INTERPRETING INTERPRETIVISM INTERPRETING INTERPRETATIONS: THE NEW HERMENEUTICS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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This article seeks to gauge the nature, distinctiveness and significance of the 'interpretivist turn' in public administration and political science more broadly. It considers the various interpretations and, indeed, misinterpretations to which this new hermeneutics of public administration has given rise, its relationship to (genuinely and seemingly) cognate perspectives (notably constructivism, the new institutionalism and critical realism) and its strengths and weaknesses – both as an analytical perspective and as a developing research programme. In the process it argues for a broadening of the interpretivist research agenda to accord a greater role to the institutional contexts in which the ideas and beliefs that actors hold acquire and retain resonance and for the value of exploring more thoroughly the synergies with constructivist variants of the new institutionalism.

As the pages of this and other leading journals attest, the last decade has seen a very significant 'interpretivist turn' in the fields of public policy and public administration with ripple effects now radiating out through all parts of the discipline. At the centre of these concentric circles is the work of R. A. W. Rhodes and his long-standing co-author in matters of meaning and interpretation, Mark Bevir. It is primarily with their work that I engage in this article. In it I seek to gauge the nature, distinctiveness and significance of the interpretivist turn, considering in so doing the various interpretations and, indeed, misinterpretations to which it has given rise, its relationship to (genuinely and seemingly) cognate perspectives (such as constructivism, the new institutionalism and critical realism) and its strengths and weaknesses – both as an analytical perspective and as a developing research programme (albeit one at a relatively early stage in its evolution).

In the process I point to the potential value of a synthesis of interpretivist and constructivist institutionalist insights, suggesting that this might allow for a broadening of the interpretivist research agenda that has developed to date. In particular I suggest that this would allow interpretivism to turn its attentions more directly to the relationship between the ideas actors hold, the inter-subjective discourses and traditions on which they draw in developing such ideas, and, crucially, the institutional and extra-discursive context in which those ideas and traditions come to acquire and retain resonance. That, in turn, would allow it to dispel the view, typically put forward by its critics, that interpretivism is merely the latest incarnation of idealism (see, for example, Dowding 2004; McAnulla 2006a; Marsh 2008, 2009). While that charge is, I think, mistaken – in that there is nothing innately idealist about interpretivism's ontological assumptions – it is made more credible by the operationalization of interpretivist insights in public administration to date. For, thus far at any rate, self-professed interpretivists have tended to restrict their empirical concerns to the mapping and interpretation of actors' beliefs, the reconstruction of the meanings to actors of the practices in which they engage, and the location of such beliefs and meanings in the context of pre-existing yet dynamic

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and open-ended traditions (seen as inter-subjective ideational systems). Nevertheless, before turning to such issues directly, it is important first to establish the nature and distinctiveness of interpretivism – both as an ontology and as an approach to political analysis which follows from that ontology.

INTERPRETING INTERPRETIVISM

Unremarkably, interpretivism places interpretation at the heart of social and political life – and its analysis. Consequently, interpretivism is 'interpretive' in at least two distinct, if interrelated, ways. First, interpretations matter for interpretivists since it is these that guide the behaviour and conduct of actors. Political subjects behave the way they do because of the beliefs and understandings they hold. Thus, in order to account for their behaviour, political analysts must seek to establish the beliefs which motivate an actor's conduct – or, put slightly differently, they must seek to reconstruct the meanings to actors of the conduct in which they engage. Political analysis couched in an interpretivist vein is, then, first and foremost concerned with capturing – or, as interpretivists typically prefer, with 'reconstructing' – the meanings and beliefs of agent participants in political processes and practices. As Bevir and Rhodes themselves put it, 'interpretive approaches to political science focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so'. Yet, as they go on, 'interpretive approaches do not merely study beliefs, ideas or discourses. They study beliefs as they *appear within, and even frame, actions, practices and institutions*' (2003, p. 17, emphasis added). The emphasis here is important. For, though typically cast by its detractors as a form of idealism, interpretivism is, as we shall see, centrally motivated by a concern to understand – and indeed to 'explain' – actions, practices and, if perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent, institutions. As this suggests, it is the ontological conviction that actions and practices in particular are themselves shaped and framed by ideas (beliefs, understandings and meanings) that leads interpretivists to ideas in the first place. The theoretical turn 'to' ideas, in other words, is not a turn 'from' actions, practices and institutions. This is a crucial point to which we will return presently.

Yet this is not the only concern of interpretivists with interpretation. For what applies to embedded social and political actors (the subjects of political analysis) applies with no lesser force to political analysts themselves. If political subjects encounter the context in which they find themselves through a veil of ideas (beliefs, understandings and meanings), then does not the same apply to political analysts? It would be strange indeed to see political analysts as enjoying an unmediated and thereby privileged access to the political realities created by the behaviour of political actors who are themselves seen to be constrained to encounter those very same realities through a veil of ideas. That, at least, is the interpretivists' claim. Thus, from such a perspective, all political analysis offers interpretation, and all that political analysis offers, 'is' interpretation. Interpretations are, in other words, not only the subject but also the medium of political analysis. Indeed, interpretivists tend to take this a step further in suggesting that political analysis offers interpretations, interpretivist political analysis 'interpretations of interpretations' (Bevir and Rhodes 2005, pp. 169–70, 2006, p. 84; see also Geertz 1973, pp. 20–1).

Taken together, these two ways of foregrounding the role of interpretation in the practice and analysis of politics provide the basis for a highly distinctive approach to political analysis. Like most internally consistent analytical traditions within the human and social sciences, interpretivism can be seen to build from a set of basic ontological

commitments that inform an account of epistemological possibilities and which lead ultimately to a set of methodological commitments and choices (on the interdependence of ontology, epistemology and methodology, see also Hay 2002, pp. 61–5, 227–34). The internal architecture of interpretivism as an analytical approach is set out, albeit in a necessarily stylized manner, in figure 1.

