PART I

Introduction

This page intentionally left blank

1

INTERPRETIVE POLITICAL SCIENCE

Mapping the field

Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes

Introduction

Interpretive political science focuses on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so.[1] Of course, all sorts of political scientists show an interest in meanings. Behaviouralists, institutionalists, and rational choice theorists sometimes study the role of ideas in politics. Interpretive political science differs from these alternatives in its theoretical agenda.

So, this Handbook is not only about the role of ideas in politics; it is also about interpretive theory and its implications for the study of politics. Interpretive theory claims that meanings are constitutive of actions. Political scientists can discuss actions and institutions properly only by evoking the intentionality of the actors. People act on their beliefs, so a social scientist can explain people's actions only by appealing to their beliefs. Any other supposed cause can influence the way people act only indirectly through their beliefs and desires. Thus, to grasp the reasons for which someone acted is not just to understand their action but also to give a proper explanation of their action. Interpretive theorists do not assume that reasons for action are always conscious and rational. On the contrary, they sometimes talk of meanings, discourses, and languages, rather than beliefs and reasons, precisely to suggest that people are not always aware of the reasons for their action, let alone in control of them. Nonetheless, almost all interpretive political scientists believe that political life consists of actions laden with meanings.

Political science had its origins in history, law, and philosophy, in all of which interpretation played a prominent role. Historians focused on particular events as they unfolded chronologically. They told narratives that explained events by appealing to the beliefs and motives of the actors in their narratives (see Chapter 5). Lawyers looked at the formal nature of institutions. They sought to unearth the intentions of lawmakers to decide how to apply the law (see Chapter 23). Philosophers explored the normative side of politics, seeking to discover the ideals by which others had lived as a guide to how we should do so (see Chapter 3). During the twentieth century, however, modernists and positivists increasingly tried to model political science on their view of the natural sciences. They were concerned to uncover the laws and regularities that governed social life irrespective of the beliefs of individuals and the meanings found in a society. Today, the most loudly proclaimed approaches to political science – behaviouralism, much institutionalism and rational choice theory – ape such scientism. Interpretive political science provides a clear alternative (see Chapter 2).

This general introduction contains five sections. The first section contrasts interpretive theory and positivism to locate the interpretive approach in the broader discipline of political science. The second section introduces the main forms of interpretive theory and describes some of the theoretical concepts associated with interpretive political science. The third section looks at the methods that many interpretive political scientists use. The fourth section considers the insights interpretive political science provides on empirical topics, using the example of the state. The fifth section looks at the implications of interpretive political science for public policy and other professional practices.

Interpretation and positivism

Epistemology poses the question: how do we know what we know about politics? Interpretive theories constitute one set of answers to that question. Behind the different types of interpretive theory, there lies the shared assumption that we cannot understand political phenomena unless we grasp the relevant meanings. Different interpretive theories conceive of meaning in different ways, including, for example, as a product of intentionality or as a system of signs. Different interpretive theories also explain meanings in different ways using notions such as logical progression, the dispositions of individuals, and the structural links between concepts. However, because interpretive theorists emphasize meanings, they oppose scientism and positivism.

Beyond positivism

Positivism was subjected to forceful philosophical criticism as early as the 1950s (Bernstein 1976). Today, few philosophers and perhaps few political scientists would describe themselves as positivists. However, even if political scientists repudiate positivism, they often continue to study politics in ways that make sense only if they make positivist assumptions. Positivist assumptions bedevil behaviouralism, institutionalism, and rational choice. No doubt institutionalists, behaviouralists, and rational choice theorists sometimes avoid the objectifying tendency of positivism. Nonetheless, the more exponents of these approaches to political science disentangle themselves from positivist assumptions, the further they depart from the principles that inform their approaches.

Positivism often refers to a vision of a unified science based on pure and atomized facts. For our purposes, however, positivism refers to two theses that draw support from this vision of a unified science.

- The first positivist thesis is that we can explain actions by allegedly objective social facts about people. Meanings are largely irrelevant to political science. Beliefs are, at most, intervening variables. Actions can be correlated with, and explained by, social categories such as class, economic interest or institutional position.
- The second positivist thesis is that the relation between antecedent and consequent in political explanation is a necessary causal one – that is, it is law as in the natural sciences. Political science seeks psychological or social laws, rather than historical narratives or understanding webs of meaning.

These two theses still dominate much political science. Interpretive theory rejects them. Crucially, once we accept there are no pure experiences, we no longer can adhere to the two positivist theses that inform so much political science.

The first positivist thesis is that we can explain behaviour by allegedly objective social facts. Here, political scientists typically try to avoid direct appeals to beliefs by reducing them to intervening variables. For example, political scientists explain why people vote for the Labour Party not by referring to their beliefs, but by saying they are working class. Political scientists then deal with the anomaly of working-class people who vote Conservative not by examining beliefs but by reference to, for example, their religious affiliation, gender or housing occupancy. No doubt few political scientists want to claim that social class and the like generate actions without passing through consciousness. They want to imply only that statistical correlations between social class and a particular action allow us to bypass beliefs. They suggest that belonging to a particular social class gives one a set of beliefs and desires that cause people to act in a given way. For example, the working class believe in redistributive policies so they support the Labour Party.

The impossibility of pure experience undermines this first positivist thesis. It implies that we cannot reduce beliefs to intervening variables. When we say that someone X in a position Y has given interests Z, we use our particular theories to derive their interests from their position. Someone with a different set of theories may believe that someone in that position has different interests. For example, when we say that a permanent secretary managing a government department has an interest in preserving the staffing and spending levels of that department, we have used a particular theory that deduces his interests from his position. People with different theories might believe that this top civil servant has different interests; that is, she is a political and policy adviser not a manager, and so has different interests – for example, protecting the minister and firefighting policy disasters.

The important point is that how people see their position and interests depends on their theories, not our theories. X may possess theories that lead her to see her position as A, not Y, and her interests as B, not Z. For example, some working-class voters consider themselves to be middle class with an interest in preventing further redistributive measures. Others consider themselves to be working class but believe that redistributive measures are contrary to the true interests of the workers. Likewise, political scientists cannot reduce people's beliefs about their social class and interests to something such as their religious affiliation, gender or housing occupancy because such ideas are not simply given to people. Rather, people construct their notions of social class using particular theories.

The second positivist thesis is that the concept of laws or necessary causation found in the natural sciences fits political science. Sometimes, this positivist thesis represents an attempt to claim the prestige of the natural sciences for a favoured approach. Talk of explaining actions by causal laws can sound impressively rigorous compared with avowedly interpretive approaches. At other times, this second positivist thesis springs from lax thinking. Political scientists recognize correctly that there is a universal feature of explanation; that is, to explain something is to relate it to other things. Then, they assume, wrongly, that the relationship between *explanans* and *explanandum* is also universal. And the prestige of natural science ensures they, again wrongly, identify this universal relationship with the scientific concept of causation. The main attractions of the second positivist thesis thus derive from the prestige of the natural sciences. But we should not take the success of natural science to preclude other forms of explanation.

The scientific concept of causation is inappropriate for political science because we cannot reduce beliefs to intervening variables. We can explain actions and practices properly only if we appeal to the reasons that inform them. When we explain actions as products of reasons, we imply that the actors could have reasoned and acted differently. Because actions and practices depend on the reasoned choices of people, they are the products of decisions, not the

determined outcomes of laws or given processes. After all, choices would not be choices if causal laws fixed their content. Political science has to recognize the inherent contingency of the objects it studies.

Positivism has been widely criticized for its faith in pure experience. Political scientists recognize that we cannot approach objects from a theory-neutral position. They seem far less aware that the impossibility of pure experience also undermines the two positivist theses just discussed. First, because people do not have pure experiences, they always construct their identities, interests, and beliefs in part through their particular theories. Thus, political scientists cannot explain behaviour by reference to given interests or objective social facts. Second, because social facts do not fix people's identities, interests, and beliefs, we have to explain actions by referring to the intentionality of the actors. Thus, political scientists cannot appeal to causal laws (for a more detailed discussion see Chapter 2).

Institutionalism, behaviouralism, and rational choice

Interpretive theory stands in contrast to institutionalism, behaviouralism, and rational choice, all of which fall foul of the preceding critique of positivism. That said, these approaches to political science are neither monolithic nor explicitly committed to positivism. Rather, they are entangled with our two positivist theses in ways that raise several problems for them. Then, when their exponents grapple with these problems, they introduce interpretive themes into their approach.

