

## ***‘UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE’*: 20 years on<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Article for the 领导科学论坛·国家治理评论 2017. This paper draws on the relevant chapters in Rhodes 2017a and 2017b. I have written this reply especially for my Chinese readers. It is published contemporaneously with the Chinese edition of *Understanding Governance*. I am grateful to Professor Ding Huang (Wuhan University) not only for translating *Understanding Governance* and piloting the book to publication but also for giving me the opportunity to write for my Chinese readers.



## Introducing the differentiated polity

A world-famous rock band once sang ‘It was twenty years ago today ...’, and it is 20 years ago that I wrote *Understanding Governance*. In 2017, Renmin University Press will publish a translation of the book, and this event is my excuse for revisiting the book for a second time (see: Rhodes 2007).

The phrase ‘the differentiated polity’ is my preferred summary term for my account of British governance. It is described also as ‘the Anglo-Governance School’ (Marinetto 2003) and ‘the Governance narrative’ (Newman 2005: 8). Marsh (2011 refers to it as ‘the new orthodoxy’. The Westminster model of British government is best understood by exploring such core ideas as a unitary state, parliamentary sovereignty, strong cabinet government, ministerial accountability, majority party control of the executive, and institutionalised opposition (see Rhodes and Weller 2005). *Understanding Governance* and its differentiated polity narrative challenges this account of British government. Its core ideas are policy networks, the core executive, hollowing-out and governance. It argues there has been a shift from government by a unitary state to governance through and by networks (see: 罗茨 1999). Differentiation became more extensive since the 1980s and subsequent decades have seen significant changes in the functional and territorial specialisation of British government. Networks have multiplied and the state’s capacity to steer has been increasingly constrained. Centralisation and control are incomplete and Britain is best viewed as a differentiated polity.

There have been many criticisms of the differentiated polity and its core notions of policy networks, hollowing –out, the core executive, and governance. Of course, any writer is grateful for readers, and, in academia, critical engagement is a mark of respect because your book has been read and the arguments deemed worthy of comment. In these debates, however, I often feel that I am a mere ‘scriptor’ who cannot provide the authoritative reading

of his own text. Rather, it is ‘eternally written here and now’ by each reader (Barthes 1977: 146-6). It is interpreted and reinterpreted to the point where the starting arguments are unrecognisable. Authorial intention is no more. I am reluctant to surrender my intentions – hence this article. I will not even try to reply to every criticism – with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, much of the debate is unduly esoteric, even self-absorbed. Rather, here, I focus on the arguments around the two notions that have attracted most attention: hollowing-out, and governance (see also Rhodes 2017a).

### Hollowing-out

In *Understanding Governance* (1997a: 17-18; and chapter 3) the ‘hollowing out of the state’ referred to the many changes that had taken place, or were taking place, in British government. I suggested that the state had been hollowed out from above (by the European Union (EU) and other forms of international interdependence); from below (by marketization and networks); sideways (by agencies and the several species of parastatal bodies); and by public sector reform. My critics disputed both that such changes had taken place and that they had the effect of reducing the capacity of the central state to steer. In this section, I concentrate on describing what has changed empirically since *Understanding Governance* was published. I seek to demonstrate the continuing relevance of my speculations by revisiting the topics of marketization, the EU, service delivery and public sector reform.<sup>2</sup> In the next section, I look at the effects of governance on the state.

In 1997, the UK economy was recovering from ‘Black Wednesday’ or Britain’s withdrawal from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on 16 September 1992. This

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, I was not alone in diagnosing the hollowing-out of the state. See for example: Frederickson 1996; Jessop 2004; Milward and Proven 2000; and, surprisingly in view of his later strictures on this subject, Peters 1994.

decision cost the UK economy some £3.3 billion and caused an economic recession.

However, by 1997, the economy was growing, unemployment was falling, and inflation was low. Unfortunately for the Conservatives, they gained little credit for the recovery. They polled less than 30 per cent of the electorate and were about to lose power. So, my original remarks were shaped by 18 years of Conservative rule and their avowed intent of redrawing the boundaries of the state.

After New Labour's electoral victory in 1997, Tony Blair kept much of the neoliberal agenda for reforming the public sector but his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, did not believe in the minimalist state. Under his tutelage, public spending rose steadily in the 2000s to a peak of 47.7 per cent of GDP (Keynes and Tetlow 2014). Similarly, public employment rose again in the late 1990s throughout the 2000s. There was a return to bureaucracy. However, with the advent of the Conservative-led Coalition in 2010, both these trends were reversed. Public spending was cut and fell to 44.4 per cent by 2014. Public employment was cut from an average of some 20 per cent in the 2000s to 14.8 per cent in 2013 (Cribb et al. 2014: 36), although health service and education continue to be protected.<sup>3</sup>

Privatisation continued at a lesser rate under New Labour, Coalition and Cameron governments, although some industries were sold to the private sector (for example the Royal Mail, the Tote). The most significant trend since 2010 was the growth of contracting-out. Bowman et al. (2015: 2-3) describe this growth as the emerging 'franchise state'. Citing Gash et al. (2013: 4), they estimate this public service industry had a turnover of some £100 billion a year with some £1 in every £3 going to independent providers (see also Raco 2016). A few

