ALL YOU NEED IS … A NETWORK: THE RISE OF INTERPRETIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Introduction

Max Bygraves was the epitome of the British all-round entertainer whose catchphrase was 'I wanna tell you a story'. He was a regular on Sunday Night at the London Palladium, the most popular variety show on British television. Like Max, we want to tell you a story.

The Beatles appeared at the Palladium on 4 November 1963 in front of Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Princes Margaret, and their entourage. John Lennon introduced the song 'Twist and Shout' saying,

> For our last number, I'd like to ask your help. Will the people in the cheaper seats clap your hands? And for the rest of you, if you'll just rattle your jewellery.

How do we interpret this story? At first sight it is just an instance of The Beatles' cheeky humour. It is more than that because Lennon is being irreverent, a working class oik mocking his betters. Such ridicule is the English way. The Beatles humour was anti-establishment and of a piece with the satirical TV programmes of the day. As one of the leading satirists put it: we 'challenged the same conventions … In a way you could say that The Beatles were satirical, or at least sceptical' (Carpenter 2000: 219). Nothing was sacred anymore. They helped to create a spirit of the times, which contributed to the death of deference. The establishment was no longer respected.

So, our story is about class, authority, and the decline of deference. And, incidentally, it spelt the death of the all-round entertainer. Storytelling gets our attention because it is a serious business, a way of unpacking the meaning of everyday life (Bevir 2011). Unpacking meaning is at the heart of the interpretive endeavour.

For this 100th Anniversary issue of *Public Administration*, we review one of the more distinctive trends in the study of public administration – the rise of the interpretive approach.

We could adopt a broad definition of interpretivism that covers not only anti-naturalism but also Foucault's governmentality, post-Marxism, critical policy analysis, and some forms of social constructivism (see Bevir and Rhodes 2016: Part II). However, in this article, we tie interpretivism to an anti-naturalist historicism and humanism in contrast to the formalism and scientism of mainstream public administration. We review developments in Britain, Western Europe, and the USA, concluding there is a divide between the empiricist Anglo-Saxon approaches and Continental interpretive and critical approaches. However, for interpretive approaches, national boundaries are less relevant because there is an international academic network spanning countries.

Against this backcloth, we argue that our interpretive approach differs from others because of its focus on philosophical arguments and its neutral approach to methods. We summarise our decentred approach with its focus on traditions, beliefs, practices, and dilemmas. We highlight its distinctive features compared with other interpretive approaches. We suggest the interpretive approach could develop by blurring genres and practicing bricolage.

Where are we now?

A long history lies behind the recent interpretive turn, dating back at least to the philosophical and empirical work of scholars such as Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall, Clifford Geertz, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Taylor. All these diverse thinkers, like many others in the latter half of the twentieth century, reacted against the behavioural revolution and the broader drift towards formalism and scientism that dominated research in the social

sciences. They wanted the study of human life and society to be sensitive to meanings, culture, and history.

Some of our predecessors, notably Charles Taylor, described the dominant outlook of social scientists, with its formal and mechanistic explanations, as “naturalism” (Blakely 2016; Choi 2009). At its most general level, naturalism is a diffuse and influential worldview that attempts to model the study of human life on the concepts, methods, and explanations of the natural sciences. At a more concrete level, naturalists typically rely on formal explanations that appeal to models of allegedly rational behaviour, to correlations between behaviour and allegedly objective categories such as class, or to reified laws, rules, and norms. Crucially, all these formal explanations downplay the contingency and contestability of people’s reasoning and agency. It is no exaggeration to say that many naturalists consciously seek to wipe out contingency and particularity from their work. They want to look past this everyday ‘noise’ and search for the underlying ‘signal’, that is, a set of invariant causal mechanisms and structures. Even when they introduce beliefs, desires, and other intentional states, they typically treat them formally, perhaps as fixed by an objective rational calculus, or as atomized units to be correlated with objective categories, or as fixed by reified institutions and norms. They sidestep the need to interpret people’s intentionality and look instead to verify their models or correlations by reference to behaviour.