What is immediately striking about this admittedly simplified account of interpretivism's ontological and epistemological commitments and the methodological implications which follow from these, is just how distinctive the resulting analytical perspective is – and just how irreducible it is to both cognate analytical perspectives (such as institutionalism and critical realism) and to those philosophical traditions on which interpretivism has ostensibly drawn most heavily (notably hermeneutics and post-structuralism).

Ontology ———— **Epistemology** ———— **Methodology**

What's out there to know about?

What can we (hope to) know about it?

How might we acquire that knowledge?

- meanings and beliefs guide action;
- beliefs and practices are co-constitutive – neither are reducible to the context in which they arise;
- social and political realities are encountered through our interpretations of them;
- agency is situated;
- actors are embedded (ideationally) in inter-subjective traditions on which they draw;
- these provide resources for the interpretation of social and political realities;
- they provide meaning and orient beliefs (offering ways of looking at the world);
- traditions are open-ended and evolve through the encountering and resolution of dilemmas.

- knowledge is perspectival (the world looks different from different vantage points) and provisional;
- no unmediated knowledge of social and political realities is possible;
- knowledge claims are socially constructed, and hence (inter-) subjective;
- understanding is key to the explanation of social and political phenomena;
- understanding entails establishing the beliefs and meanings which inform actions/practices;
- political analysts offer interpretations, interpretivists interpretations of interpretations;
- the value of aggregate concepts can only be judged practically.

- the goal of political analysis is to capture the meaning to political actors of their actions and practices;
- this entails embedded research and an ethnographic method – a 'political anthropology of court politics', for instance;
- political analysis should proceed inductively rather than deductively;
- textual analysis and the analysis of social and political practices as texts is the key to understanding (and hence explanation);
- whilst knowledge is provisional and subjective, situated observation allows for the generation of knowledge claims that are robust, comprehensive and consistent;
- though a focus on beliefs and meanings may entail a certain practical preference for qualitative techniques there is still value in the use of quantitative methods.
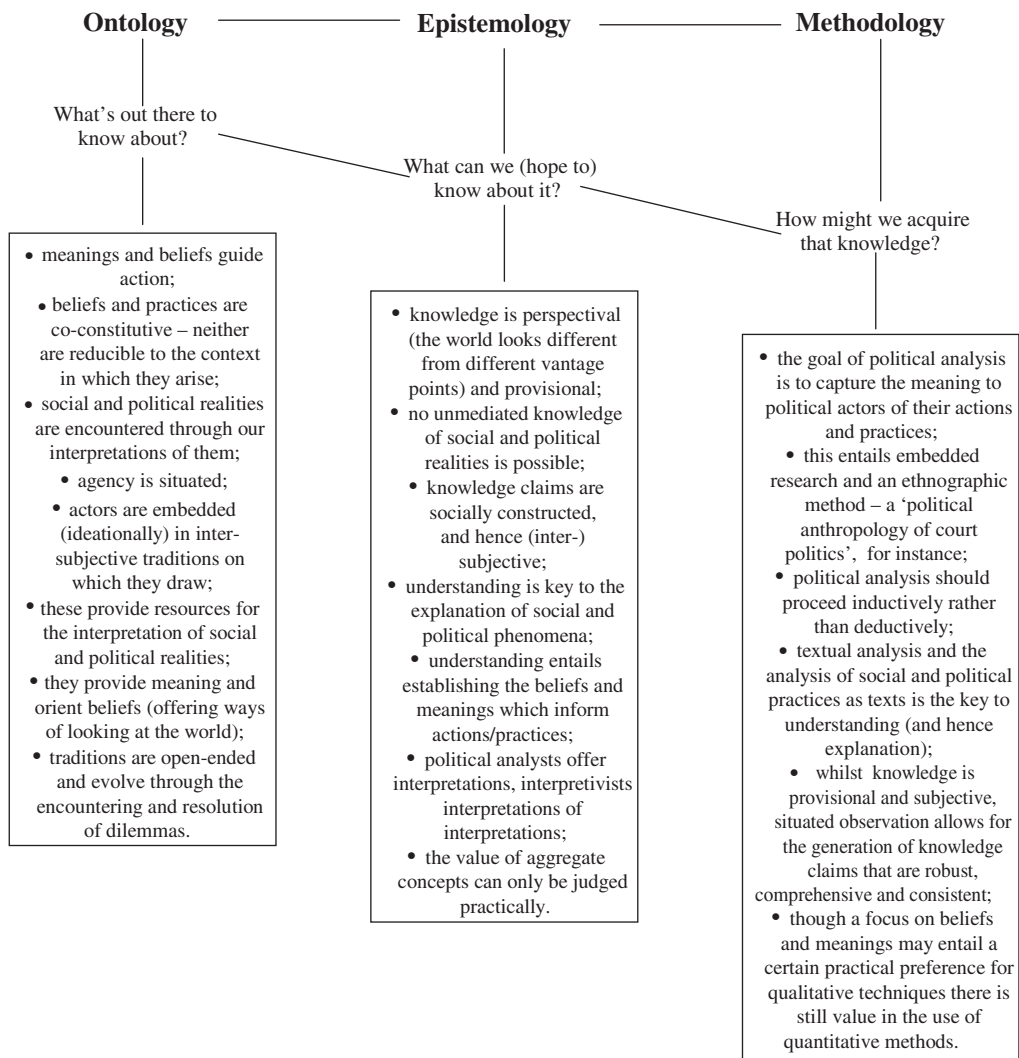
FIGURE 1 *Interpretivism's analytical trinity*

Thus, if we start first with interpretivism's core ontological assumptions, what we see in effect is the transpositioning and attendant broadening of a worldview drawn essentially from hermeneutics. This foregrounds questions of meaning and interpretation just as hermeneutics does but it recasts and broadens this concern, transposing it from the realm of the (narrowly and literally) textual to the social and political more generally (see, in particular, Bevir 1999, pp. 76–7, 121–4; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 21–2, 2006a, pp. 88–9). In essence – and in what is a more clearly post-structuralist move – it re-casts and re-reads (quite literally) social and political practice as text. That in turn rests on an ontological commitment to the irredeemably meaningful character of social and political practice and to the notion, common to much of the literature seen to comprise the 'ideational turn', that actors orient themselves to the environment in which they find themselves through the ideas about that environment that they come to hold. Social and political realities are, then, encountered through our interpretations of them – through the meanings they hold for us and the meanings we make out of them.