Institutionalism

Institutional approaches to political science focus on constitutions, legal systems, the formal organizations of government, and the comparison of these objects across space and time. The new institutionalism relaxes the concept of an institution to include less formal and more dynamic organizations based on norms as well as, or even instead of, laws. Institutionalism could be a purely descriptive approach, but if it were, it would offer little more than the trite observation that there are continuities in politics. Institutionalism becomes interesting only if it makes the explanatory claim that institutions 'cause' actions. Institutionalism implies that laws or norms have explanatory power because they constitute or structure practices. March and Olsen (1984: 738) argue that institutions are 'collections of standard operating procedures and structures that define and defend interest' and even constitute 'political actors in their own right'. Hall (1986: 20) defines institutions as 'formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure relationships between individuals in various units of the polity and the economy'.

Unfortunately, institutionalists remain ambiguous on how we should conceive of institutions. On the one hand, institutions often appear to have an unacceptably reified form. They are defined as fixed rules or procedures that limit, and perhaps even determine, the actions of individuals. Political scientists are thus able to ignore the contingency, inner conflicts, and construction of institutions. On the other hand, however, institutions sometimes are opened to include beliefs in a way that implies they cannot constitute the beliefs and so actions of individuals. If we open institutions in this way, we cannot treat norms and rules as if they were given. Instead, we have to ask how people create, recreate, and change their beliefs and actions in ways that produce and modify institutions (see for example Chapter 20).

Institutionalists like to take institutions for granted. They like to treat them as if the people in them are bound to follow the relevant norms. Norms, not contingent agency, produce path

dependency. However, to reify institutions in this way is to rely on positivist theses. Institutionalism, so conceived, assumes that allegedly objective rules prescribe or cause behaviour. This assumption ignores the obvious point that people can wilfully choose to disobey a rule. More importantly, it ignores the point that political scientists cannot read off people's beliefs and desires from social facts about them. Further, we cannot resolve this problem by examining the intentions that are implicit in the rules or norms because we have no reason to assume the intentions, beliefs, and desires of those in an institution in any way resemble, let alone are identical to, those of the founders of the institution. Political scientists have to disaggregate institutions, exploring the contingent beliefs that lead people to maintain and modify them.

Faced with such considerations, institutionalists may open the concept of an institution to incorporate meanings. They may conceive of an institution as a product of actions informed by the varied and contingent beliefs and desires of the relevant people. Interpretivists will welcome such a disaggregation of institutionalism. Even as they do so, however, they may wonder whether we should still think of the approach as distinctively institutionalist in any significant sense. All the explanatory work would be done not by given norms but by the diverse ways people understood and applied them. Appeals to institutions would be misleading shorthand for accounts of the beliefs and desires of the people who acted to maintain and modify the institutions in the way they did.

Behaviouralism

Behaviouralists may accept a constructive role for theory, deny the possibility of conclusively establishing a particular causal relationship and accept some form of epistemological relativism. However, they continue to insist that explanations are acceptable only if they are falsifiable and that we should isolate variables to test explanations against empirical observations (Saunders 1995: 58–75). This belief in falsification then entangles them with our two positivist theses. First, behaviouralists focus on behaviour rather than meanings because doing so provides them with brute facts by which to test their theories. They study beliefs and meanings through alleged behavioural indicators since these indicators are deemed suitable empirical facts. Second, behaviouralists usually test their theories against large data sets, often using sophisticated statistical techniques. They hope to discover quasi-scientific, law-like relations, typically expressed as statistical regularities (on which see Chapter 11).

Our critique of positivism implies that such correlations cannot provide a straightforward explanation. Suppose that we discover a strong correlation between being working class and voting Labour. Behaviouralists may argue that this correlation allows us to explain why people vote Labour by saying they are working class. But our critique of positivism implies that explanations of actions must appeal to beliefs and desires. In response, behaviouralists may treat beliefs as intervening variables. They may unpack their explanation as saying working-class people vote Labour in the expectation that the Party will promote redistributive measures that will make them better off. But we have found that political scientists cannot attribute beliefs and desires to people solely because of allegedly objective social facts about them. Working-class voters may consider themselves well off and even to stand to benefit from a Conservative government. Yet they still may vote Labour because, for example, they believe it will promote social justice and they desire to live in a fair society. The important points here are that if behaviouralists want their correlations to do explanatory work, they have to unpack the beliefs and desires. They cannot ascribe beliefs to people based on allegedly objective social facts. We can unpack correlations into beliefs and desires only through an act of interpretation.

7

Behaviouralists sometimes try to avoid these problems by explicitly appealing to beliefs and desires. They conceive of beliefs and desires as objective attitudes that they can discover using techniques such as questionnaires. Political culture is treated as a given fact composed of attitudes that can be measured.

The behaviouralist approach to political culture does not allow sufficiently for either the holistic character of beliefs or the constitutive relation of beliefs to actions. For a start, because people hold beliefs for reasons of their own, we can make sense of any one of their beliefs only by locating it in their wider web of beliefs. Suppose, for example, that behaviouralists establish a correlation between a positive attitude to social justice and voting Labour. They still cannot properly explain people's voting Labour by reference to this attitude. Someone who has a positive attitude to social justice may vote Conservative if they believe still more strongly in conservative values, or if they believe Labour will not implement its manifesto. To grasp why someone with a positive attitude to social justice votes Labour, we have to appeal to the other relevant beliefs and desires that relate that attitude to that vote. To explain an action, we cannot merely correlate it with a single isolated attitude; we have to interpret it as part of a whole web of beliefs and desires.

The holistic quality of beliefs and desires implies that intersubjective beliefs are often constitutive of practices. Consider the practice of voting (Taylor 1985, Vol. 2: 15–57). Behaviouralists might describe the act of voting as one in which people indicate a preference from competing policies or candidates by raising a hand or putting a piece of paper in a box. But appeals to behaviour alone cannot tell us why raising one's hand should be considered voting. Why would there be uproar if someone forced someone else to raise their hand against their will? Why can only certain people be regarded as eligible to vote? We can explain these sorts of things only if we appeal to the intersubjective beliefs that underpin the practice of voting. We need to know, for example, that voting is associated with making a free choice, so with a particular concept of the self. We need to know what counts as an infringement of free choice. Who is regarded as capable to make such a choice? Practices and beliefs are constitutive of one another. Practices could not exist if people did not have appropriate beliefs. Beliefs would not make sense without the practices to which they refer.

The behaviouralist concept of an attitude presupposes, first, that beliefs can be related individually to actions and, second, that beliefs can be differentiated from actions. In contrast, interpretive theory allows that beliefs form holistic webs and that beliefs are constitutive of actions and practices.

Rational choice

Rational choice theory presupposes that actors choose an action because they believe it to be the most efficient way of realizing a given end. Rational choice theorists build models of political life based on the assumption that actions are the product of strategic, utility-maximizing individuals. Sometimes rational choice theory reduces the motives of actors to self-interest (Downs 1957: 27–8). But most rational choice theorists now recognize that we have no valid grounds for so privileging self-interest. Even when actions happen to have beneficial consequences for the actors, we cannot conclude the actors did what they did to bring about those consequences. Thus, rational choice theorists have expanded their notion of a preference, requiring only that an actor's preferences are logically consistent. Yet reducing all motives to an expanded concept of preference is either true but vacuous or false. If we extend our concept of preference to cover any motive for action, we reduce motives to preferences. As a result, we remove all substantive content from our concept of a preference. Further, if we equate people's

preferences with the choices revealed by their actions, then explanations of the choices by their preferences are viciously tautological. The danger of sliding into empty tautologies surely requires rational choice theorists to fill out their account of a preference. When they do so, however, they seem destined to return to self-interest with its well-known problems. These problems include the difficulty of allowing for altruism and the evidence from psychological studies showing people do not structure problems or process information in the ways required by expected utility theory.

The attempts of rational choice theorists to exclude considerations of meaning or belief have run into dead ends. Concepts such as preference and expected utility cannot be equated with the self-interest of the actor if only because the way in which an agent sees her self-interest depends upon her wider web of beliefs. But if rational choice theorists expand the notion of preference to detach it from self-interest, they offer mere tautologies.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that rational choice theorists have begun to appeal explicitly to notions such as social norms, cultural values, ideology, and group identification (Chong 1996). Rational choice theorists usually attempt to incorporate beliefs by appealing to norms as a source of preferences. Sometimes the norms they invoke are effectively reducible to self-interest. They assign to norms a causal effect not because of their intrinsic motivating power, but because of the costs and benefits of breaking or complying with the norms. These costs can be social (for example, ostracism) and psychological (for example, guilt). At other times, rational choice theorists invoke norms that are not reducible to self-interest but merely compatible with it. Norms appear here alongside self-interest as a source of allegedly given preferences. Norms are added to an actor's fixed preferences so they enter rational choice models in the same way as expected utilities. Norms are treated as atomistic entities so they can play a role analogous to that of additional variables in behavioural studies. When rational choice theorists introduce beliefs, they ignore their holistic and constitutive nature for actions and practices.