In sharp contrast, anti-naturalism treats actions as meaningful and meanings as holistic. Because meanings or beliefs are holistic, their analysis requires something like a hermeneutic circle: individual beliefs are only decipherable within wider social or intersubjective webs of meanings. Satisfactory social explanations must have two features. First, they must pass through an account of the beliefs or meanings of the relevant actors. They cannot let intentionality drop out of their story. Second, they must place these beliefs or

meanings in wider webs, including their historical and cultural contexts. They cannot atomize meanings or beliefs, let alone reduce them to reified norms or a formal rationality. Because naturalists fail to grasp the philosophical nature of an adequate social explanation, they cling to flawed research programs riven by distortions and misunderstandings.

On offer, then, are two contrasting approaches to public administration: one formal and often broadly institutional, the other interpretive and often broadly historicist. Naturalists seek stable and formal concepts, categories, and typologies. They try to operationalize these in comparisons, correlations, and models. Sometimes they themselves, or people influenced by them, translate these results into scientific expertise on issues of public policy. Anti-naturalists seek to recover the intentionality of actions. They try to understand beliefs and desires by locating them in webs of belief, intellectual traditions, and cultural contexts. Sometimes they themselves, or people influenced by them, draw on their understanding to engage people in dialogue and discussion. The question is whether this anti-naturalism has been able to establish a foothold in public administration in Britain, Continental Europe, and the USA? The short answer is 'yes' and in the next section we provide a brief overview of the key contributors.

Interpretivism in the UK and Continental Europe

We will discuss our version of interpretivism later in this article, and we like to think it has contributed to the rise of a robust interpretivism within the UK.[1] For now, however, we would emphasize that we are not alone. There are, for example, several well-established authors in the interpretive genre in Continental Europe (see below). Koen et al. (2020a: 295) conclude there has been 'a second wave of landmark texts suggesting that it has now "come of age"'. We identify five landmark contributions by interpretive approaches to the study of public administration: theory and methods, interpretive policy analysis, elites and their

narratives, deliberative policy analysis, and discourse analysis (and for an overlapping but different classification, see Needham 2016: 342-5).[2]

First, there are several contributions to interpretive theory and methods. As well as our work (see the next section), we note especially the contributions of Paul Friusen 1999, Maarten Hajer (1995 and 2009), Colin Hay (2002, 2004, 2011, 2016), Henk Wagenaar (2011), and Dvora Yanow (see below). There have also been several handbooks surveying the field (see for example, Bevir 2010, Bevir and Rhodes 2016; Fischer et al. 2015). Finally, there are guides to interpretive methods (see for example, Boswell et al. 2019).[3]

Second, there is the interpretive policy analysis literature, which comes in various guises and is *the* growth area of the past decade (and for an authoritative survey se Wagenaar 2011). The study of street level bureaucrats has proliferated. Although Lipsey (1980) is the inspiration for such studies, more recent work has taken an interpretive turn (for an overview see Hupe and Hill 2015). For example, Durose (2009 and 2011) explores how front-line workers in British local government understand everyday work through storytelling and use this local knowledge to respond to the difficulties they confront (see also Bang and Sørensen, 1999; Barnes and Prior 2009).

Third, there are case studies of specific policies; for example, Mol (2008) on the lived practices of caring in diabetes clinics compared with diabetes self-care, and Wagenaar et al. (2017) on the practices of local administrators that can undo national policymaking on prostitution.

Fourth, there are a growing number of studies focusing on national and local political and administrative elites and their narratives (see for example, Crewe 2005; Gains 2009; Geddes 2020; Hodgett and Deneulin 2009, Morrell 2006; Orr 2005 and 2009, Orr and

Bennett 2017; Rhodes 2011; Rhodes et al., 2007; van Eeten et al. 1996, van Hulst 2008and 2013; Wilkinson 2011).

The last two landmark contributions of interpretivism are arguably less central as they overlap with, and at times are swamped by, other research agendas. The fourth landmark contribution is deliberative policy analysis (see for example, Fischer and Gottweis 2012; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, Hendricks et al. 2020, Koen et al 2020b). Deliberative policy analysis is in many ways a subset of the interpretive policy literature. The two share broad debts to hermeneutics, phenomenology, and ethnography. However, deliberative policy analysis explicitly combines these debts with a moral and political agenda taken from deliberative democracy, often Jurgen Habermas in particular. Deliberative policy analysts are, therefore, particularly likely either to focus on empirical cases of deliberation within policy or to use other cases to suggest the advantages of a deliberative approach.