In the context of the 'ideational turn', this is already distinctive ontologically. But what most sets interpretivism apart as an ontological stance is its particular understanding of the inter-subjective character of meaning and hence the social origins of the beliefs and understandings that inform our actions and the practices to which they give rise. Here again the greatest single influence would appear to be hermeneutics. It should be added that the precise extent of that influence is, however, difficult to gauge owing to the limited number of direct references in Bevir and Rhodes' work to specific contributions within the hermeneutic tradition (though see Bevir 1999, pp. 76–7, 121–4; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 21–2, 2006a, pp. 88–9). Yet what is undoubtedly clear is that Bevir and Rhodes do see themselves as offering a hermeneutic approach to social and political analysis (2003, p. 18). Thus, in a manner ostensibly similar to Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*) which occurs whenever a reader-as-interpreter encounters a text (Gadamer 1975; Garrett 1978; Weinsheimer 1985), interpretivists emphasize the embeddedness of political subjects in 'traditions' understood as webs of meanings (see, for example, Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 4–5, 32–7, 63–4, 2005, pp. 171–3). These provide the ideational resources on which actors draw in making sense of their experiences and in orienting themselves to the world they encounter and the challenges it presents to them. Such traditions bind actors together in often unacknowledged inter-subjective communities. They are open-ended and dynamic, evolving – again in a manner not unlike the 'horizons' of embedded interpreters in Gadamer's textual hermeneutics – through encounters with new situations, experiences and other traditions. These Bevir and Rhodes refer to as 'dilemmas' (Bevir 1999, pp. 221–64; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 36–7, 63–4, 2005, p. 173, 2006b, pp. 400–1; Rhodes 2007, pp. 1253–4; see also Bevir and Richards 2009).

Such ontological assumptions of course have significant epistemological implications, though these are not quite the same as those typically attributed by others to interpretivism. In particular, and although it clearly does place considerable emphasis on the perspectival nature of knowledge claims (Collingwood 1965; Rorty 1980), interpretivism is far less characterized by epistemological scepticism than is invariably assumed (see, for example, Dowding 2004). Indeed, this is where its distance from postmodernist perspectives is perhaps greatest. The reason for this is ultimately ontological. For while both perspectives emphasize that the world can be viewed differently and that the key to how one sees the world is the vantage point (or subject-position) from which it is viewed, there is very little agreement between them beyond this point. Postmodern theorists (such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, for instance) are committed, in effect, to an ontology

of difference (even, perhaps, an ontology of singularity), in which there is a near infinite number of mutually exclusive subject positions or vantage points from which the world can be viewed differently, yielding innumerable and, in principle, violently irreconcilable claims – including, of course, knowledge claims. Allied to a respect for such difference (a normative commitment) and a refusal to judge between contending claims in the absence of criteria acceptable to both parties in the contest, a profound epistemological scepticism almost invariably follows (for a more detailed account, see Hay 2002, pp. 225–34). It is important here to differentiate between the postmodernism of authors such as Lyotard, Baudrillard and Feyerabend on the one hand and the post-structuralism of Derrida, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe on the other. The latter perspective, especially as developed by authors such as Glynos and Howarth (2007, 2008; see also Bastow and Martin 2003; Finlayson 2007), has rather more in common with the interpretivism of Bevir and Rhodes than the former. I am indebted to both referees for suggesting this clarification – which might also serve as an appropriate qualification of the argument presented in Hay (2002, pp. 225–34). From an interpretivist perspective, however, things proceed rather differently. For where postmodernists see a proliferation of incommensurate discourses, language games and subject positions, interpretivists see instead a far more highly conserved set of common inter-subjective resources (in the form of traditions) for making sense of events and experiences. In other words, where postmodernists are dispositionally inclined to see difference, diversity and incommensurability, interpretivists are dispositionally inclined to see commonality and consensus (as manifest, for instance, in strong prevailing norms and conventions for adjudicating between contending knowledge claims). When this is combined with a much more conditional, fluid and sociological understanding of knowledge itself – not as the accumulation of objective truths, but as the process of developing and revising an inter-subjective consensus on empirical matters amongst members of a community sharing common traditions – a much greater degree of epistemological confidence and conviction results.

That epistemological confidence is reflected in a further key difference between interpretivism on the one hand and postmodernist perspectives on the other, with the former typically keen to emphasize the explanatory nature of the analytical enterprise in which it is engaged while the latter largely disavows explanation as the privileging of one subject position over others. Yet we need to proceed cautiously here. For it is immediately important to note that interpretivism's use of the term explanation is rather different from that prevailing within the natural sciences – though it is, I suspect, rather closer to the lay understanding of the term. For interpretivists, to explain an outcome is not to summon or conjure the appropriate general or covering law under which the generation of that outcome falls. A natural scientist might, for instance, seek to explain the motion and final resting place of a particular spherical object dropped from the top of a tower by appealing to a series of general properties (such as the propensity of relatively frictionless objects in gravitational fields to accelerate towards the source of the gravitational attraction in a particular way and the propensity of spherical objects – as distinct from, say, feathers – to prove themselves relatively frictionless in such a context). In the process the scientist advances an explanation of the particular instance of a more general phenomenon of the following form: this particular object follows this observed path because objects of this general type tend to behave in this way under these specified conditions. This kind of explanation is, in effect, a form of abstracted re-description – the specific case is represented (and in the process of being represented in this way, is 'explained') as a specific instance of a more general phenomenon. This type of explanation interpretivism

disavows, not least since it tends to reject, ontologically, the very idea that social and political systems exhibit the kind of regularities which make the identification of general or covering laws possible.