Objective knowledge

Perhaps the most prevalent misconception about an interpretive approach is that it is inherently relativist. Because this claim remains so prevalent, we devote some space to countering it and outlining our preferred epistemology (see Bevir 1999; and also Lakatos 1978; Wittgenstein 1974).

All political scientists confront epistemological issues about how to evaluate narratives, models, correlations, and typologies. Many positivist political scientists imply that we can justify claims to truth using logics of vindication or refutation (Carnap 1937; Popper 1959; Ricci 1984). Logics of vindication would tell us how to decide whether a statement is true. Logics of refutation would tell us how to decide whether a statement is false. Advocates of verification argue that we can decode all reasonable theories into a series of observational statements, and we can determine if these are true because they refer to pure perceptions. They conclude that a theory is true if it consists of observational statements that are true. Or, it is more or less probably true according to the nature and number of observational statements in accord with it.

Advocates of falsification deny that positive observations can prove a theory to be true no matter how many we obtain. They defend an ideal of refutation, arguing the objective status of theories derives from our ability to make observations that show other statements to be false. We do not need to worry about the differences between verification and falsification. Both logics ground objectivity or truth in confrontations with basic facts. All logics of vindication and

refutation believe that we can confront accounts of the world with basic facts in a test to prove them to be either true or false. Their proponents typically defend the idea of basic facts by arguing that we have pure experiences of the external world. They disagree about whether the pure experiences that decide issues of truth are the particular experiences of individuals or the intersubjective experiences of a community. But they almost always defend some version of pure experience as the grounds of their logics of vindication or refutation.

An interpretive approach can move beyond vindication and refutation by drawing on its holistic analysis of meaning. Philosophical holism implies, in contrast to positivist approaches, that we do not have pure experiences. The nature of a perception depends on the prior web of beliefs of the perceiver. A sensation becomes the object of a perception or an experience only when intelligence identifies it as a particular sensation distinct from, yet related to, other sensations. People become aware of a sensation only if they attend to it, and when they attend to it, they locate it in the web of their current beliefs. Perceptions always incorporate prior categories. Even everyday experiences incorporate a wide range of realist assumptions, includ-ing: objects exist independently of our seeing them, objects persist over time, other people can see them, and they sometimes act causally on one another. To insist on the role of prior categories in perception is not to argue that categories determine experiences. No doubt objects can force sensations on people. It is to argue only that categories influence how people experience sensations. People use prior categories to make sense of the sensations objects force on them. Experiences cannot be pure since they always embody prior categories. Also, because experience entails prior categories, evaluation cannot rely on logics of vindication or refutation. If an experience disproved a favourite statement, one could rescue the statement by insisting that our understanding of that experience was based on a false theory.

Holism leads many proponents of an interpretive approach to reject the idea of truth as certainty. Because meanings are holistic, experiences always embody prior theories. So, we cannot determine whether an individual statement is true or false because any such conclusion has to take for granted various theoretical assumptions embodied in our experiences. An interpretive approach typically adopts a holism that implies all knowledge always might be mistaken. However, to reject the idea of certainty is not necessarily to adopt a relativist position. Proponents of an interpretive approach repudiate relativism. They define objectivity as evalua-tion by comparing rival stories using reasonable criteria. Sometimes there might be no way of deciding between two or more interpretations, but this will not always be the case. Even when it is the case, we still will be able to decide between these two or more interpretations and many inferior ones.

Objectivity arises from using agreed facts to criticize and compare rival interpretations. A fact is a piece of evidence that nearly everyone in the given community would accept as true. This definition of a fact follows from recognition of the role of theory in observation. Because theory is integral to observation, we cannot describe a fact as a statement of how things are. Observation and description entail categorization. For example, when an opposition MP speaks to the prime minister in the chamber of the House of Commons, we categorize the event as question time. Such categorization also entails decisions about what other instances fall into that category. So, when any MP speaks to any minister in the chamber, this event resembles question time. Facts always entail prior categories, so they are not certain truths.

Narratives explain shared facts by postulating significant relationships, connections, or similarities between them. A fact gains a particular character because of its relationship to other facts. Narratives reveal the particular character of facts by uncovering their relationships to one another. Indeed, when narratives reveal the particular character of a fact, they typically help to define the content of that fact. In this sense, narratives not only reveal the character of facts but

they also create their character, and guide our decisions about what counts as a fact. Because there are no pure observations, political scientists partly construct the character of a fact through the theories they incorporate in their observations. Thus, we cannot say simply that such and such a narrative either does or does not fit the facts. Instead, we must compare bundles of narratives by assessing their success in relating facts to one another, highlighting similarities and differences, and exploring continuities and disjunctions.

Objectivity arises from using agreed facts to compare and criticize rival narratives. Criticism plays a pivotal role in such an evaluation. Critics of a narrative can point to facts that its proponents have not considered. They can highlight what they take to be facts that contradict that narrative. In short, a narrative must meet tests set by its critics. So, proponents of an interpretive approach defend objective knowledge as comparison between rival stories.

This notion of objectivity raises the question of what criteria decide between rival stories. We propose criteria or rules of thumb that treat objective behaviour as intellectual honesty in responding to criticism. The first rule is that objective behaviour requires taking criticism seriously. If people do not take criticism seriously, we will consider them biased. Nonetheless, they could respond to a fact or argument against their narrative by denying the fact or argument, or by deploying a speculative theory to reconcile the fact or argument with their view. Thus, the second rule is that objective behaviour presupposes a preference for established standards of evidence and reason. It also assumes that challenges to settled standards should rest on impersonal and consistent criteria of evidence and reason. This rule limits the occasions on which people can reject a fact or argument that contradicts their narrative. And, the third rule is that objective behaviour implies a preference for positive, speculative responses that produce exciting new stories, not ones that merely block off criticism of existing stories. This rule limits the occasions on which people can have recourse to speculative theories to reconcile a narrative with seemingly contrary evidence. We should try to adjust our narratives in ways that extend their range and vigour.

This account of intellectual honesty results in criteria for comparing stories. Because we should respect set standards of evidence and reason, we will prefer narratives that are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent. Our standards of evidence require us to try to support our narratives with clearly identified facts. An accurate narrative fits the facts supporting it closely. A comprehensive narrative fits many facts with few outstanding exceptions. Similarly, our standards of reasoning require us to endeavour to make our narratives clear and coherent. A consistent web of narratives holds together without going against principles of logic. Because we should favour positive speculative responses, we will prefer narratives that are progressive, fruitful, and open. A progressive narrative is one characterized by positive speculative responses that introduce new ideas not previously connected with that interpretation. A fruitful narrative is one in which the new ideas contained in speculative responses receive support from the facts. Because fruitful progress stems largely from speculative responses to criticism, the more a narrative cuts itself off from all possible criticism, the more it becomes a dead end, unable to sustain further progress. An open narrative is one that encourages and engages criticism.

Proponents of an interpretive approach can defend accounts of objective knowledge as a comparison of rival narratives. Positivist political scientists might reject such an epistemology as relativist because it gives us no reason to assume the narratives that we select as objective will correspond to truth. They might argue that, even if we agree on the facts and we have criteria for comparing narratives, we still cannot declare any narrative to be true. After all, facts might be widely accepted without being true. We would agree that our epistemology does not allow us to assign truth, understood as certainty, to objective knowledge. In our view, however, that is not a problem. It merely restates what should be a commonplace – knowledge is provisional.

Theories

Interpretive approaches often begin from the insight that to understand actions, practices, and institutions, we need to grasp the beliefs – the intentional meanings – of the people involved. As political science developed, the study of meanings was associated with hermeneutics and ethnography. More recently, post-structuralism and other post-foundational philosophies have inspired other varieties of interpretation (and on this variety see Chapters 6, 7, and 8).

