretive approach rests on ‘meaning holism’. It replaces na¨ıve empiricism with an anthropological epistemology based on comparing rival accounts. It rejects reified ontologies for recognition of the constructed nature of social reality. It moves away from formal explanations towards historicism. It provides a defence of public administration as storytelling.

When I first met Rod Rhodes in 1994, he was already a leading scholar of public administration and British politics. He was presiding over the monumental Whitehall Programme, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (Rhodes 2000). He would soon become Chair of the Political Studies Association, UK. We met because Rod accepted a Professorship at the University of Newcastle, where I was then a post-doctoral fellow. Rod was the big professor, and I was the most junior member of the Department. At first, we had little to do with one another. Then, in 1995 or 1996, Rod gave a research seminar on Postmodern Public Administration. He suggested that the shift from government to governance signalled a postmodern epoch. Yet, he dismissed postmodernism as epistemology. In the ensuing discussion, I suggested that, irrespective of what one thought about postmodernism, contemporary philosophy was dominated by meaning holism, which posed important challenges to public administration.

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In the year following Rod’s seminar on Postmodern Public Administration, he and I went to the pub – several times. We began to collaborate. Our collaboration has been one of the great joys of my scholarly life. I have had the immense good fortune of seeing my philosophical ideas applied to public administration and British politics by a scholar who has a superb empirical sense and who has used his seniority to try new things with verve and imagination. Rod and I defend an interpretive approach and a decentred theory (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, 2010; Bevir et al. 2003; see also Rhodes et al. 2007, 2009). We are constructivists and historicists. Governance arises contingently as actors change their beliefs by drawing on historical traditions to respond to dilemmas, as the new beliefs lead them to modify their actions, and as the new actions coalesce in new practices and patterns of rule.

Some colleagues draw a sharp contrast between this interpretive approach and Rod’s earlier work with its behavioural topics and institutional theory. Perhaps they are right. Rod would be among the first to insist that a scholar’s life should be an open and exploratory one – trying new things, tackling new issues, and creating new agendas. Nonetheless, these colleagues should not overlook the continuities in Rod’s work. The most obvious continuity is Rod’s concern to open up the black-box of the state, discover what policy actors really think and do, and so challenge the pieties of the Westminster model. This concern echoes across many of his key phrases, including ‘Beyond Westminster and Whitehall’, ‘governing without government’, ‘differentiated polity’, and ‘stateless state’ (Rhodes 1988, 1997; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2010). Another equally important continuity in Rod’s work is his storytelling. Rod is a literary craftsman who spins words and phrases to create new images and to change the way we see the world.

I could write much more on Rod’s qualities as a scholar, collaborator, colleague, and friend. His clarity and inventiveness. His enthusiasm and organizational skills. His energy and willing capacity for sheer hard work. The bluff Yorkshire exterior, and the more uncertain and much warmer interior. The advice, encouragement, and helpfulness given to younger scholars and graduate students.

However, I am writing for an academic journal. Impatient readers may wonder what I have to say about public administration. Some may not know of Rod. Are there such people? Surely not among readers of this journal. Nonetheless, in my imagination, I hear their impatient call for scholarly discussion, not fond reminiscence. Fear not. My reminiscences are indeed fond, but I have selected them to set the scene for a scholarly argument. In this essay, I will return to my earliest discussions with Rod. I will explore the implications of meaning holism. Meaning holism informs the constructivism and historicist theory of our interpretive approach. It gives a defence of public administration as storytelling.

DEBATING GOVERNANCE

The point of my discussing meaning holism here is to redirect the study of governance. A good place to begin is, therefore, with debates about governance. The governance literature offers a compelling picture of the contemporary state. Arguably, it has become a ‘new orthodoxy’ (Marsh 2008, p. 738). Much of the governance literature focuses on the public sector reforms begun in the late 20th century. It suggests that these reforms created a differentiated polity characterized by a hollowed-out state, a core executive fumbling to pull rubber levers of control, and, most notably, a massive growth of networks. However, while the governance literature typically focuses on recent administrative reforms, it is clearly an extension of earlier studies of pressure groups and policy networks.
Political scientists began to focus on pressure groups in the late 19th century and more dramatically between the two World Wars. Earlier they had concentrated on the theory of the state, constitutional law, and institutional history. At the end of the 19th century, political scientists began to argue that this old agenda was inadequate to the politics of mass societies with a fuller suffrage. Political scientists began to explore new empirical topics that were collectively described as political behaviour. They suggested that modern democracies could be understood only by paying as much attention to public opinion, political parties, and pressure groups as to formal laws and government institutions.