So what does pass for explanation amongst interpretivists? Three points are here crucial. First, and if only by a process of elimination, in the absence of covering laws to which (causal) appeal might be made, explanation is – as it must be – case or instance-specific. Second, for interpretivists, and initially strange though this might seem, the key to explanation is in fact understanding. To traditionally trained social scientists, brought up on the (Weberian) distinction (indeed, dichotomy) between causal explanation (*Erklären*) and interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*), this is likely to sound decidedly disconcerting. But the point is that if we disavow or reject the applicability of a covering law conception of (causal) explanation, then we are in a position to recast understanding *as* explanation (Bevir and Rhodes 2005, pp. 174, 177–8). That, in effect, is what interpretivism attempts. Thus, for interpretivists, understanding is the key to explanation of social and political phenomena and, no less significantly, understanding entails establishing the beliefs and meanings which guide and inform actions (and the practices to which they give rise). As Bevir and Rhodes put it, 'to locate beliefs in webs of beliefs and to locate webs of beliefs against the background of traditions and dilemmas is to explain those beliefs and the actions and practices they inspire' (2005, p. 177).

As this suggests, interpretivists are committed to a form of explanation that is in fact very close to the lay understanding of the term. To explain an outcome is to understand (or at least to make a claim to understand) how things came to be the way there were and not some other way. It is, in short, to present a narrative of the occurrence of the action, practice or outcome to be explained which identifies the key factors that made it what it was rather than something else. But this is not all that is required of a credible explanation from an interpretivist perspective – crucial, too, is that the explanation provides an account (ideally, one that is evidentially based) of the motives, beliefs, preferences and meanings to the actor of the actions in which they engaged and of how such ideas informed their conduct. In and of itself, this may not be sufficient to explain the outcome – it is typically necessary to make reference to the context in which the outcome arose and to the consequences, both intended and unintended, of the conduct of other actors – but it is a necessary condition of developing an adequate explanation. As this indicates, interpretivism is no less demanding of the explanations it sanctions than the natural sciences (and those wedded to a naturalist social science) are of theirs. But they are nonetheless very different: interpretivist explanations take a narrative form, are couched at the same level of generality as the phenomena for which they seek to account (and do not make reference to general or covering laws), and are built from an account of the specific motives, beliefs and meanings to the actor of the actions in which they engage (rather than deriving and/or attributing motives and characteristics to the actor from the context in which they are embedded).

Unremarkably perhaps this distinct set of ontological and attendant epistemological commitments also serves to set interpretivism apart from other approaches to political analysis when it comes to methodological choices. Reflecting its epistemological commitment to 'understanding as explanation' and the key role played by beliefs and meanings in both, the central empirical challenge of interpretivist political analysis is to capture and reconstruct the meanings to political actors of the actions in which they engage and the practices to which their behaviour gives rise. This, however, is no easy task. As Paul Converse would have it, 'belief systems have never surrendered easily to

empirical study . . . indeed, they have often served as primary exhibits for the doctrine that what is important to study cannot be measured and that which can be measured is not important to study' (Converse 1964, p. 206). Of course, the former need not – indeed does not logically – imply the latter. But the point is nonetheless a significant one. Interpretivists set themselves not only an exacting explanatory standard, but one that also invariably commits them to arduous, difficult and extensive primary research if it is to be operationalized empirically. For interpretivists typically favour what might be termed 'embedded research' in which political analysts, if they are to gain the required access to the authentic beliefs and meanings of participants in a political process, must, in effect, become as deeply socialized into the relevant political community as is practically possible. This, it need hardly be pointed out, can prove a frustrating and time consuming process – and what may make it all the more frustrating is that there is absolutely no guarantee of a decent return on the time invested in the task.

That risk is, however, a price that interpretivists would see as well worth paying for the kind of fine-grained empirical detail which can only come from situated observation of this kind. As this suggests, the interpretivist method is, in essence, an ethnographic one; the interpretivist imagination is, at heart, an anthropological one. Indeed, undoubtedly the greatest single contribution of interpretivism in political science to date has been the development of what Rhodes (2007, p. 1256) terms a 'political anthropology of the executive's court politics' through the immensely detailed and extensive shadowing of ministers and civil servants within Westminster and Whitehall (see, for example, Rhodes and Weller 2001; Bevir and Rhodes 2003, part III; Rhodes 2005). That work is richly empirical and broadly inductive in its approach. For in its disavowal of a covering law view of political causation and explanation, interpretivists refuse to derive the preferences, interests or motives, far less the more general beliefs of actors and the meanings to them of the action in which they engage, from stylized assumptions about their rationality or the material circumstances in which they find themselves (Rhodes 2005, p. 6). Consequently, issues which in other influential perspectives are resolved theoretically (most evidently in rational choice theory but arguably also in all approaches based on material interest assumptions) become open empirical questions (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 18–20). The resulting body of empirical work presents a profound challenge to many previously accepted orthodoxies, notable casualties being the ease with which instrumental motives can simply be projected on to political elites and core assumptions about the 'Westminster model' itself.