Hermeneutics

In the early part of the twentieth century, positivism helped inspire a behaviourist political science with little interest in beliefs or meanings. The main alternatives to positivism came from philosophers who inherited the idealist mantle of the late nineteenth century, and who often turned to continental traditions such as hermeneutics and phenomenology. R. G. Collingwood (1946), Michael Oakeshott (1991 [1962]), and Charles Taylor (1985 [1971]) favoured interpretive approaches to the human sciences. These kinds of philosophers inspired anthropologists, sociologists, and the occasional political scientist who wanted to understand the meanings people attach to social action in their own or other societies (see Chapter 3).

Hermeneutics emerged in biblical scholarship, but it has come to refer more broadly to the theory of understanding texts and actions. Typically, hermeneutic theorists explore the existential nature of understanding while recognizing it is embedded in tradition (Gadamer 1960; and Chapter 4). Collingwood argued that all history was 'thought', where thought was a series of answers to specific questions arising in a historically specific set of fundamental propositions. Oakeshott similarly insisted, against rationalists and positivists, that political knowledge could come only from history. Political activity should reflect the wisdom and moral claims in the relevant tradition of action. W. H. Greenleaf's (1983–87) grand narrative of British politics in the twentieth century represents a self-conscious application of Oakeshott's philosophy. Greenleaf traces the rise of collectivism, the ideological tensions that then surrounded the growth of government and the impact of such growth on the political system. He moves outwards from the intimations of a tradition to the practices and institutions it produces.

Edmund Husserl (1931), the originator of phenomenology, argued that the life world of everyday common sense is the basis of experience. Later phenomenologists then suggested that our common-sense knowledge is always incomplete and variable. Such knowledge derives from social processes, and it is always provisional. Ethnography thus focuses on different forms of common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning occurring in diverse social contexts. Ethnography has appealed mainly to sociologists and cultural anthropologists, most famously Clifford Geertz.

For Geertz (1993 [1973]), humans are suspended in the webs of significance they spin. Anthropologists practise ethnography to discover the relevant weaves of meaning. Ethnography involves selecting informants, transcribing texts, and keeping field notes. It aims at 'thick descriptions' that are constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. The everyday phrase is 'seeing things from the other's point of view'. The ethnographer provides an interpretation of what others are up to and so of these others' interpretations of the world. Ethnographic studies are often microscopic interpretations of the flow of social discourse. The task is to set down the meanings that particular actions have for social actors and then say what these thick descriptions tells us about the society in which they are found (see Chapter 12).

Post-structuralism

Hermeneutics and ethnography persisted even during the heyday of positivism. More recently, post-structuralism and post-foundationalism have inspired new interpretive approaches. The label 'post-structuralist' refers to a broad range of theorists, including most famously Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. The clear differences among these theorists make the label of limited use. So, we will try to give the reader a feel for the interpretive theories inspired by post-structuralism by looking more closely at the work of Foucault (see Chapters 9 and 10).

Like most post-structuralists, Foucault opposes grandiose claims that ground our knowledge and ethics on objective and essential foundations. He rejects appeals to either pure experiences of the world or a pure human subjectivity, and other related positions on the transparent nature of language and the progressive nature of human history. Foucault's work displays a continuing hostility to two modern concepts, the subject and reason.

Foucault's hostility to the modern project leads him to adopt an interpretive approach to social life. In opposing pure experiences, he suggests that we have experiences only in a prior discourse. Objects and actions become 'real' only when they have a place in a language. So, to understand an object or action, political scientists have to interpret it in the wider discourse of which it is a part. Human life is understandable only in a framework of meaning and this framework of meaning cannot be reduced to an objective process or structure. Discourse cannot be dismissed as a passive reflection of social or economic forces such as social class or the means of production. Equally, Foucault's hostility to modern concepts of the subject often prevents his assigning a significant role to human agency in constructing discourses. He implies that discourses develop randomly as products of time and chance.

In his archaeologies, Foucault sometimes argued an episteme structured the particular meanings or objects of a given era (Foucault 1970). Even here, however, meanings were not fixed: the episteme only limited the particular meanings found in it. In his later genealogies, Foucault turned from the notion of an episteme to that of discursive practice (Foucault 1972 and 1977). A discourse consists of endlessly multiplying meanings, statements, and events, none of which are stable, none of which makes up an essence. The key to understanding a social practice is not its formal legal character. For example, neither the law on marriage and sexual conduct, nor the objective educational and occupational background of the individuals involved, explain the practice. Rather, these characteristics, like the practice itself, can only be understood as part of the cluster of meanings that make them possible. For example, Foucault argues the modern state gets its character from the way in which it brings together the concepts of sovereignty, discipline, and pastorship (Foucault 1991).

The distinct nature of Foucault's interpretive approach owes much to his hostility to the subject and reason. His hostility to the subject means he stresses the ways regimes of power and epistemes construct individuals and their beliefs. Foucault rejected the idea of an autonomous subject that had its own foundation in meaningful experiences, reasoning, beliefs, and actions formed outside all social contexts. Equally, he rejected the Hegelian and Marxist vision of history as realizing the subject. For Foucault, the subject is a contingent product of particular discourses, techniques of power, and technologies of the self. Thus, he stresses discourses rather than beliefs.

Foucault's hostility to reason means he denaturalizes discourses to show how they arise out of the more or less random interactions of all sorts of micro-practices. In his genealogies, he rejects the notion of quasi-structural relationships, essential characteristics, or a logical development governing social practices. The modern state, for example, arose by adapting various techniques of discipline and pastorship which clearly are not integral to sovereignty.

Interpretive approaches all focus on meanings, but they take different views of meaning. The main debates following the rise of post-structuralism concern the nature of the subject and the limits of reason. Older varieties of interpretive theory came dangerously close to embodying analyses of the subject as autonomous and reason as pure and universal. Post-structuralists rightly criticize such analyses, prompting us to decentre traditions and practices. Yet, conversely, newer post-structuralist varieties of interpretation teeter on denying any scope to the subject or reason. Surely the future of interpretive theory lies in a course between the older and newer views.

Post-structuralists are rightly suspicious of appeals to a pure subjectivity or a pure reason. But if their debt to structuralism leads to reification and determinism, they will fall back into a discredited positivism. In particular, post-structuralism often inherits several features of structuralism, namely: a linguistic formalism, hostility to agency, and a preference for synchronic explanations. Their linguistic formalism treats language as a reified object. It reduces the content of people's contingent speech-acts to the unstable relations among signs. Post-structuralists forget or ignore people's capacity to create meanings and practices. Further, the post-structuralists' hostility to agency leads to a kind of determinism. Systems of signs appear not only to exist apart from the actors who make them but also to define what these actors can say and how they can say it. Post-structuralists criticize an earlier structuralism for exhibiting determinism. Instead, they think about change, chance, and transformation as the instabilities inherent in structures. This argument elides the important question: are these instabilities necessary qualities of a disembodied quasi-structure that defines its own development or are they products of people's contingent activity?

It is no accident that structuralist themes lead to a reification and determinism more usually associated with positivism. Structuralism arose alongside positivism in the early twentieth century in clear opposition to historicism. Both structuralism and positivism reject historical forms of explanation. Their explanations rely instead on synchronic correlations, classifications, models, institutions, systems, and structures. No doubt some political scientists appeal to institutions or quasi-structures only as a shorthand for clusters of contingent beliefs and actions. Nonetheless, the worry remains that their shorthand bewitches them. To avoid reification and determinism, political scientists need to find room for agency and historical contingency. Foucault himself came eventually to similar conclusions, rediscovering the subject and turning to genealogical inquiries (Foucault 1984 and 1988).

Ontological concepts

Interpretive theory needs concepts that avoid reification and determinism by referring to common meanings and allowing for agency. Later we will examine concepts that constitute historicist forms of explanation. Now, however, we want to look at concepts that refer primarily to the ontological nature of political life: situated agency, practice, and power. Throughout we distinguish these historicist concepts from those associated with more positivist political science, especially institutionalism.

Situated agency

A particular concept of the human agent constitutes the micro-level of many approaches to political science. Interpretive theorists, following post-structuralists, are sceptical of the idea of an autonomous individual who can form beliefs and act on pure experiences or a pure reason. All experiences and reasoning occur in webs of beliefs. However, to reject autonomy is not to reject

agency. Even if people are necessarily influenced by their contexts, they may still be agents who can adopt beliefs and perform actions for reasons of their own and in ways that transform the contexts that influence them. So, agency is possible, but it is always situated in particular contexts.