Finally, there is discourse analysis. Some examples of discourse analysis clearly draw inspiration from the interpretive policy literature discussed above (see van Bommel et al. 2014, Hajer 1995 2005, Hajer and Versteeg 2005)). Other examples arguably draw more on post-Marxism with its debt to structuralism and its consequent use of concepts, such as signifier, that present languages and ideologies as systems that have formal or quasi-structural properties irrespective of the ways in which agents use them (see Howarth and Griggs 2012 and 2013, Howarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis 2000).

Interpretivism in the USA

The interpretive turn is largely a European phenomenon but as always with such sweeping generalisations there are exceptions (Rhodes 2011b). Interpretive approaches are well established in comparative politics (see for example, Schatz 2009; Wedeen 2010) but

there are only pockets of dissent against naturalist public administration, mainly focused on theory and methods, interpretive policy analysis, and narrative analysis.

According to Raadschelders (2011: 168-7), this 'relativist perspective' covers phenomenology, critical theory, and post-modernism. The American authors he describes as 'representative' are Farmer (1995 and 2010), Fox and Miller (1995), Miller (2002), McSwite (1997 and 2002) and Spicer (2001). We would add Fischer (2003) and Yanow (1996, 1999 and 2012). Most self-identify with critical theory and post-modernism. Apart from Fischer and Yanow, they would not self-describe as 'interpretivists'. The leading books on interpretive methods are by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006 and Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011.

The most substantial book we could find explicitly on interpretive public administration as distinct from public policy was Jun (2006). He argues that 'current public administration practice tends to rely on one learned frame—an institutional, structural, functional, or political perspective'. The foundations of mainstream public administration are 'efficiency, instrumental rationality, professionalism, positivistic and functionalist epistemology, and managerial leadership (Jun 2006: 12 and 33). He suggests there is a pervasive dualism in the study of public administration,

> 'most conspicuously in its epistemological and methodological approaches, which pit functionalist epistemology against interpretive epistemology, empirical and quantitative research against human science and qualitative research, and objective reality against subjective reality' (Jun 2006: 9).

In place of 'functionalism, institutionalism, systems theory, rational decision-making, public choice, pluralistic incrementalism, and contingency-management theories', he favours

an ‘interpretive perspective, which … seeks to understand and explain the social world primarily from the viewpoint of the actors in a social situation’. He argues that ‘people construct meaning in the social world through social interactions, and through social interaction and the sharing of meanings, a revised (negotiated) meaning of action emerges Jun 2006: 48). The task when studying public administration is to ‘understand the intersubjective relationships that constitute all forms of organizations and (Jun 2006: 49). So far, so familiar.

However, the most prominent American contributor to interpretivism is Dvora Yanow 1996, 1999 and 2015). She had some distinguished predecessors. Fischer and Forrester’s (1993) influential collection of essays introduced the linguistic turn to policy analysis and underpinned the later development of deliberative policy analysis. Fischer and Gottweis (2012) revisited this territory two decades later. Roe (1994) and Stone (2012 [1997]) pioneered the use of narratives in policy analysis. Schon and Rein (1994) introduced the notion of ‘policy frames’ that has been a constant in interpretive policy analysis ever since. Although nowhere near as well known as the texts just cited, White (1999) explores the storytelling foundations of public administration and provides a valuable exposition of the *philosophical* foundations of research in public administration.

Among our contemporaries, as in the UK and Continental Europe, there are studies of street-level bureaucrats (Maynard-Moodie and Musheno 2003; Zacka 2017). There are studies of specific policy areas; for example, Soss et al. 2011 on race and poverty, Lejano and Nero (2020) on environmental policy. Perhaps the most persistent strand of interpretive thought running through this miscellany of studies is narrative analysis. For example, *Public Administration Review* ran a three-part series of article on interpretive narrative inquiry (Ospina and Dodge 1995a and 1995b: Dodge, Ospina and Foldy 1995).[4]

For the most part, American work in the interpretive idiom attracts only cult attention.[5] We were concerned with our inability to find more explicitly interpretive American research. We consulted colleagues. It was reassuring to be told 'I think it is safe to say it is a minority sport, where people mostly hang out with friends in other disciplines or come to Europe during conference season to meet kindred spirits' (private correspondence 14 October 2021). Comparing US public administration with its British and Continental European counterparts, it is clear there are two self-referential communities with limited intellectual engagement (Rhodes 2011b: 565). This divide between empiricist Anglo-Saxon approaches and Continental hermeneutics and interpretive approaches can be no great surprise. It is longstanding (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: chapter1); Pyrez 2011: 117).