As we have seen, for its critics, interpretivism is typically dismissed as a form of idealism leading inexorably to relativism (see, for example, Dowding 2004). Such a view, as I have sought to show, falsely conflates interpretivism's epistemology with the profound epistemological scepticism associated with much postmodernist theory. And, on the basis of this (mis)characterization, it tends also to dismiss interpretivism methodologically – assuming its approach to empirical analysis to be equally amorphous and no less lacking in rigour. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. For, although interpretivists are (appropriately) anxious to emphasize the provisional character of the claims to knowledge they advance on the basis of the extensive empirical work in which they engage, their methodological standards are both extremely exacting and perhaps surprisingly conventional. Thus, for instance, interpretivists tend to be profoundly sensitive to the inherent methodological difficulties of relying, in effect, on witness testimony. Consequently, and in an attempt to counter this, they tend to be far more insistent on the need for evidential triangulation and corroboration than the vast

majority of political analysts who rely on elite interviews alone for the inferences they draw. As Bevir and Rhodes themselves suggest, interpretivists have well-established criteria for adjudicating between contending accounts, preferring

> narratives that are accurate, comprehensive and consistent. Our standards or evidence require us to try to support our narratives with as many clearly identified facts as we can. 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 is to endeavour to make our narratives clear and coherent. A consistent web of narratives holds together without going against principles of logic. (Bevir and Rhodes 2005, p. 184)

This is, in fact, merely the tip of the proverbial iceberg – with interpretivists typically revealing themselves to be far more reflexive methodologically than their non-interpretivist colleagues. And what is particularly interesting is that such reflexivity has also led them to be rather more pluralistic methodologically than is typically assumed. For, despite their emphasis on what are invariably cast as 'soft' variables that do not submit easily to quantification, interpretivists are reluctant to privilege qualitative methods (for an example of the use of quantitative methods to map elite political discourse, see Hay and Smith 2010). As Bevir and Rhodes again explain, interpretivism 'does not prescribe a particular methodological toolkit for producing data. Instead, it prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type' (2005, p. 178). It is, in other words, not the source or type of the data that is the issue, but the validity of the inferences drawn from the data and the status of the claims made about it. These need to reflect the provisional character of all knowledge claims and, in addition, to be adjusted in the light of our own self-critical reflections on the limitations inherent in whatever methodology we have chosen.

MISINTERPRETING INTERPRETIVISM: DIVIDED BY THE ABSENCE OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

Having sought to establish in some detail the distinctiveness of the interpretivist approach to political analysis – ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically – in the previous section, it is important now to consider the various misinterpretations to which it has given rise in the secondary literature. To be fair, some of the more glaring of these were dealt with in the discussion above. As we have seen, they relate, typically, to a mischaracterization of interpretivism as a simple form of relativism and/or idealism. But in what follows I am rather more interested in the invariably more sympathetic and certainly less clearly distorting critiques that have come from cognate theoretical perspectives – notably from those committed to a more critical realist analytical perspective.

Critical realists seem to have something of an ambivalent relationship with interpretivism – on the one hand apparently rather attracted by the considerable synergies with a critical realist take on the structure-agency relationship that they detect, yet on the other seemingly rather disappointed by interpretivists' characteristic failure (as they would have it) to see things quite the way they do. In particular, critical realists charge interpretivists with three related failings – a privileging of agency in the structure-agency relationship; a privileging of the ideational in the equivalent material-ideational relationship; and a related incapacity to explain continuity which they associate with its (unwarranted) emphasis on contingency and change (McAnulla 2006a, b; Marsh 2006; McAnulla 2007; Marsh 2008).

It is, of course, important to proceed with a certain degree of caution here. For each of these issues is, at heart, an ontological one – and ontological differences, concerned as they are with the nature of the social and political realities we perceive, are not easily reconciled. The point is that, in the absence of agreed criteria for the resolution of ontological disputes, there is a danger that debates of this kind tend to degenerate into bouts of 'ontological evangelism' – in which the protagonists proclaim in ever more exasperated tones the self-evident superiority (from their own perspective) of the worldview they profess (on such dangers, see Hay 2005, 2007, 2009). And, to be fair, there is quite enough of that in this debate already. Thus both Marsh and, if to far less an extent, McAnulla, both seem to express a certain righteous indignation that Bevir and Rhodes, their chosen adversaries in this exchange, cannot see the benefits of abandoning interpretivism in favour of critical realism. But there is a certain irony here – and it is that irony that I am interested in exploring. For in their haste to condemn interpretivism for its failure, in essence, to be more critical realist in its ontological commitments, they mischaracterize it. In particular, and in the process, they fail to appreciate its considerable synergies with critical realism, particularly on the question of the structure-agency relationship, and its even greater affinities with other forms of philosophical realism, notably with what has been termed 'as if realism' (Hay 2005). In what follows I suggest that if we can only get beyond the simplistic and antagonistic counter-posing of interpretivism and critical realism we can see both perspectives more clearly. Intriguingly, this suggests, to me at least, the possibility that interpretivists and philosophical realists might work together in addressing some of the issues that the developing interpretivist research programme both acknowledges that it needs to address but has thus far failed to consider. It is to such an agenda that I turn in conclusion, but before doing so it is first important to examine in some detail the similarities and differences between interpretivism on the one hand and realism in its various guises on the other.

The key to all of this, I contend, is the concept of 'situated agency'. This lies at the heart of the interpretivist approach and offers us perhaps the clearest clue as to the character of the social ontology contained therein. That ontology, and particularly the view of the structure-agency relationship contained within it, is in fact remarkably close (though by no means identical) to that held by critical realists. But, on first impressions, it certainly doesn't look that way. The problem here is largely a semantic one. For quite specific reasons (for which, as it happens, critical realists are likely to hold some sympathy) interpretivists like Bevir and Rhodes disavow the concept of structure and hence make no direct reference to it in their work (for a clear expression of their thinking on this point, see Bevir and Rhodes 2005, pp. 175–6). (In short, they see it as homogenizing, reifying and totalizing.) This undoubtedly makes their social ontology appear more voluntarist than would otherwise be the case. But, this notwithstanding, it remains quite a profound distortion of their view to argue, as McAnulla does, that theirs is an approach in which 'all causal weight is burdened on to agency' (2006a, p. 118). To see why this is mistaken, all that is required is the briefest exposition of the concept of situated agency, whose implied understanding of (what Marsh and McAnulla would term) the structure-agency relationship is mapped out schematically in figure 2. This is based loosely on an equivalent schematic depiction of the structure-agency relationship in the 'strategic-relational approach' (for example, see Hay 1995, p. 202, 2002, p. 131).