Some readers may mistake the concept of situated agency for the institutionalist claim that people behave rationally in particular settings. Interpretive theory differs from institutionalism in two respects. First, whereas institutionalists conceive of the context as reified institutions, interpretive theorists think of it as the wider web of beliefs the actor reaches against a historical background. Second, whereas many institutionalists define rationality using ideas from rational choice theory, interpretive theorists emphasize the contingency of local reasoning.

Local reasoning

Reasoning is always local in that it occurs in the context of agents' existing webs of belief. The adjective 'local' refers to the background of a particular web of beliefs. While the content of the relevant web of beliefs varies from case to case, there is no possibility of reasoning outside any background web. To insist on the local nature of reasoning is, therefore, to preclude the autonomous and universal concepts of subjectivity and reasoning found in much rational choice theory. Rational choice theory adopts a view from nowhere – that is, people adopt beliefs and decide in ways that do not depend on the prior views they hold. On the other hand, local reasoning occurs in the specific context of such prior views. Similarly, whereas rational choice theory gestures at an assumption of perfect information, local reasoning recognizes agents can use only the information they possess, and they do so even when the relevant information is false.

When we use the adjective 'local' to capture reasoning that takes place against a background of prior beliefs, we need not give it spatial content. Here local refers to a web of beliefs, not a territorial area.

Practices

Once interpretive theorists leave the micro-level of actions and beliefs for the mid-level and macro-level, they think about practices rather than institutions, structures, or systems. A practice is a set of actions, perhaps a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Actions and practices are the main grounds on which we assign beliefs to people: we assign beliefs to people to make sense of their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions since people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about that practice, and these beliefs need not be accurate.

Practices can be the consequences of actions. The effects of actions often depend on the responses of others. Nonetheless, we should remember a practice is made up solely of the contingent actions of individuals. It is these actions, in their diversity and contingency, which constitute the consequences of the action. And we explain these actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, not the practice itself.

When political scientists appeal to 'institutions', they often evoke something akin to a practice, but they assign it a greater constraining power on individuals. If they do want to attribute such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practices constrain actions. Clearly practices – or at least the actions of others – constrain the effects and so the effectiveness of actions. It is unclear, however, how

practices can constrain the actions that people might attempt to perform. If looked at hard enough, institutions decentre into beliefs and practices and, if they do not, they have not been looked at hard enough.

Power

Interpretive theorists reject as reifications those concepts of power that refer to social relations based on the allegedly given interests of classes or other social groups. They reject these concepts of power because people necessarily construct their understanding of their interests through particular and contingent discourses.

However, there are other ways of thinking about power. For a start, power can refer to the way in which contingent historical backgrounds impact on individuals, influencing their subjectivity and their actions. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving people their beliefs and actions, and so making the political world. Interpretive political science is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contestable beliefs that emerge out of contingent historical contexts.

In addition, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what people can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as elected politicians, senior civil servants, doctors, police officers, and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, interpretive political science may show how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. Local actors – bureaucrats, doctors, and police officers – can draw on their own traditions to resist policies inspired by others in the policy chain.

Explanatory concepts

Human action is historically contingent. It is characterized by change and specificity. We cannot explain social phenomena if we ignore their inherent flux and their concrete links to specific contexts. Such historicist explanations work not by referring to reified correlations, mechanism, or models, but by describing contingent patterns of meaningful actions in their specific contexts.

Historicists argue that beliefs, actions, and events are profoundly contingent because choice is open and indeterminate. They question the possibility of either a universal theory or ahistorical correlations and typologies. In addition, they argue that if we are to understand and explain actions and beliefs, we have to grasp how they fit within wider practices and webs of meaning. They emphasize contextualization in contrast to both deduction and atomization. Historicism thus promotes forms of understanding and explanation that are inductive studies of human life in its historical contexts. They do not appeal to fixed principles or to reason and progress to define the relevant contexts and link them to the present (see Chapters 5 and 14). So, historicist explanations are not only temporal in that they move through time; they are also historical in that they locate the phenomena at a specific time. These historical narratives are based on concepts such as tradition and dilemma (Bevir 1999; and Chapter 5).

Narratives

A familiar distinction has positivist social science generating causal explanations while interpretive political science leads to an understanding of beliefs and actions. This distinction wrongly implies that interpretive political scientists are trying only to understand or reconstruct objects,

not to explain them. Interpretive political scientists believe their narratives explain beliefs and actions by pointing to historical causes. Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word 'cause' to describe different explanatory relationships. They use the word 'cause' to indicate the presence of a relationship that explains the object of interest. In our view, narrative is the form of explanation appropriate to an interpretive theory of politics. Narratives work by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them and by situating these beliefs and desires in particular historical contexts.

Narratives depend on the conditional connections between beliefs, desires, and actions. These conditional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Because they are not necessary, political science differs from the natural sciences. Because they are not arbitrary, we can use them to explain actions and practices.

Although narrative explanations appear in works of fiction, we should not equate interpretive political science with fiction. Interpretive political scientists strive, to the best of their ability, to capture the way events happened in the past or are happening today. Even if they accept that no fact is simply given to them, they still cannot ignore the facts.

Tradition

A tradition is the background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs. It influences (without determining or – in a strict philosophical sense – limiting) the beliefs they later go on to adopt. The justification for this definition of tradition derives from situated agency. Traditions help explain why people hold the beliefs they do, and because beliefs are constitutive of actions, they also help explain actions. Traditions cannot fully explain actions in part because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and in part because people are agents able to innovate against the background of a tradition. While a tradition explains why an agent adopted an initial web of beliefs, it consists solely of the beliefs of other actors.

Because positivist political scientists rarely concentrate on meanings, they rarely evoke traditions. They prefer to appeal to objective social facts that apparently determine the beliefs of actors, or even make it unnecessary to appeal to beliefs at all. Similarly, when they do appeal to meanings, positivists typically reify meanings, treating them either as norms that govern behaviour or as one among the several variables that explain outcomes. The distinction between interpretive theory and positivism is especially clear, therefore, in the former's use of historicist concepts such as tradition to evoke the contingency of social life.

Dilemmas

A dilemma is any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit as a tradition. It combines with the tradition to explain (although not determine) the beliefs people go on to adopt and so the actions they go on to perform. Dilemmas and traditions cannot fully explain actions because actions are informed by desires as well as beliefs, and because people are situated agents who respond creatively to any given dilemma. Although dilemmas sometimes arise from experiences of the world, we cannot equate them with the world as it is because experiences are always theory-laden. Like meanings in general, dilemmas are always subjective or intersubjective.

Positivists sometimes adopt concepts such as dilemma to refer to the sources of change, but they then equate dilemmas or pressures with objective facts about the world rather than the subjective beliefs of policy actors. If they are to define pressures in this way, they need an analysis of how these pressures lead people to change their beliefs and actions.

Methods

We live in an era of methodological eclecticism and we have no argument with this buzzing and blooming profusion. We do have some provisos. It does not mean that interpretive and positivist approaches can now live in peace. As Bevir and Blakely (Chapter 2) argue, there may be agreement on the tools in the toolkit of political scientists but the two approaches remain at odds at the most fundamental philosophical level. Briefly, positivists treat methods as logics of discovery whereas interpretivists treat methods as the techniques of a craft. Positivists espouse atomism and causal explanations whereas interpretivists champion holism and narrative explanations.

An interpretive approach does not necessarily favour particular methods. It does not prescribe a particular toolkit for producing data but prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. The approach need not rely on textual analysis (see Chapter 11) and participant observation (see Chapter 12). Interpretivists can avail themselves of whatever methods are best suited to answering their research question. They might construct their interpretations using data generated by various techniques. They can draw on participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, mass surveys, statistical analysis, and formal models as well as reading memoirs, newspapers, and official and unofficial documents. These data should be treated as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. Political scientists should not try to bypass meanings or beliefs by reducing them to principles of rationality, fixed norms, or social categories.

The interpretive view of how we should treat data does, of course, have some implications for methods of data collection. It leads, in particular, to greater emphasis on qualitative methods than is usual among political scientists. Suppose the data associated with models, formal constitutions, or large-scale surveys lead us to assign certain beliefs to a group of people. Since such data typically abstract from individual circumstances to find patterns, they elide differences between people, lumping together individuals who act in broadly similar ways for different reasons. Therefore, an interpretive approach often favours more detailed studies of the beliefs of the relevant people using textual analysis, participant observation, and interviews. Much present-day political science prefers 'scientific' techniques and ignores, or even denigrates the other methods. In contrast, an interpretive approach does not require an exclusive use of any one method. However, it does redress the balance to the qualitative analysis more often associated with anthropology.