This interest in political behaviour arose earlier than and independently of the shifts in methodology and theory that constituted the ‘behavioural revolution’. As early as 1888, James Bryce’s pioneering *The American Commonwealth* moved unusually quickly through the historical and legal material in order to devote hundreds of pages to public opinion and political parties (Bryce 1888). Then, between the two World Wars, the new empirical focus on political behaviour combined with the rise of pluralism to inspire American scholars such as Peter Odegard and Pendelton Herring to work on pressure groups (Odegard 1928; Herring 1929). By the 1950s, American and British scholars alike were busily reinterpreting British politics in terms of pressure groups (Mackenzie 1955; Finer 1958; Eckstein 1960; Beer 1963). Through the 1960s to the 1980s, pluralist and neocorporatist perspectives on groups and state-society relations flourished. Scholars described the process of interest intermediation among groups using new phrases such as clientelism, group subgovernment, and iron triangles. By the 1990s, Rod and others were championing ‘policy network’ as a generic label applicable to diverse forms of interest intermediation (Marsh and Rhodes 1992a). They devised typologies that categorized policy networks according to the closeness of the relationships within them, and other apparently related features such as number of participants, stability, and internal consensus.

Much of the contemporary literature on governance arose as political scientists interested in pressure groups and policy networks responded to the public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. The rise of neoliberalism brought concerted efforts to transform the public sector through the spread of contracting-out and the new public management. Neoliberals attempted to reduce the power of policy networks by using markets to deliver services. They sought to bypass existing networks and curtail the privileges of the professions by subjecting them to rigorous financial and managerial controls. Policy networks and public administration began to appear less relevant than markets and business studies. Rod was among the first to respond. Initially, he and Dave Marsh suggested that neoliberal policy change was more rhetorical than actual (Marsh and Rhodes 1992b). Soon afterwards, Rod introduced many of the leading ideas of the anglo-governance school. He argued that neoliberal policies had the unintended consequence of further spreading networks (Rhodes 1997). Neoliberalism had created a new governance, but this new governance was characterized less by the emergence of properly functioning markets than the proliferation of networks, the fragmentation of the public sector, and the erosion of central control. Marketization had multiplied the networks it aimed to replace.

The anglo-governance school placed the old idea of policy networks at the heart of the concept of governance (Rhodes 1997; Smith 1999; Stoker 1999; Rhodes 2000; Stoker 2000; Richards and Smith 2002; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; and for discussion see Marinetto 2003). They associated governance with the changing nature of the state after the public sector reforms of the 1980s. These reforms created new networks and increased the membership of existing networks, incorporating both the private and voluntary sectors. Complex packages of organizations now deliver most public services. The resulting fragmentation
means the state increasingly depends on other organizations to implement its policies and secure its intentions. The state has swapped direct for indirect controls. Central departments are no longer invariably the fulcrum of a network. The state may set limits to network actions, but it has increased its dependence other policy actors. State power is dispersed among spatially and functionally distinct networks.

Rod in particular associated the new governance with something akin to a hollowing out of the state. He had long challenged hierarchical and centralized models of British government. He had explored territorial and local politics, showing how they escape the control and even understanding of the centre (Rhodes 1981, 1986; Rhodes and Wright 1987). When he developed his account of governance, he used phrases such as ‘hollow crown’, ‘core executive’, and ‘differentiated polity’ to suggest the centre was constrained and splintered (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Rhodes 1997; Weller et al. 1997; Peters et al. 2000; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Rhodes et al. 2003). The British state was characterized by baronies, policy networks, and intermittent and selective coordination. Governance eroded the ability of the state to act effectively. Marketization fragmented service delivery, multiplying networks and diversifying the membership of networks. The state was being hollowed out from above by international interdependence, from below by marketization and networks, and sideways by agencies.