In representing interpretivism's social ontology in this way my hope is to draw attention to the at least implicit conception of structure at work within it. To make this clearer still,

it is useful to remind ourselves that widely accepted synonyms for structure and agency are context and conduct. The advantage of this conceptual pairing is that neither of the terms that comprise it hold any problem for interpretivists. The point is that, linguistic differences between interpretivism and critical realism notwithstanding, it is difficult not to see figure 2 as setting out a distinct view of the relationship between conduct (agency) and context (structure). Actors, within this social ontology, are situated, embedded or contextualized in a manner that circumscribes their room for manoeuvre. As Bevir and Rhodes are at considerable pains to demonstrate, such actors are not autonomous but display an agency conditioned if not fully determined by the context in which they find themselves. Thus, in a manner almost entirely analogous to that depicted by critical realists and in the strategic-relational approach (Jessop 1996; see also Hay 2002, pp. 126–34), actors encounter a structured social and political landscape that presents them with a complex configuration of opportunities and constraints. Their agency is thus both potentially transformative and yet nonetheless conditioned by the context in which they are situated. Presented in such terms, it is difficult to imagine a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between conduct and context and hence agency and structure.

This is fine as far as it goes. But there is, of course, one key difference between the view of the structure-agency relationship set out in figure 2 and that with which, I imagine, critical realists like McAnulla and Marsh would feel more comfortable. It is, quite simply, that the context considered by interpretivists – the context within which interpretivism situates actors – is almost solely ideational. Actors, in other words, are indeed situated agents. But the point is that they are situated primarily, perhaps even exclusively, within an ideational context – a context understood in terms of the structuring role of inter-subjective traditions as interpretive resources.

It is surely in part precisely for this reason that both McAnulla and Marsh have thus far failed to see the implicit concept of both context and structure at work in Bevir and Rhodes' interpretivism. In a sense for critical realists like themselves, and I suspect rather more for Marsh than for McAnulla, ideational structures don't really count – after all, from the former's perspective, ideas aren't really part of the 'real world out there' (2009). And as this in turn suggests, Marsh and McAnulla's failure thus far to see interpretivism's concept of tradition as analogous to their own concept of structure reveals something
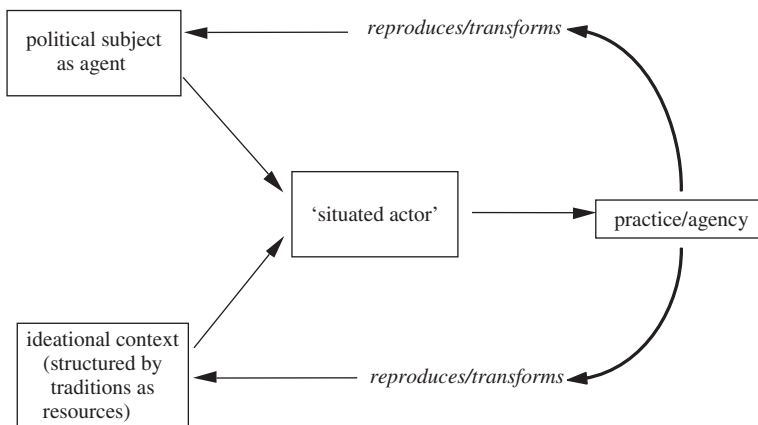

FIGURE 2 *Interpretivism's social ontology: situated agency*

of the unevenness of their own treatment of ideas. For in much critical realist inspired political analysis ideas tend to be seen as purely agential, with little or no consideration being given to the reciprocal or, as they tend to prefer, 'dialectical', relationship between ideational agency and ideational structure (McAnulla is, in fact, something of an exception here: see, in particular, his excellent discussion of the work of Margaret Archer – McAnulla 2002). Ideas and discourses are, after all, both structured and structuring.

There is in fact one further difference between Bevir and Rhodes' implicit social ontology and that of critical realism. This is far less immediately apparent than the seeming privileging of extra-discursive and discursive contexts or structures respectively, but arguably no less significant. It relates to the status of the aggregate concepts used to describe the context within which actors are situated. Put simply, for critical realists, the structures to which they point and with respect to which they situate agents are ontologically real; for interpretivists, the equivalent aggregate concepts, notably the traditions with respect to which they contextualize actors' beliefs and meanings, are not. As Bevir and Rhodes make very clear, the value of such aggregate concepts must be judged pragmatically – as aids to analysis and as means to attaining an analytical purchase on empirical phenomena not against some metaphysical criteria of objectivity (2008, p. 730). To give an example that I have used before, while the social practices of gender inequality are very real indeed (all too real, alas), the concept of patriarchy (whether understood as a structure or, indeed, as a tradition) is an analytical construct – and, as such, a category which may or may not be useful to help us explore those ontologically real social practices. The point is that for interpretivists and, indeed, for constructivists like myself, it is not itself real – however useful it may be to refer to it 'as if' it were real. As this suggests, interpretivism is certainly not a form of critical realism; but it can perhaps usefully be seen as an expression of an 'as if realism' (on which see Hay 2005).

THE UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERPRETIVIST RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The above paragraphs certainly point to some problems in critical realism's characterization of interpretivism and also, more fundamentally perhaps, to an otherwise uncharacteristic privileging of the agential in its treatment of ideas. But they are certainly no less suggestive of problems of unevenness in the development of the interpretivist research programme to date – an unevenness arguably responsible for much of the misrepresentation to which it has been subjected. In the final substantive section of this paper I turn directly to these issues, discussing in turn: (1) the rather static depiction of social and political systems that emerges from interpretivism's emphasis on traditions as the key ideational resources on which actors draw and the attempts to correct that bias through the appeal to the concept of dilemmas; and (2) the more general problems which arise from contextualizing agency almost exclusively in ideational terms. In both cases I hope to show how a further exploration of the affinities and synergies with critical and 'as if' realism and, more substantively, some borrowing from constructivist versions of the new institutionalism, might lead to a broadening of the interpretivist research agenda such that it might respond more effectively to both of these challenges.