When critics contrast an interpretive approach with others, they want to dismiss interpretation as fuzzy, subjective, and impressionistic. They want to defend a political science that relies on hard data, experimental testing, and methodological rigour. However, surely their idols of hard data, experimental tests, and methodological rigour lose all allure once we renounce a positivist faith in pure experience? If we cannot have pure experiences, all data is soft because it presupposes prior theories that are themselves contestable. If all data is soft, we cannot evaluate particular narratives or theories using experiments. All knowledge arises, rather, from comparisons between rival theories or narratives that are based at least in part on constructed facts. Also, we can challenge the idol of methodological rigour. Often methodological rigour is held up as a way of producing secure facts that others can replicate and accept. In contrast, we have suggested methods and the facts they construct should be evaluated together as parts of larger narratives or theories. We will accept methods as 'rigorous' – or to use a more accurate term, 'appropriate' – only if we adopt philosophical theories that imply the relevant methods are suitable for the objects to which they are applied. Judgements about methodological rigour or appropriateness always depend on logically prior judgements about philosophical rigour or appropriateness.

The idol of methodological rigour typically acts to obscure prior philosophical issues or even to prejudge such issues to support positivism. An interpretive approach, in contrast, gives

primary importance to philosophical rigour. It highlights the importance of political science meeting the logical requirements of our concepts. It rejects the stress on methodological rigour as a bewitching effect of the positivist philosophy of the natural sciences.

It follows, therefore, that an interpretive approach rejects the distinction between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods. Whether using a mass survey or ethnographic interviews, the inter–pretive approach insists that data is treated as evidence of the meanings embedded in actions. There are no exclusively interpretive methods. As Stone (Chapter 11) argues, numbers have no meaning until embedded in a narrative and she provides several illustrations of how researchers interpret their quantitative data. In short, the quantitative/qualitative distinction is at best unhelpful and at worst meaningless.

Finally, as Ansell (Chapter 6) suggests, the inductive and deductive logics of inquiry so common in political science are less relevant to interpretive research. Drawing on the work of Charles Peirce (1839–1914), he suggests that the logics of abduction and retroduction are better suited to interpretive research. Abduction refers to 'the creative development of hypotheses to explain surprising observations that fall outside the realm of our prior theory' while retroduction refers to 'the process of moving from hypothesis back to observations in order to critically examine the conditions responsible for the theory in question'. This kind of puzzling will be familiar to everyone who has sought to master their fieldwork notebooks. It has a clear affinity with Karl Weick's (1995) work on sensemaking in organizations (see Chapter 20).

The simple fact is that the shared toolkit of positivism and interpretivism obscures the deep philosophical differences between the two approaches. As Rhodes (Chapter 12) argues, there is a world of difference between naturalist and interpretive ethnography. The former uses ethnography as a method for collecting data to test political science theories. The latter uses ethnography as a way of recovering beliefs and practices to write narratives of how things work around here.

Empirical disciplines

All the empirical fields discussed in Part IV focus on deconstructing the mainstream approach; they fracture the symmetry of the mainstream. The focus shifts to insider perspectives, local meanings, and local knowledge, all of which involve the recovery of beliefs and practices.

An interpretive political science requires ontological and explanatory concepts that replace positivism with historicism. These concepts shape a distinctive research agenda. Interpretive political science decentres key topics in political science. It focuses attention on elite narratives, social technologies, and popular resistance. To decentre is to highlight the diversity in (say) a policy network by unpacking the contingent beliefs and actions of its individual members. Indeed, it questions whether there is any shared idea of the network. The aim is to reframe our understanding of such ideas as gender (see Chapter 25) and race (see Chapter 26). The terms 'decentring', 'deconstructing', 'disaggregating', 'reframing', and even the everyday term 'debunking', all espouse the aim of unearthing what the existing literature is not covering and who is left out of existing accounts. They strive for 'edification' – a way of finding 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' political science (Rorty 1980: 360).

Here we illustrate our argument by decentring the idea of the state (see Bevir and Rhodes 2010; also Chapter 21). An interpretive theory of the state refuses to treat it as defined by principles such as the nation, liberty, or even sovereignty. Interpretive theorists deny that the state or particular states are natural entities with core features waiting to be discovered. In their view, the state consists of a plethora of contingent, possibly conflicting, and often transnational practices. They trace historical lines back from the practices that interest them to the often

surprising and hidden ancestors of that feature of governance. This approach to the state echoes the pluralists from early in the twentieth century. The pluralists argued that states do not have a metaphysical nature fixed by formal constitutions and institutions or by the common good of its people. They wanted to disaggregate the state into all kinds of competing pressure groups, and they wanted to explore the behaviour of political actors.

Today the idea of disaggregating the state appears primarily in the literature on governance. Much of the literature on governance arose during the 1970s and 1980s as political scientists interested in pressure groups and policy networks responded to two challenges. First, the rise of neoliberalism entailed concerted efforts to transform the public sector through the spread of markets, contracting out, and market mechanisms. Political science began to appear less relevant than economics to the study of the state. One response was to argue that these neoliberal policies had the unintended consequence of further spreading networks. This response reworked the idea of policy networks to make them integral to governance conceived as a new pattern of rule.

A second challenge to the literature on policy networks was the rise of rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists called on other political scientists to clarify their micro-theory and to establish what the concept of a policy network explained. Political scientists often responded to this challenge by redefining themselves as concerned with mid-level theory or institutions.

The literature on governance consists in no small measure of mid-level studies of the institutional legacy of neoliberal reforms of the state. Governance is associated with the changing nature of power and the state following the public sector reforms of the 1980s. The reforms are said to have precipitated a shift from a hierarchic bureaucracy toward a greater use of markets, quasi-markets, and networks, especially in the delivery of public services. The resulting complexity and fragmentation are such that the state increasingly depends on other organizations to secure its intentions and deliver its policies. Governance evokes a world in which state power is dispersed among a vast array of spatially and functionally distinct networks composed of all kinds of public, voluntary, and private organizations.

Interpretive political science echoes themes in the general literature on governance, but it also decentres governance, paying particular attention to the diverse meanings within it, and the contingent historical roots of these meanings.

The literature on governance often disaggregates the state in functionalist terms, arguing that different institutions and networks arise to fulfil distinct functions required of the political system. Narratives of contemporary governance often focus on issues such as the objective characteristics of policy networks and the oligopoly of the political market place. They stress power-dependence, the relationship of the size of networks to policy outcomes, and the strategies the centre might use to steer networks. In sharp contrast, interpretive political science decentres governance, focusing on disaggregated patterns of meaning in action. This approach encourages us to examine the ways in which patterns of politics are created, sustained, and modified as people act on various conflicting beliefs. It also encourages us to explain people's actions not by reference to structures, norms, or modernization, but by appealing to the historical traditions they inherit and the dilemmas to which they respond.

A decentred view implies that different people draw on different traditions to reach different beliefs about any pattern of governance. Often their beliefs include some about the failings of existing arrangements. When their understanding of these failings conflicts with their existing beliefs, the failures pose dilemmas for them. The dilemma then pushes them to reconsider their beliefs and so the traditions that inform those beliefs. Crucially, because people confront these dilemmas against the background of diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what

constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them. Exponents of rival positions seek to promote their particular sets of theories and policies. This contest often leads to reforms of governance – reforms that thus arise as a contingent product of a contest of meanings in action. The reformed pattern of governance then displays new failings, posing new dilemmas, and generating competing proposals for reform. There is another contest over meanings, a contest in which the dilemmas are often significantly different, and the traditions have been modified because of accommodating the previous dilemmas.

Of course, while we can distinguish analytically between patterns of governance and a contest over reforms, we rarely can do so temporally. The activity of governing continues during most contests, and most contests occur in part in practices of governing. Governance thus consists of a complex and continuous process of interpretation, action, and conflict that produces ever-changing patterns of rule.

An interpretive political science highlights contests among diverse and contingent meanings. As a result, it privileges distinctive empirical topics, including ruling elite narratives, rationalities or technologies of power, and popular resistance referred to as the '3Rs'.