There is an important qualification to this conclusion that is hinted at in the earlier quote - there are now well-established research networks spanning not only Britain and the Continent but providing a collegial holiday home for like-minded American and other international colleagues.[6] The Netherlands has a strong claim to be the heartland of interpretive policy analysis in Western Europe (see van Bommel et al., 2014 72-74). Of course, it is not exclusively a Dutch preserve, but every network needs a node. So, there is the internet group 'Interpretive Policy Analysis' which runs both its own annual conference, and the journal, *Critical Policy Studies*. There is also an interpretive political science group of the UK's Political Studies Association, and the ECPR's (European Consortium for Political Research) 'Standing Group on Theoretical Perspectives in Policy Analysis', both of which organise regular, and on occasion joint, workshops.[7]

For interpretive studies, national and disciplinary boundaries are arbitrary. Dvora Yanow is a good example of an academic who spans both. She does not self-identify as a public administration scholar but as, initially, interpretive policy studies and, latterly, as

organization studies and interpretive methodologies. She is an American citizen residing in The Netherlands and a visiting professor at Wageningen University. She is not only an important contributor to interpretivism in her own right, but she was especially prominent in building its organizational presence within the USA in the 2000s and in spanning the continental divide (see van Bommel et al. 72-74). In short, there is an established and growing network of scholars spanning national boundaries who practice interpretivism.

What is decentred theory?

We turn now to our version of interpretivism and its relationship to the broader movement just described (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, and 2010; see also Bevir and Blakely 2018, and Rhodes 2017). We have argued that an anti-naturalist interpretivism inspires a decentred theory particularly as applied to institutions. Anti-naturalism inspires an overtly historicist approach that emphasizes agency, contingency, and context. Also, it opposes the hubris of mid-level or comprehensive explanations that claim to unpack the essential properties and necessary logics of social and political life. Anti-naturalism suggests, for example, that neither the intrinsic rationality of markets nor the path dependency of institutions properly determines whether policies are adopted, how they coalesce into patterns of governance, or what effects they have. Anti-naturalism prompts us instead to decentre institutions and practices. Decentred theory conceives of social and political life as contingent constructions of actors inspired by competing beliefs themselves rooted in different traditions and changing in response to different dilemmas. Decentred theory explains shifting patterns of politics and public administration by focusing on the actors' own interpretations of their actions and by locating these interpretations in historical contexts. It replaces aggregate concepts that refer to objectified social laws with historical narratives that explain actions by

relating them to the beliefs that produce them. Table 1.2 provides definitions for the main concepts that appear in our decentred theory.

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Table 1: Decentred Theory: a summary

Concept	Definition
Beliefs	Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis in that they are the interpretations of individuals of their world and their surroundings. Their webs of belief and are the source of the reasons they give to explain their actions.
Practices	A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life.
Traditions	Traditions are 'webs of belief' and form the background of ideas in which agents find themselves. Agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point but may amend them.
Situated agency	Individuals are situated in wider webs of beliefs, or traditions, which largely shape their beliefs. Yet they keep a capacity for agency in that they respond to traditions, beliefs, and dilemmas in novel ways
Dilemmas	A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, posing a problem. Dilemmas are resolved by accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.

Source: modified from Geddes and Rhodes 2019: 95.

Decentred theory begins with the everyday notion that explanations of actions refer to the beliefs or reasons agents have for performing those actions (Bevir 2013). Decentred theory suggests, first, that social scientists explain these reasons by locating them in the agents' webs of belief. Second, it suggests that social scientists explain these webs of belief by locating them in a historical context of traditions and dilemmas. These types of

explanation reflect the theory laden nature of experience. To reject a naive positivism is to imply that people cannot have pure experiences, so social scientists cannot read-off their beliefs from objective social facts. Social scientists must interpret beliefs by relating them to other beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas. Here the forms of explanation we should adopt for beliefs – and so for social and political life – revolve around two sets of concepts (Bevir 1999: 187-218 and 223-51). The first set includes concepts such as tradition, structure, and paradigm. These concepts explore the social context in which individuals think and act. They vary in how much weight they suggest should be given to the social context in explanations of thought and action. The second set includes concepts such as dilemma, anomaly, and agency. These concepts explore how beliefs and practices change and the role individual agency plays in such change.