Though to my mind rather strangely seen by both Marsh and McAnulla as ill-equipped to deal with continuity and inclined to over-emphasize change in social and political systems, the view of situated agency depicted in figure 2 in fact strikes me as rather static. Tellingly perhaps, Bevir and Rhodes also express themselves 'incredulous' that

their approach could be seen as unable to account for stability and continuity (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 729). Agents, though presumably creative in the manner in which they do so, draw their understandings of the world in which they find themselves largely from pre-existing, albeit constantly evolving, inter-subjective traditions. As such, ideational innovation is largely confined to the contingent juxtaposition, combination and recombination of ideas and insights drawn from the different traditions to which they are exposed. Such innovation of course feeds back into the ongoing and iterative development of the tradition over time, but it is difficult not to see the resulting analytical approach as far better placed to explain continuity and path dependence than radical change or rapid ideational innovation.

Of course, it might well be objected that this is largely because figure 2 fails to consider the core concept to which interpretivists appeal in explaining change – namely that of dilemma. And, as figure 3 shows, it is not at all difficult to incorporate a role for dilemmas in a revised version of the original model.

So, is figure 3 more innately dynamic than figure 2, putting interpretivism in a better place analytically from which to explain not only path dependence but also path-shaping ideational innovation and change? The short answer is that this depends on what precisely the concept of dilemma is taken to imply – and there is a certain amount of ambivalence and ambiguity here. The problem is that the concept of dilemma is, thus far at any rate, rather underdeveloped and inadequately theorized, seemingly performing rather different functions at different points in the theory's development.

The concept is in fact first used by Bevir in his work on the history of political ideas (1999, pp. 29, 221–44). Here it refers to any and every 'new belief no matter how one arrives at it and no matter how insignificant it and its consequences may be'. As Bevir goes on, 'the introduction of any new belief into a web of beliefs necessarily entails some change in the web. At a minimum, the new belief will require an extension of the old ones, and to extend the old ones will be to modify them' (1999, p. 233). This is undoubtedly helpful and certainly does introduce an element of dynamism into a model largely bereft
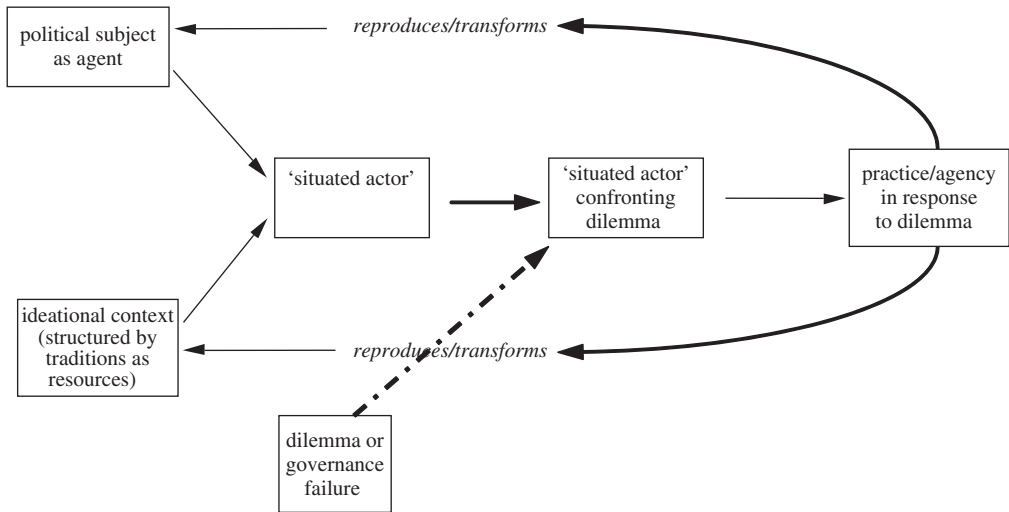

FIGURE 3 *Interpretivism's hermeneutic circle*

of one until this point. However, in the earliest attempts to transpose Bevir's concept of dilemmas from the history of political thought into the political anthropology of court politics, the concept is in fact used to refer to little more than the simple juxtaposition, combination and recombination of ideas and insights drawn from the different traditions to which a given political actor is exposed, as discussed above. Used in this way, the concept adds little or nothing that was not already there – and its insertion within the model is certainly not going to change in any decisive way our expectations about the temporality of change within social and political systems (which are still likely to remain iterative and incremental in their dynamics).

Yet, as the perspective has developed, so the concept of dilemma has itself evolved. Perhaps most interesting in this regard are Rhodes' own reflections in the journal *Organization Studies* (2007) on his book *Understanding Governance* 10 years after its publication and Bevir and Richards' introductory essay to a special issue of this journal on 'Decentring policy networks' (2009). In their rather different ways, both develop the concept of dilemma from Bevir's initial starting point.

Rhodes in fact begins by merely reiterating the initial definition of the term. A dilemma arises for an individual or a group, he suggests, 'when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of the existing beliefs and associated tradition' (2007, p. 1253). This is fine, but it tells us next to nothing about where such new ideas might come from – and in the absence of such an account there is a clear danger of tautology here. In so far as we can find evidence that existing beliefs have changed and/or that the relevant prevailing tradition has been reconfigured in some we can attribute this to a dilemma; and in so far as we can point to the existence of a dilemma we can be confident, whether we have the evidence for it or not, that existing beliefs and the traditions which support such beliefs are in a state of flux. Yet altogether more interesting – and suggestive – is what Rhodes goes on to argue. For in the very next paragraph he suggests that institutions of governance are always prone to fail in some way (by disappointing our expectations of them, for instance) and that such failings, in so far as they come to be experienced and articulated, might be seen as sources of novels ideas – dilemmas requiring a response. Bevir and Richards say something very similar, linking dilemmas to the identification of problems and failings in existing institutional arrangements (2009, p. 7).