Interpretive theory suggests that political scientists should pay more attention to the traditions against the background of which elites construct their worldviews, including their views of their own interests. Further, the central elite need not be a homogeneous group, all the members of which conceive of their interests in the same way, share a common culture, or speak a shared discourse. Political scientists should examine how 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 America, for example, contemporary governance has been portrayed as a continuing struggle and hodgepodge of administrative arrangements drawing on traditions of meritocracy, efficiency, entrepreneurialism, and egalitarianism (Stillman 2003). Similarly, in Britain, different members of the central elite are inspired by Tory, Whig, Liberal, and socialist narratives. While the dominant narratives in the central civil service used to be Whig narratives, a managerial narrative has clearly made headway recently.

Even as the central elite may well conceive of the world using diverse narratives, so they often turn to forms of expertise to define specific discourses. Nowadays different traditions of social science influence public policy. Here interpretive theory draws attention to the technologies of power that inform policies across different territories and different sectors. Governmentality refers to the scientific beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct (see Chapters 10 and 29). It concerns the ways governments and other social actors draw on knowledge to construct policies and practices, especially those that create and regulate subjectivities. Much of the world has witnessed the rise of technologies based on neoliberal knowledge of the markets. Recently, policy makers have begun to devise newer technologies based on institutionalist knowledge of society; that is, networks, social capital, and political legitimacy.

When political scientists neglect agency, 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 elite agendas. Interpretive theory may draw attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policy cultures are sites of struggles not just between strategic elites, but between all kinds of actors with different views and ideals reached against the background of different traditions. Subaltern actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by consuming them in ways that draw on local traditions and their local reasoning. For example, police officers are influenced by traditions that encourage them to prioritize combating crime, leading them to neglect community policing even when it is supported by elite policy makers. Similarly, citizens may

continue to act on territorial loyalties and identities that bear little resemblance to the administrative units crafted by policy makers.

This focus on local reasoning recurs. Bayard de Volo (see Chapter 17) stresses that a great virtue of an interpretive approach in comparative politics is that it delivers surprises unearthed by 'being there'. The researcher does not treat interviews and observations as 'true' but as data to be interpreted in their particular context. The interpretivist accesses insider perspectives, local meanings and local knowledge to produce 'extended case studies' (Burawoy 1998) that generate new insights into political life.

This idiographic character of ethnographic fieldwork is invariably seen as a weakness by positivists because, it is claimed, it is not possible to generalize. Of course, you can make general statements from a case. What we cannot do is make statistical generalization to propound laws. Political scientists have a poor track record of prediction but we can aspire to 'plausible conjectures'. We can make general statements that are plausible because they rest on good reasons and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information (paraphrased from Bourdon 1993). So, we can derive plausible conjectures from local knowledge; 'small facts speak to large issues' (Geertz 1993 [1973]: 3).

Professional practices

To be harsh, positivist political science 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, and how they should explain the data they generate. The technicians are sought after. They provide evidence-based policy advice for governments. They are expert advisers. They staff the think tanks. However, although they are able to run a regression analysis or produce a formal model, too often 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.

An interpretive approach brings the people back into the professional, applied fields. Interpretive political science may not appear self-evidently 'relevant' to applied, professional fields. 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. So, how has professional practice been reframed? Do interpretivists still strive to be relevant and, if so, what does relevance mean for them?

Much policy-oriented work on, for example, 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 toolkit for managing it.

So, 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. The idea of narrative plays a dual role in this

approach. The term refers, first, to the stories by which the people studied made sense of their worlds. Second, it refers to the stories by which the researchers made sense of the narratives and actions of the people studied.

As advocates of an interpretive approach, we are suspicious of inappropriate claims to 'scientific expertise'. Nonetheless, we recognize the appeal of useful techniques as ways of making interpretive studies relevant to policy makers. We adopt the device of storytelling to build bridges between theory and practice. We are not alone. Although the label varies – the argumentative turn, narratives, storytelling – there is now a growing literature on 'the interpretive turn' in policy analysis, planning, and management (see for example Morgan 1993; Rein 1973; Wagenaar 2011). 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. Storytelling has become the prime analytical device in many professional fields (see Chapters 15, 27, and 28).

However, not everyone would agree that the task is to help decision makers. Inevitably, there are questions about whose aims are served by the research and who owns the research results. If the interpretive approach is about decentring an established organization to identify its several voices, its contending beliefs and practices, and its traditions and stories, then the research is never about privileging any one voice. Rather, it draws attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policies are sites of struggles between all kinds of actors with different beliefs arrived at against the background of different traditions. Subordinate actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by constructing them in ways that draw on their local knowledge and their local reasoning. For example, street-level police officers are often influenced by an organizational tradition that stresses combating crime even when the new police commissioner wants to ginger up the troops by promoting community policing. But the troops know he or she will be gone in a few years. There will be a new commissioner with new interests and priorities. So, interpretive work in a professional field remains relevant, but not necessarily for government decision makers. It highlights the many voices and can be relevant to, for example, the police officer's trade union or a civil rights non-governmental organization (NGO). The issue isn't one of relevance but of relevance for whom.

An interpretive approach becomes relevant when it marries local knowledge to storytelling; when, yet again, the focus shifts to insider perspectives, local meanings, and local knowledge, all of which involve the recovery of beliefs and practices. Local knowledge differs from the cognate idea of local reasoning discussed earlier. Local knowledge refers to people's grasp of their own experiences and circumstances, where this knowledge is specific, concrete, and practical, rather than general, abstract, and theoretical. Local knowledge contrasts not with rational choice's autonomous view from nowhere, but with expert knowledge based on professional training.

The task of the researcher is to recover, recount, and review the stories when studying through a policy; that is, tracing the webs of beliefs and practices in which a policy is located over time and multiple sites. There are many ways to recover stories (see for example Chapter 10). Whatever the favoured method, the aim is to recover the stories told by politicians, public servants, and citizens. We systematize these accounts; we tell our version of their stories. Then we recount them to see if they make sense to ourselves, to those involved in policy making and to those affected by the policy. The researcher's version is reviewed jointly to identify inaccuracies, divergence, and lessons. The aim is a fusion of horizons that covers both agreement and where we agree to disagree. In effect, recovering, recounting and reviewing constitute a technology to derive practical lessons from lived experience; an interpretive equivalent of evidence-based policy making (for an example see Rhodes and Tiernan 2014).

In the professional fields, the language may vary but storytelling or narratives or performative accounts lie at the centre of their analysis. Policy advice, planning, and much else are spheres of knowledge in which contingency, practice, experience, and local knowledge are at a premium. Plausible conjectures rooted in local knowledge are particularly apposite for professional practice where the aim of research is complex specificity in context; the analysis of situated agency.

Summary

The structure of the Handbook follows the structure of this introduction. Part II reviews the main theoretical approaches in interpretive political science. In Chapter 2, Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely review the debate between naturalism (positivism) and anti-naturalism (interpretivism). The editors asked all authors not to rehearse these arguments in their chapters except where the debate had its own distinctive character. In Chapter 3, Naomi Choi describes the idealist legacies that underpin present-day interpretivism. In Chapter 4, Jens Olesen looks at the hermeneutics tradition and its impact on interpretivism. In Chapter 5, Robert Lamb reviews the evolution of historicism from Collingwood to Skinner and Bevir. In Chapter 6, Chris Ansell argues that a pragmatist interpretivism has much to offer interpretive political science whether in sensemaking theory or by using abduction, retroduction, triangulation, and counterfactual thought experiments for interpretation. In Chapter 7, Colin Hay compares interpretivism with the constructivism of Searle and Berger and Luckman arguing that, although they explore many of the same questions and issues, they have different starting points. Constructivism is seen as an ontology; intepretivism is seen as epistemological. In Chapter 8, Alan Finlayson explores the contribution of cultural studies through, for example, the work of Stuart Hall on 'Thatcherism' and shows how it complements ideational approaches to the study of politics. In Chapter 9, David Howarth discusses the post-Marxist strand of interpretive political science, focusing on the seminal work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Chapter 10, the final chapter in Part II, by Thomas Biebricher, explores the concept of 'governmentality'; the central importance of Michel Foucault to interpretive political science; and the challenges facing the governmentality approach.

Part III reviews the methods commonly employed by interpretive scholars. An interpretive approach does not have its own specific toolkit for producing data. Nonetheless, the interpretive approach has implications for methods of data collection. Its proponents have a preference for ethnography (observation and interviewing), textual analysis, historical methods, and narratives or storytelling.