We define a tradition as a set of understandings an actor receives during socialization. Although tradition is unavoidable, it is a starting point, not something that governs later performances. We should be cautious, therefore, of representing tradition as an unavoidable presence in everything people do in case we leave too slight a role for agency. We should not imply that tradition is constitutive of the beliefs people later come to hold or the actions they then perform. Instead, we should see tradition mainly as a first influence on people. The content of the tradition will appear in their later actions only if their agency has not led them to change it, where every part of it is in principle open to change.

A socially inherited tradition is the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they perform. Equally, however, social contexts only ever influence – as distinct from define – the nature of individuals. Traditions are products of individual agency. This insistence on agency may seem incompatible with our earlier insistence on the unavoidable nature of tradition. However, our reasons for appealing to tradition allow for individuals to change the beliefs and practices they inherit. Just because individuals start out

from an inherited tradition does not imply they cannot adjust it. On the contrary, the ability to develop traditions is an essential part of people's being in the world. People constantly confront at least slightly novel circumstances that require them to apply inherited traditions anew, and a tradition cannot fix the nature of its application. When people confront the unfamiliar, they must extend or change their heritage to encompass it, and as they do so, they develop that heritage. Every time they try to apply a tradition, they reflect on it, whether consciously or not, to bring it to bear on their circumstances, and by reflecting on it, they open it to innovation. Thus, human agency can produce change even when people think they are sticking fast to a tradition they regard as sacrosanct.

The concept of dilemma provides a way of thinking about the role of individual agency in changing traditions. People's capacity for agency implies that change originates in the responses or decisions of individuals. Whenever someone adopts a new belief and action, they must adjust their existing beliefs and practices to make way for the newcomer. To accept a new belief is to pose a dilemma that asks questions of one's existing beliefs. A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated tradition. Social scientists can explain change in traditions, therefore, by referring to the relevant dilemmas. Traditions change as individuals make a series of variations to them in response to any number of specific dilemmas.

It is important to recognize that social scientists cannot straightforwardly identify dilemmas with allegedly objective pressures in the world. People vary their beliefs or actions in response to any new idea they come to hold as true. They do so whether that new idea reflects real pressures, or, whether it corresponds to a pressure that social scientists believe to be real. To explain change, there is no reason to privilege academic accounts of the world. What matters is the subjective and intersubjective understandings of policy actors, not

scholarly accounts of real pressures in the world. The task of the social scientist is to recover the shared intersubjective dilemmas of the relevant actors.

There are various challenges to our approach. They include, for example, critiques of the underlying philosophy (Burrow 2002, Lamb 2011), our methods (Gains 2011, Schwartz-Shea 2019), the focus on agency (Marsh 2008a and 2008b, McAnulla 2005 and 2006), and our interpretation of British governance (Marinetto 2003; Diamond et al. 2016). We essayed several replies (see for example Bevir and Rhodes 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2012; Rhodes 2007). In our view, the most perceptive and constructive critiques are by Hay (2011), Turnbull (2016b), and Wagenaar (2011). [8]

How is decentred theory different?

Decentred theory differs from other interpretive approaches because it insists that the case for interpretation is philosophical. It rests on philosophical arguments *against* naturalism and *for* anti-naturalism, and it extends these arguments to promote humanist and historicist explanations. Also, it rejects all attempts to map these philosophical arguments on to questions about methods. There is no straightforward correspondence between naturalism and one set of methods or between anti-naturalism and another set of methods. Most so-called methods are just techniques for gathering data or analysing patterns in data. Interviews and participation observation are both ways of getting data about what people believe. We see no reason to challenge any widely accepted method. Unless the researcher misunderstands or misapplies the method, an interviewer will report the answers given, the ethnographer will report the behaviour seen, and the statistician will report the mathematical relationship. We do not question the validity of quantitative methods as ways of getting data and finding patterns in data. Rather, we regret the division of public administration into professional

camps based on methodological preferences, and we would include mixed methods as just one more such camp. These various camps view the key issues as methodological, not philosophical. We would suggest that the interpretive turn with its anti-naturalism corrects this view. Our interpretivism is a set of philosophical claims about the nature of meaning, action, and political and administrative life. It derives from philosophy, not canonizing a particular way of doing research. Debates about methods are often a distraction from the core philosophical issues that define approaches to public administration.