If the governance literature offers a compelling picture of the contemporary state, it nonetheless faces important challenges relating to its appeals to a hollow state and its characterization of policy networks. One challenge to the anglo-governance school might accurately be described as a debate within the governance literature. This debate is an empirical one about the extent to which the state has been hollowed out. Proponents of metagovernance argue that the state is still a dominant actor but its mode of operation has changed. Governance can ‘increase public control over society’ as states ‘rethink the mix of policy instruments’ (Pierre and Peters 2000, p. 78 and pp. 104–5). Under governance, ‘coercive or regulatory instruments become less important’ while ‘softer instruments gain importance’ (Pierre and Peters 2000, p. 111; see also Davies 2002; Jessop 2003). The state has not been hollowed out. To the contrary, it has reasserted its capacity to govern by regulating the mix of governing structures, including markets and networks, and by using indirect instruments of control. Metagovernance, then, refers to the role of the state in governance. Metagovernance suggests that the state now secures coordination through negotiation, diplomacy, and more informal modes of steering. The state increasingly steers and regulates sets of organizations, governments and networks. These other organizations undertake much of the work of governing: they implement policies, provide public services, and at times even regulate themselves. The state governs the organizations that govern civil society – the governance of governance.

Another challenge to the anglo-governance school is more philosophical than empirical. It dates back to the criticisms of the policy network literature made by rational choice theorists. Rational choice theorists argued the concept of a policy network was purely metaphorical (Dowding 1995). They asked: What does a policy networks refer to other than the actions of individuals? How do policy networks explain anything? These questions are about social ontology and social explanation. The members of the anglo-governance school, irrespective of whether they place more emphasis on the hollow state or metagovernance, typically respond to these philosophical questions by appealing to institutionalism and mid-level theory as alternatives to rational choice and micro-level theory (Rhodes 1997; Marsh and Smith 2000; Stoker 2000). Unfortunately, they do not spend much time spelling out the philosophical content of their mid-level commitments. Sometimes they just wave

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the flag of ‘critical realism’ – as if the phrase itself could magically answer the awkward philosophical questions. At other times they just evoke institutionalism as a long-standing and common approach – as if longevity and popularity could substitute for philosophical argument. Generally, they appear to want to wish away the philosophical questions posed by rational choice theory in order to return to familiar empirical topics. Nonetheless, the implicit commitments of their mid-level theories are fairly clear. Mid-level theories involve a commitment to institutions or structures as existing apart from actors and their activity, and as exercising a causal influence on actors and their activity. Mid-level ontologies typically reify norms and conventions or ideal types and structures. Mid-level explanations typically appeal to formal systems and functions or ahistorical logics and mechanisms.

MEANING HOLISM

Rod and I introduced an interpretive approach as an alternative to both rational choice theory and the modernist empiricism that lurks in so many mid-level theories. Yet, some of our critics complain that we have not properly addressed mid-level theories such as institutionalism and critical realism (Hay 2004; McAnulla 2006, 2007; Marsh 2008; Smith 2008). Let me now try to do so in four clear stages.

1. Meaning holism undermines naïve empiricism; it leads instead to an anthropological epistemology based on comparing rival accounts.
2. Meaning holism undermines reified ontologies; it leads instead to constructivism.
3. Meaning holism undermines formal explanations; it leads instead to historicism.
4. Meaning holism thus provides a defence of public administration as storytelling.

Having made these philosophical arguments, I will then consider their implications for the study of governance, including debates about the hollow state.

Epistemology

Social scientists are generally empiricists. Empiricism can be defined as the belief that knowledge comes from experience. While empiricism has an obvious appeal, it often lapses into scepticism. Sceptics ask: how can we assume that patterns found in past experiences will persist in the future? They pose the problem of induction. What justification is there for assuming that a generalization based on previous observations will hold for other cases? The problem of induction is widely viewed as insurmountable. It famously led Karl Popper to shift attention from confirmation to refutation (Popper 1959). Popper argued that evidence never confirms theories. It is worth belabouring what his argument implies, since a surprising number of social scientists apparently believe he lends support to their uses of induction. In Popper’s view, it is impossible to confirm a theory to even the slightest degree irrespective of the amount of observations gathered in accord with it and irrespective of the number of observations it predicts successfully. Popper’s concern was to demarcate science from pseudo-science: what distinguished science was its use of propositions that could be falsified; a proposition is scientific if and only if there is an observation (or perhaps set of observations) that would show it to be false.