This part of the Handbook opens with a discussion of quantitative analysis, or perhaps we should say numerical analysis. In Chapter 11, Deborah Stone provides several fascinating examples of ways in which numbers and numerical analysis only make sense when embedded in a larger and frequently normative narrative. In Chapter 12, R. A. W. Rhodes reviews the shared toolkit of fieldwork, participant observation, and ethnographic interviewing, and surveys the defining debates surrounding ethnographic methods arising from the 'culture wars' of the 1980s in anthropology. In Chapter 13 Isabela and Norman Fairclough analyse political discourse as instantiated in texts of various sorts. In Chapter 14, Fritz Sager and Christian Rosser describe the historian's handicraft; that is, the techniques historians apply in collecting, evaluating, validating, and interpreting historical evidence to gain knowledge of the past. Finally, in Chapter 15 Yiannis Gabriel shows how narratives have become central to exploring the relation between storytelling and organizational identity, the relations between public, formal organizational narratives and private, personal stories, and the value of storytelling in knowledge transfer.

Part IV surveys the contribution of the interpretive approach to the various subfields of political science. A common feature across all these empirical disciplines is the ways in which

the interpretive approach reframes what is considered a problem, and the questions to be asked. A contrast emerges the nearer one gets to the heartland of present-day political science, the USA, where there is the greatest resistance to the interpretive turn. Whether the topic is American politics or race and politics, the impact of interpretivism is limited when the subject matter is American. On the other hand, Europe is the heartland of interpretivism whether we are talking about the major theoretical contributions, empirical disciplines, or professional practices. We seem to be on the cusp of a world in which there are two self-referential communities; American political science with its aspirations to 'science', and European political science with its hermeneutic, idealist, and historicist traditions.

In Chapter 16 Cecelia Lynch charts the substantial impact of interpretive work, in its many guises, on the discipline of international relations. In Chapter 17, Lorraine Bayard de Volo surveys the importance of 'being there', or fieldwork, in comparative politics and the 'surprises' that come from that work. In Chapter 18, Joseph Lowndes reviews the limited impact of the interpretive approach on the study of American politics, although he identifies some important exceptions; for example, the subfield of American political development. In Chapter 19, Thomas Diez shows that the interpretive approach is a latecomer in the study of the European Union. It has still had an impact; for example, the pioneering work on the ways in which the European policies of member states construct 'Europe'. In Chapter 20, Gibson Burrell charts the long-standing contribution of interpretive thinking to organizational sociology which continues to this day in the work of, for example, Karl Weick. In Chapter 21, Emmy Eklundh and Nick Turnbull identify the main contributions from political sociology. They itemize the analysis of the nation-state, modernist conceptions of state–society relations, new social movements, and clandestine organizations, riots, and new actors in the online, global civil society. In Chapter 22, Helen Haste and her colleagues review four interpretive strands, some with a long history, in political psychology, psychoanalytic approaches, framing, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis. In Chapter 23, Martin Loughlin and Samuel Tschorne offer a synthetic overview of three present-day varieties of legal interpretivism in public law: descriptivist, normativist, and phenomenological. In Chapter 24, Catherine Needham shows that public administration, for all its standing as a formal, descriptive, and applied discipline, nonetheless has produced several interpretive scholars who have unlocked the black box of bureaucracy and exposed its myths, rituals, and symbols. In Chapter 25, Mary Hawkesworth shows that much feminist thought anticipated the emergence of the interpretive approach and expanded our understandings of political life. Whether the theory is empiricist, standpoint, or post-modern, feminist interpretation has abandoned essentialism, false universals, and confining stereotypes to explore the specificity of particular situations. Finally, in Chapter 26 Ron Schmidt explores American studies of race and politics. The study of racial politics is arguably a recent arrival as a topic in American political science. The interpretive variant is newly born. Nonetheless there are distinct and distinctive contributions in the study of American political development, racialization, racial inequality, and race in contemporary electoral politics.

In Part V, we turn our attention to professional practices; to the applied face of interpretive studies. The professional fields covered in this section have been much more open to the interpretive turn than the empirical disciplines. Each field has its precursors; scholars who recognized the limitations of an applied social science.

In Chapter 27, Henk Wagenaar documents how interpretive policy analysis has proliferated into a rich and varied landscape of approaches, claims, and ambitions. In Chapter 28, Patsy Healey reviews the diverse and rapidly expanding body of work with an 'interpretive' dimension in planning. She focuses on the second wave of scholarship and its concern with meanings, performative practices, building governance capacities, and transformation and

innovation. In Chapter 29, Alan McKinlay and Eric Pezet explore the massive impact of Michel Foucault on critical management studies. In Chapter 30, Robin Roslender shows the massive influence of sociological theory on accountancy through two waves of interest in interpretivism. Current influences include Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, Bruno Latour on actor network theory, and Pierre Bourdieu on practice theory. In Chapter 31, Janet Newman traces the significance of critical social policy in the 'framing' of policy problems and the 'construction' of the subjects and objects of policy. She outlines the contribution of discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and other qualitative methods to identifying how policy shifts are played out in particular professional, institutional, or local settings. She concludes that interpretive approaches offer nuanced accounts of particular, spatially differentiated, and relational spaces in which poverty and inequality are experienced and in which welfare governance is negotiated. The last chapter in the book is by Didier Fassin who uses the case of lead poisoning to show that public health not only 'naturalizes' or 'discovers' disease, it is also a cultural practice that 'invents' disease.

Note

1 Inevitably, we draw on our previous work in writing this introduction. See in particular: Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, and 2010.

Bibliography

Bernstein, R. (1976) *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Bevir, M. (1999) *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Bevir, M. and R. A. W. Rhodes (2003) *Interpreting British Governance*. London: Routledge.
Bevir, M. and R. A. W. Rhodes (2006) *Governance Stories*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Bevir, M. and R. A. W. Rhodes (2010) *The State as Cultural Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Bobrow, D. B. and J. S. Dryzek (1987) *Policy Analysis by Design*. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press.
Bourdon, R. (1993) 'Towards a Synthetic Theory of Rationality'. *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1): 5–19.
Burawoy, A. (1998) 'The Extended Case Method'. *Sociological Theory* 16 (1): 4–33.
Carnap, R. (1937) *The Logical Syntax of Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Chong, D. (1996) 'Rational Choice Theory's Mysterious Rivals', in J. Friedman (ed.), *The Rational Choice Controversy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 37–58.
Collingwood, R. G. (1946) *The Idea of History*, edited by T. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.
Foucault, M. (1970) *The Order of Things*. London: Tavistock.
Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock.
Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Allen Lane, Penguin.
Foucault, M. (1984) 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Vintage Books, pp. 76–100.
Foucault, M. (1988) 'The Ethic of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom', in J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (eds), *The Final Foucault*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 12–20.
Foucault, M. (1991) 'Governmentality', in G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 87–104.
Gadamer, H. (1960) *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinscheimer and Donald G. Marshall. Reprint, New York: Continuum, 2004.
Geertz, C. (1993 [1973]) 'Thick Descriptions: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*. London: Fontana, pp. 3–30.
Greenleaf, W. H. (1983–87) *The British Political Tradition*, 3 volumes. London: Methuen.

Hall, P. (1986) *Governing the Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Husserl, E. (1931) *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Lakatos, I. (1978) 'Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes', in *Philosophical Writings, Vol. 1: The Methodology of Scientific-Research Programmes*, edited by John Worrall and Gregory Currie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 8–101.

March, J. G. and J. P. Olsen (1984) 'The New Institutionalism: Organisational Factors in Political Life', *American Political Science Review* 78 (3): 734–49.

Morgan, G. (1993) *Imaginization*. London: Sage.

Oakeshott, M. (1991 [1962]) *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 2nd expanded edition. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press.

Popper, K. (1959) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. New York: Basic Books.

Rein, M. (1973) *Social Science and Public Policy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Rhodes, R. A. W. and A. Tiernan (2014) *Lessons of Governing: A Profile of Prime Ministers' Chiefs of Staff*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Ricci, D. (1984) *The Tragedy of Political Science: Politics, Scholarship, and Democracy*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rorty, R. (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Saunders, D. (1995) 'Behavioural Analysis', in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds), *Theories and Methods in Political Science*. London: Macmillan, pp. 58–75.

Stillman, R. (2003) 'Twenty-First Century United States Governance: Statecraft as Reform Craft and the Peculiar Governing Paradox It Perpetuates'. *Public Administration* 81 (1): 19–40.

Taylor, C. (1985) *Philosophical Papers*, *Volumes 1 and 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wagenaar, H. (2011) *Meaning in Action: Interpretation and Dialogue in Policy Analysis*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Weick, K. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage.

Wittgenstein, L. (1974) *On Certainty*, translated by D. Paul and G. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.

This page intentionally left blank