Political scientists ought to be divided over philosophy, not method. This view challenges the fashionable stress on methods by so many in political science and public administration. Even many interpretive political scientists either define interpretivism in methodological terms or at least argue that interpretive philosophy requires us to adopt some methods and reject others (Yanow and Schwart-Shea 2006; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Schwartz-Shea 2019). We too would accept that some methods are better suited than others to recovering beliefs as webs of belief. We ourselves rely on ethnographic and, to a lesser extent, historical methods in our case studies. We simply want to stress that no method is inherently either interpretive or naturalistic. Philosophical analyses of causation and explanation neither require nor exclude the use of specific methods to collect data or to analyse patterns in the data. Methods are largely neutral tools for getting data and finding patterns in data. Interpretivists can make careful use of many methods (see below).

Decentred theory changes the kinds of explanations social scientists offer. It downplays efforts to create causal inferences that supposedly uncover laws or mechanisms and turns instead to people's reasoning. Decentred theory thus brings a cultural and historical focus that ties political science and public administration more closely to the humanities. Although this focus does not require specific methods, it opens a vast space for the inventive

and imaginative use of what we will call “genres”. The humanities offer a plethora of strategies for exploring and reporting on people’s actions, reasons, and beliefs, and for locating them in their cultural and historical contexts. These strategies do not secure data with allegedly pure experiences, nor do they close the ineradicable gap between data and explanation. Rather, they provide researchers with ways of engaging the world, ways of getting, checking, and revising information, and ways of presenting, explaining, and narrating that information.

Although anti-naturalism does not require specific methods, nonetheless it provides a dual challenge to methodological orthodoxy. First, it insists that no method can secure certain facts let alone causal explanations. Philosophers have long since rejected the naïve positivist belief in pure facts. Second, and perhaps because it rejects pure facts, anti-naturalism expands the repertoire of methods to embrace those more often associated with the humanities. One of our core ambitions is, indeed, to promote such blurring.

Where to from here -blurring genres and bricolage?

Our alternative approach leads public administration away from a naturalist and lukewarm positivism towards an anti-naturalist interpretivism that is widespread in the humanities. There is a shared focus on the recovery of meaning and historical contingency. So, what can public administration learn from the humanities?

Blurring Genres

We acknowledge we stand on the shoulders of giants, notably Clifford Geertz. Geertz argues that anthropologists practice ethnography to discover weaves of meaning.

Ethnography involves selecting informants, transcribing texts, and keeping field notes. The resulting 'thick descriptions' are often microscopic interpretations of the flow of social discourse. The task is to set down the meanings that actions have for social actors and then say what these thick descriptions tells us about the society in which they are found - recovering and recounting meaning. For Geertz (1983: 21) these tasks benefit from genre mixing. He suggests that social scientists turn 'away from a laws and instances ideal of explanation towards a cases and interpretations one'. He suggests we draw on 'analogies drawn from the humanities' within which 'society is less and less represented as an elaborate machine or quasi-organism and more as a serious game, a sidewalk drama, or a behavioural text'. The task is to recover the meaning of games, dramas, and texts and to tease out their consequences. We believe the task of blurring genres – of learning from the humanities – is an exciting challenge for political scientists. It takes us out of our comfort zone by asking us what we want to know and providing new ways of finding out. It is not about replacing but adding to the political scientists' toolkit. It is about opening a conversation with the humanities that enlarges our organizing perspective and broadens our toolkit (see for example Rhodes and Hodgett 2021).