Epistemology and philosophy of science have moved far even from the views of Popper. The most important move has been that towards holism following the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962), W. V. O. Quine (1961), and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1972) (see also Fodor and LePore 1992). Holism asserts that the meaning of a proposition depends on the paradigm,
web of beliefs, or language game in which it is located. What would have to be the case for a proposition to be true (or false) depends on the other propositions we hold true. Meaning holism undermines earlier ideas not only of confirmation but also of refutation. It implies that no observations can verify or falsify a proposition. People can logically reject or retain any proposition in the face of any evidence provided they make appropriate changes to other propositions they hold true. No proposition ever confronts the world in splendid isolation. Evidence only ever confronts overarching webs of belief, and even then the evidence is saturated by theories that are part of the relevant webs of belief.

Meaning holism renders implausible the naïve empiricism implicit in many mid-level theories. Yet, to reject naïve empiricism is not necessarily to propose out-and-out relativism. Contemporary philosophers have offered alternative accounts of justified knowledge based on comparative approaches to theory choice. Recognition that theories can be tested only as webs of belief inspired attempts to think about domains in which, and criteria by which, to choose among rival webs of belief. The trick is to find valid philosophical ways of generating a domain and criteria of comparison. One common idea is to locate the domain of comparison in the ability of a tradition to narrate itself and its rivals. My own view is that we also might try to generate criteria of comparison as something akin to deductions from holism itself.

Why should social scientists worry about a shift from naïve inductive empiricism to comparative approaches to theory choice? Let me mention just one obvious reason. Social scientists are wrong if they think methods – models, regression analyses – can ever justify causal claims or even the data they generate. Methods just create data, the validity of which is still open to debate. The validity of both data and causal claims depends on comparisons between rival bundles of facts, theories, and assumptions. Moreover, these comparisons often depend less on methodological rigour than on philosophical coherence, theoretical imagination, fruitfulness, and synergies with other ways of thinking.

Ontology
Now that I have discussed the rise of meaning holism, I can turn to ontology and explanation. The point is that ‘meaning holism’ inspires constructivist and historicist alternatives to the assumptions that are implicit in mid-level theorizing. Holism implies that the world, as we recognize it, consists of things that we can observe and discuss only because we have the web of beliefs we do. The implication may appear to be that holism entails a constructivist ontology according to which we make the world through our concepts. However, although holism leads to a constructivist view of the objects in ‘our world’, there are philosophical debates about the relationship of ‘our world’ to ‘the world’. Some philosophers are reluctant to evoke a real world that is apart from our world and so by definition something we cannot access. Others are equally reluctant to give up their realist intuitions. Fortunately I need not resolve the philosophical debate about ‘the world’ to show the profoundly constructed nature of social objects. All that matters is that we make the social world by acting on conscious and unconscious beliefs that gain content only as part of wider webs of belief. Holism implies a linguistic constructivism according to which we not only make the social world by our actions; we also make the beliefs on which we act. Our beliefs, concepts, actions, and practices are products of particular traditions or discourses. Social concepts (and social objects), such as ‘bureaucracy’ or ‘democracy’, do not have intrinsic properties and objective boundaries. They are artificial inventions of particular languages and societies. Their content varies with the wider webs of belief in which they are situated.
Mid-level theories sometimes treat social concepts as if they referred to natural kinds. In contrast, linguistic constructivism implies that social concepts are pragmatic. This constructivist ontology undermines attempts to treat social objects as natural kinds and to ascribe to social objects an essence that determines their other properties or the effects they have. Linguistic constructivism implies, in other words, that institutions are merely the aggregate products of activity. Social life consists of meaningful activity. When we use aggregate concepts to refer to a set of actions, the decision about which actions to include under the concept is a pragmatic one made in accord with our purposes.

Constructivism does not preclude the existence of institutions or structures. It just requires social scientists to conceive of institutions and structures as practices. 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. ‘Practice’ is a pragmatic concept in that there is no natural boundary or essence to the set of actions, and in that the practice itself does not possess intrinsic causal properties. In contrast, ‘institution’ and ‘structure’ are typically used to evoke an entity with an essence and causal properties. The institution or structure is meant to explain why people act as they do or why their actions have the consequences they do. Obviously people can act on their beliefs about the nature of a practice; but these beliefs are not necessarily correct, and it is their beliefs not the practice that causes their actions. Again, obviously people find that practices – or rather the actions of others – effect or even constitute the consequences of an action; but the consequences are then the results of other people’s activity not some reified institution or structure.