What is important about such suggestions, underdeveloped though at this stage they undoubtedly remain, is that they refer to extra-discursive factors, institutional pathologies in particular. As such they indicate, for the first time really, that interpretivists are starting to move beyond the narrow contextualization of situated actors within ideational contexts. For here we see a clear link drawn between the institutional context within which political actors are situated (in this case an institutional context confounding prevailing expectations of it) and the ideational context (the context within which such expectations were first forged and must now be renegotiated in some way). This suggests to me the value now of an explicit attempt to broaden the interpretivist research agenda by bringing institutional (and potentially other extra-discursive contexts) into the analysis. There are, of course, different ways of doing this. But what also strikes me are the major potential synergies between such an interpretivism and the work of constructivist-minded institutionalists on institutional dynamics. Figure 4 attempts to show schematically how a synthesis building on such synergies might start to link institutional and ideational dynamics in a manner entirely compatible with the suggestions of Rhodes (2007) and Bevir and Richards (2009).
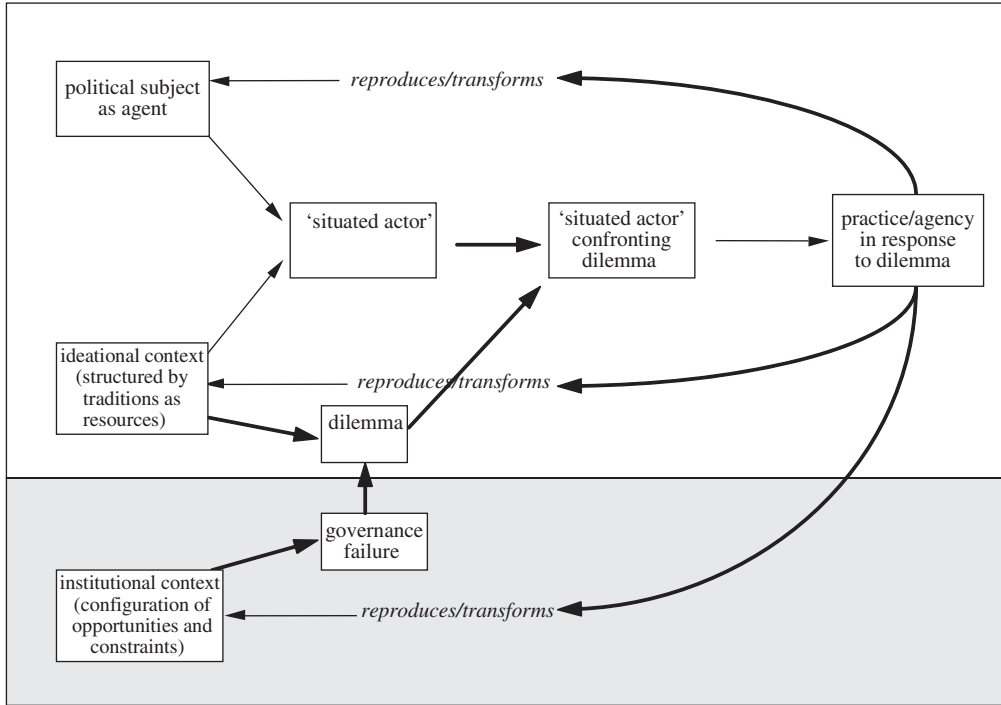
FIGURE 4 *Towards an interpretivist institutionalism? Linking institutional and ideational contexts*

Such an approach sees institutional configurations as systems which generate both expectations and performance (both good and bad) and, in the process, potential conflicts between the two. Such conflicts might be seen to pose dilemmas which in turn become the focus for ideational contestation as differently situated groups mobilized around different constructions of their own and others' self-interest seek to identify, narrate and control the agenda for responding to such perceived institutional failings and crises (see also Hay 1996, 2011). What is appealing about such an approach is that it clearly has the capacity to explain both incremental/path dependent change and more dramatic/path-shaping episodes.

Space prevents a more detailed exposition and much more work would undoubtedly be required to develop such insights into a more fully fledged constructivist/interpretivist institutionalism. But an illustrative example may nonetheless serve to make the point and to suggest the potential value of such an interpretivist-institutionalist synthesis. Bevir and Rhodes would, no doubt, see the 'global financial crisis' (as it is typically now labelled to) as posing a series of dilemmas to policy-makers – not least in the puncturing of the institutionally embedded growth models that had developed in the anglo-liberal economies since the early 1990s and expectations about the sustainability of growth based on these (for a detailed account of which see Hay 2011). But rather than simply see this as some kind of external shock to which policy-makers were forced to respond after the fact, we might note the existence of institutionalist accounts which both predate the crisis and point to the institutional frailties that it would expose (for instance, Hay 2006; Hay *et al*. 2006). The point is that such an instititionalist-augmented interpretivist approach is capable both of explaining (indeed, even of anticipating) the dilemma and of describing

and explaining the conflict and ensuing ideational and institutional change to which the dilemma is likely to give rise. It is not, I think, difficult to see the value of such an approach.

CONCLUSION

Clearly there is much still to do to take this forward, but in the preceding analysis I hope to have shown not only the value of the interpretivist research agenda as I see it, but the additional insights that can perhaps be gained by now exploring more thoroughly its synergies with cognate perspectives, notably the constructivist institutionalism with which it shares so much. Interpretivists have signalled very clearly a desire to move beyond the exclusive contextualization of situated agents with respect to ideational contexts which has thus far tended to characterize its developing research programme. My hope is that they will join with others in exploring the relationship between the ideas actors hold, the inter-subjective discourses and traditions on which they draw in developing such ideas, and the institutional and extra-discursive contexts in which those ideas and traditions come to acquire and retain resonance. That is a profoundly interpretivist research agenda, but it is also a profoundly institutionalist research agenda. Above all, though, it is one that refuses to privilege the agential and the ideational and is sensitive both to path dependence and to path-shaping ideational and institutional change.

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