Bricoleurs

A *bricoleur* is, someone who pieces 'together sets of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation' using whatever tools are available (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 4). A *bricoleur* employs a ragbag of tools; what works is best (Levi-Strauss 1966: 16-17; and see Hammersley 1999 for a discussion of other uses of the term). The aim is to understand the lived experience of politicians, and administrators using whatever means are both available and work (for an overview of the range of available qualitative methods see Bernard and Gravlee 2015, and Denzin and Lincoln 2011). As bricoleurs, we recover

evidence in the form of stories, and we then recount our interpretations of these stories using different genres. Geertz (1983: 19-20) encourages us to present research as if it is a game, a drama, or a text. He gives several examples including, baroque fantasies presented as deadpan empirical observations (Jorge Luis Borges), parables presented as ethnographies (Carlos Castenada) and epistemological studies presented as political tracts (Paul Feyerabend). In our forthcoming book (Bevir and Rhodes 2022), we are less baroque in our choices, using the examples of storytelling by and about chiefs of staff to the Australian prime minister, an historical narrative about the rise of New Labour in British party politics, thick descriptions of the court politics of British prime ministers, and an autoethnography of life as Dean of a social science faculty. Whatever the example, the common denominator is a social and political drama presented using the narrative devices more common in the humanities than the social sciences.

Conclusion

From the standpoint of mainstream Anglo-Saxon political science and public administration journals, interpretive approaches remain conspicuous for their absence. From the 1970s to the early 2000s, quantitative research dominated (Bennett, Barth, Rutherford 2003: 373-8). Of one thousand articles published in the American Journal of Political Science and the American Political Science Review between 1996 and 2005, only one relies on ethnographic research (Auyero and Joseph 2007: 2). The conclusion that interpretivism is an example of 'patterned isolationism' seems inescapable. It does not 'fit' in the disciplinary mainstream. At best, these alternative theories and methods sit alongside, and at worst outside, established disciplines and departments (Collini 2001: 299).

Change the standpoint, look to Continental Europe, and for networks that span the Anglo-Saxon and Continental European worlds, and a different pictured emerges. There are established, thriving networks behind which lies the nineteenth century European tradition of hermeneutics and idealism (Bevir and Rhodes 2010: chapter 1). The observation by Mr Spock that there is 'no life as we know it', applies. It is not life as understood by the naturalist mainstream. It is a different way of life and it is a noble endeavour because the study of public administration rooted in the humanities enables us to:

> remind the society of its contradictions, articulate salient emotional states, detect changing cultural premises, confront their culture's deepest moral dilemmas, and document the unpredictable events that punctuate a life or historical era (Kagan 2009: 231).

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Notes

[1] Needham (2016: 346) observes that 'the many debates on interpretivism prompted by Bevir and Rhodes in disciplinary journals … have raised the profile of interpretive approaches to public administration.' In a similar vein, Turnbull (2016a: 1) argues that, although interpretive approaches have been around for a long time, they 'have gained significant ground over the last decade' and 'in the United Kingdom the interpretivist flag in political science and public administration has been carried most prominently by Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes'.

[2] Although we are convinced that interpretive public administration is relevant to practitioners, in this article we focus on its contribution to the study of public administration. On interpretive approaches and practice see Bevir and Rhodes 2022: Part III; and Rhodes 2013.

[3] Our citations are illustrative not comprehensive for the simple reason that we are illustrating an argument not compiling a bibliography. We used the University of Southampton's Delphis discovery tool on EBSCO, which searches across databases, supplemented with https://www.grafiati.com/en/.

[4] The debate between naturalist and anti-naturalists occurs in narrative analysis. See the response by Jones et al. (2010 and 2014); to Sabatier (2000).

[5] The Public Administration Theory Network (PAT-Net) and its journal, *Administrative Theory and Praxis* provide a home for these various approaches. See http://www.patheory.org (accessed 7 October 2021). See Harmon 2003 for a short history of the group. There is also the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) at

the Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs, Syracuse University, which runs an annual summer school with several interpretive strands.

[6] There is an antipodean wing with John Dryzek (2002) and Hendriks, Ercan, and Boswell (2020) prominent contributors on deliberative democracy, and Jack Corbett (2015) a leading authority on leadership in small states.

[7] See respectively, See: https://ipa.science/; https://www.psa.ac.uk/specialist-groups/interpretive-political-science; and See: https://standinggroups.ecpr.eu/tppa/news/. All last accessed 11 October 2021.

[8] See also: Finlayson (2004), Glynos and Howarth (2008), Lawson (2008), Smith (2008), Turnbull (2016b), and Wagenaar (2012).