Explanation

Social scientists, when they attempt to explain why something happened, generally evoke institutions and structures as if they were given objects. When concepts such as class, legislature, and democracy are used purely descriptively, they usually can be unpacked as social constructions: we can treat them as simplified terms for patterns of actions based on webs of subjective meanings. In contrast, when these concepts are used to explain actions or outcomes, they often take on a more formal or fixed content: they are reified so that they can be treated as causes that either operate independently of the actors’ beliefs or stand in for these beliefs. Social scientists sometimes aim just to describe the world, but they more often aspire to provide explanations, and it is this aspiration that encourages them blithely to reify all kinds of concepts.

Meaning holism sustains a constructivist ontology that rejects reifications. In this view, social science explores actions in relation to the intentionality of the actors. Social life is intentional in a way purely physical events are not. Actions embody the reasoning, beliefs, and desires, whether conscious or not, of the actors. More importantly, meaning holism implies that social explanation requires us not only to relate actions to beliefs, but then to make sense of these beliefs by locating them in the larger webs of belief that give them their content. It thereby undermines formal and ahistorical explanations, and leads instead to contextualizing and historicist explanations.

Holism requires social scientists, firstly, to adopt contextual explanations. It implies that we can properly explain people’s beliefs (and so their actions and the practices to which their actions give rise) only if we locate them in the context of a wider web of beliefs. Holism thus points to the importance of elucidating beliefs by showing how they relate to one another, not by trying to reduce them to categories such as social class or institutional position. Social scientists should explain beliefs – and so actions and practices – by unpacking the conceptual connections in a web of beliefs, rather than by treating them as variables.
Holism requires social scientists, secondly, to adopt historicist explanations. It implies that people can grasp their experiences and so adopt new beliefs only against the background of an inherited web of beliefs. Social scientists cannot explain why people hold the webs of belief they do solely by reference to people’s experiences, interests, or social location. On the contrary, even their beliefs about their experiences, interests, and social location will depend on their prior theories. A social scientist can explain why people hold the webs of belief they do only by reference to the intellectual traditions that these people inherit. Holism suggests, in other words, that social explanation contains an inherently historicist moment. Even the concepts, actions, and practices that seem most natural to us need to be explained as products of a contingent history.

The shift towards contextual and historical forms of explanation implies that correlations, classifications, and models are not properly speaking explanations at all. They are just further types of data that we will accept in so far as we trust the methods by which they are produced. Social scientists can explain such data only by appealing to contexts and histories. Correlations and classifications become explanations only if we treat them as shorthand for accounts of how certain beliefs fit with other beliefs in a way that makes possible particular actions and practices. Similarly, although models appeal to beliefs and desires, they are mere fables that become explanations only when we treat them as accurate depictions of the beliefs and desires that people actually held in a particular case.

**Storytelling**

Meaning holism promotes a comparative epistemology, constructivist ontology, and contextualizing and historical form of explanation. Each of these three positions contributes something to a defence of public administration as storytelling. Contextual and historical explanations emphasize narrative. A constructivist ontology emphasizes ‘seeing aspects’. A comparative epistemology emphasizes enlarging sympathies.

Social explanation should relate actions to beliefs and desires, and locate beliefs in the context of wider webs of belief and historical traditions. Social scientists cannot treat beliefs as epiphenomena explicable in terms of objective facts about the world, social formations, or a purportedly universal rationality. Social science relies on explanations that refer to the reasons people had for acting and that contextualize and historicize these reasons. Social explanations thus resemble narratives. Historical and fictional narratives alike characteristically relate actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them. Narratives depend on conditional connections that are neither necessary nor arbitrary: because they are not necessary, social science differs from the natural sciences; because they are not arbitrary, social scientists can use them to explain actions and practices. These conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. They condition each other, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship. Equally, the one does not follow from the other, so they do not have a necessary relationship. Public administration is less about finding formal connections, than about telling stories about beliefs, actions, practices, and their contexts.

A constructivist ontology implies that social scientists should make sense of practices by appealing to activity and the beliefs that inform that activity. In addition, it undermines the idea that social scientists should aim at comprehensive accounts of abstract terms such as democracy or governance. Too many social scientists crave the generality that comes from reducing highly diverse practices to a monolithic social logic, law-like regularity, or purported essence. To operationalize a concept is usually to reify it. A constructivist ontology undermines such reifications and comprehensive accounts. It implies that we
best understand general concepts, such as governance, by using them in particular cases. There need be no single feature shared by all those cases to which social scientists apply general terms. In social science, general terms are usually characterized by a set of family resemblances. A grasp of these concepts consists in the ability to provide reasons why it should be applied in one case but not another, the ability to draw analogies with other cases, and so on. Public administration is less about discovering general rules, than about seeing new aspects of cases and relating them to our more abstract concepts.

In epistemology, meaning holism suggests that a theory or causal claim becomes objective not by virtue of its isolated relationship to facts but rather through a comparison with rival accounts. The comparison includes considerations about the relationship of the rival accounts to generally agreed facts. Social scientists should definitely ask whether various accounts accurately capture agreed facts and whether they cover a wide spectrum of facts. Yet, the comparison also should include other considerations, notably the extent to which each account enlarges our sympathies. Good accounts create fruitful research agendas. They may draw attention to neglected themes. They may open new questions. They may build bridges to other ways of thinking. Social scientists often put too much emphasis on being able to suggest that an isolated causal claim is supported by allegedly given facts. They may forget that the validity of the facts and so isolated causal claim depends on the openness and fruitfulness of the wider web of assumptions that support them. Meaning holism can remind us that public administration resembles fiction as described by Susan Sontag in the epigraph to this essay. Public administration needs the imagination to create a new sense of the world that enlarges our knowledge and sympathies.

RETHINKING GOVERNANCE

Rod and I have used meaning holism to rethink governance as storytelling. Our interpretive approach challenges institutionalism, critical realism, and other mid-level theories with their reified ontologies and formal explanations. It sustains a concern with narratives about practices, actions, beliefs, and traditions and dilemmas. This interpretive approach with its meaning holism has enabled Rod and I to respond to the main debates about governance. It provides an alternative to rational choice as a micro-theory, rethinks the hollow state as a stateless state, and promotes new topics, including ruling, rationalities, and resistance (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006; see especially Bevir and Rhodes 2010).

Too many governance scholars try to ignore the awkward questions about micro-theory that rational choice poses. Rod and I recognize the philosophical limitations of mid-level theories with their inexorable drift towards reification and formalism. Any viable social theory must grapple with the micro-level of action and the beliefs and desires informing it. Rod and I propose a decentred theory. Political life consists almost entirely of meaningful activity. The flow of politics is speech and other actions. To discuss and explain this meaningful activity is to ascribe desires and beliefs to the relevant actors. Actions can be understood only in terms of the conscious, unconscious, and subconscious reasoning of the actors. In contrast to rational choice theory, however, our decentred theory emphasizes the holistic and contingent nature of intentionality. Social scientists have to do the empirical work of finding out what beliefs and desires people actually hold in any given case. They have to rely less on formal models than on contextual and historical explanations. So, decentred theory concentrates not only on the construction of practices as people act on beliefs, but also on the narratives and traditions that provide the context and historical background to the relevant beliefs and actions.
An interpretive approach suggests that the state, like all political life, consists of meaning in action. The state is a cultural practice. It is a practice because it is contingent activity. And it is a cultural practice because this activity is meaningful. This theory of the state as a cultural practice stands in contrast to both the hollow state and the state as metagovernance. Compared with these accounts, Rod and I depict a stateless state. The hollow state and the state as metagovernance are reifications. They abstract the state from meaningful activity. They postulate the state as an entity that determines practices and explains outcomes. Rod and I suggest instead that the state is merely an aggregate descriptive term for a vast array of meaningful actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting, and contested practices. The state is stateless in that it has no essence, no structural quality, and no power to decide the actions of which it consists. These actions are explained instead by the beliefs actors inherit from traditions and then change for reasons of their own. In short, Rod and I offer a stateless theory in the sense that we reject the idea of the state as a pre-existing causal structure that can be understood independently of people’s beliefs and practices.

Finally, Rod and I have used our interpretive approach to try to open up new topics in the study of governance. We have moved away from: studies of networks and the state as reified entities; typologies and other comprehensive accounts; and formal explanations of governance couched in terms of modernization and functional differentiation. Instead, we have told stories about meaningful activity, especially ruling, rationalities, and resistance. Rod and I explore the activity of ruling and the elite narratives that inform it. The central elite need not be a uniform group, all the members of which hold similar beliefs, view their interests in the same way, or even share a common culture. Decentred theory suggests that social scientists should ask whether different sections of the elite draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about the world, their place in it, and their interests and values. In Britain, different members of the central elite are inspired by Tory, Whig, liberal, and socialist narratives. The dominant narrative in the central civil service used to be the Whig story of the generalist civil servant, spotting snags and muddling through. It has been challenged by a liberal managerial narrative that sees civil servants as hands-on, can-do managers trained at business schools not on the job. Today these narratives coexist, sometimes separately, sometimes bumping into one another to create dilemmas. Civil servants often continue to believe in the Westminster notions of ministerial accountability to parliament, a centralizing idea, even as they decentralize decision making in line with managerial notions.

Central elites construct their world using diverse narratives, but they also rely on expertise, including traditions of social science. An interpretive approach draws attention here to the rationalities that inform public policies across different sectors and different geographical spaces. These rationalities consist of scientific beliefs and their associated technologies, including, for example, rational choice and mid-level social science. Governments and other social actors draw on these rationalities to construct policies and prescribe practices. Britain, like much of the developed world, has witnessed the rise of neoliberal managerial rationalities using technologies of performance measurement that spread far beyond the central civil service to encompass the control of localities. The centre relies on inspectorates, audits, targets, and other technologies to try to impose its will. Alongside neoliberalism, Britain has also witnessed the rise of policies and practices inspired by institutionalism, network theory, and new approaches to planning. The New Labour governments promoted partnerships, joining-up, social cohesion, and other technologies as means of addressing wicked problems. What will the coalition government bring?
When mid-level theorists reify institutions and structures, they can give the impression that politics and policies arise exclusively from the strategies and interactions of central and local elites. Yet other actors can resist, transform, and thwart the agendas of elites. Decentralized theory draws attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policies 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.

CONCLUSION

Public administration is too often committed to naïve forms of empiricism and realism, and formal modes of explanation that lack philosophical plausibility. Rod and I have promoted an alternative, interpretive approach. We draw on meaning holism to defend constructivism and historicism. We may still be empiricists, but we suggest that the justification of knowledge depends on comparing whole webs of belief. We may still be realists, but we suggest that much of social reality is linguistically constructed. We can still defend a type of naturalism, but we suggest that the human sciences explain by telling stories.

Little has changed since I first met Rod. Contemporary philosophy is still dominated by a meaning holism that poses important questions to public administration. Yet, scholars of public administration still rarely think about such questions, let alone respond to them and modify their scholarship accordingly. While other interpretivists sometimes foreground philosophical questions, even they generally get sidetracked into methodological debates (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). The critics of an interpretive approach are, likewise, generally more than willing to displace the philosophical debate onto methodological terrain. They dismiss an interpretive approach for failing to specify appropriate variables and isolate causal factors (Hay 2003; Smith 2008). Clearly, however, the nature and relevance of methodological rigour cannot be assumed without bothering to think about the relevant philosophical issues.

To be harsh, public administration is in danger of becoming the realm of dull technicians. The technicians may be able to apply the techniques that they learn from statisticians and economists, but perhaps they fail to appreciate the philosophical issues entailed in decisions about when they should use these techniques, the degree of rigour they should want from them, and how they should explain the data they generate. The technicians may be capable of running a regression analysis or producing a formal model, but perhaps they forget that their numbers refer to people and their activity, and that their correlations and models are just more data in need of a story. A constructivist ontology brings the people back into public administration. Storytelling may bring the fun back into it.

When Rod published his first article in Public Administration back in 1973, it was about the great Victorian storyteller – Anthony Trollope (Rhodes 1973). Rod has trod a long, hard road to the top of academia. Like Trollope, he has combined drive, talent, and continuous hard work to rise himself up. Like Trollope, his output is prodigious. Today I imagine him at his home in a peaceful Hobart suburb beneath Mount Wellington and overlooking the Derwent River, surrounded by eucalyptus trees and with the Kookaburras calling. In the day, he sits at his desk writing more stories for us to enjoy. In the evening, with Jenny, he partakes of a full-bodied Australian red. I hope he has fun. Knowing him, he does.
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