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<sup>3</sup> The Institute of Fiscal Studies provides authoritative commentaries on the state of the economy (see: <http://www.ifs.org.uk/>). The Office for Budget Responsibility is another authoritative source of data – see: <http://budgetresponsibility.org.uk/category/publications/>. See also: [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/psf\\_statistics.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/psf_statistics.htm)

global firms have emerged that specialise in contract delivery and regulation on a mass scale (for example, G4S, Atos, Capita, and Serco). Indeed, the annual update on *Open Public Services* (Cabinet Office 2012: 13) was explicit:

In the world we are now entering, all those who serve the public will have a right to be recognised as public servants – regardless of whether the organisations for which they work are traditional public sector agencies, independent trusts, employee mutuals, private enterprises, social enterprises or community groups. Dedication to the provision of high-quality public services should be recognised as the hallmark of the public servant, regardless of which particular type of employer he or she happens to work for.

The state and these giant corporations are co-dependent. The corporations rely on the taxpayer money, and the state that awards and monitors the contracts has ‘stripped itself of institutional resources and intelligence previously used to deliver goods and services’ (Bowman et al. 2015: 5).

The cuts in public spending and public employment, and the growth of the franchise state were underpinned by the so-called austerity narrative (Blyth 2013; Johnson and Chandler 2015). The ‘structural current budget deficit’ is the perceived problem. It was caused by the spending of the previous Labour government, the secondary banking crisis in America, and world recession. The governing elite agreed the most pressing problem facing British government was the size of the public sector debt. So, the major parties agreed we must have spending cuts to bring the deficit down; fiscal consolidation. As with Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, this economic reality was a brute fact; government must do less and public spending must be cut. An old acronym returned; TINA - there is no

alternative. The budgets for health and education were ring fenced, so most of the cuts fell on welfare payments and local government. However, the combined impact of the continuing Eurozone crisis, slow growth, high unemployment and low productivity meant that deficit targets were not met. Further cuts in public spending were announced over the life of the 2015 parliament. The deserving poor were protected (the elderly). The undeserving poor (everyone else) paid for the polite euphemism of ‘fiscal consolidation’. Cameron has presided over a ‘concerted assault on the bottom third of society’ (Toynbee and Walker 2015: 3). Or, in the language of broadsheet headlines, the recipe is ‘more poverty and worse public services’ (*The Guardian*, 8 December 2013).

This austerity narrative is about not only fiscal consolidation but also that age-old neoliberal ambition for the minimal state. As Bale (2014) argues ‘the right – free-market, small-state, low-tax, tight-borders, tougher sentences, eco- and Euro-sceptical – is where the solid centre of the [Conservative] party now comfortably resides’. So, the franchise state is part of the blueprint for creating and managing the minimal state. It involves a concentration of power in the hands of the Minister and the central department. Intermediate institutions are abolished or bypassed for various forms of markets. Services are out-sourced or privatised. Managers are becoming empowered. The new quasi-markets are subject to regulation by performance measurement regimes that are also intended to foster choice by giving citizens more information. There would appear to be a coherent ‘new governance’ narrative stemming from the impact of neoliberal, managerial and neoconservative ideas (Bevir and Rhodes 2016). This blueprint has been the solid centre of government policy since 2010. It also brings to the fore once again questions about the capacity of the central state. As Bowman et al. (2015: 3) argue the ‘franchise state is socially wasteful and administratively inefficient’. The

companies ‘game the contractual system and taxation regimes’ and the state has ‘limited organisational capabilities’ to regulate such gaming (Bowman et al. 2015: 6).

In other words, the hollowing-out thesis continues to pose important questions about the roles and boundaries of the state. The trends in public spending, public employment and privatisation in the 2010s show the continuing relevance of my argument, with an important qualification. Because I was writing about the heyday of Conservative rule in the 1980s and 1990s, I did not allow for the influence of the differing beliefs of the political parties. It is not black-and-white argument. Some features of the neoliberal agenda are accepted by New Labour, and the Labour opposition under Ed Miliband adhered to the austerity narrative. Nonetheless, neoliberal beliefs in the minimal state are held mainly by the Conservative Party whereas the Labour Party envisages a continuing, even decisive, role for the central state. The franchise state is hollowing-out in new clothes. As in the Thatcher and Major years, Conservative rule continues to hollow out the central state.

The immediate retort to this argument is that the state has greater control over less. But all the recent changes disaggregate public bureaucracies – central and local – while providing limited capacity for regulation. It does not control the franchise state. It does not even monitor the outcomes.

Nor is it obvious that British government had much influence over the issue of British sovereignty in the EU. Indeed, it was the lack of such influence that helped to fuel demands for the 2016 referendum and subsequent British exit from the EU. Indeed, there was a case to be made that the influence of the EU had grown. Clifton (2014) suggests that public service delivery was being Europeanised because many services were increasingly treated as economic and, therefore, within the purview of the Commission. For example, were the

subsidised lifeline ferry services to the Scottish islands an economic service subject to competition rules? The Commission said they were, and the Scottish government had to introduce competitive tendering. To everyone else, the ferries were an unprofitable social service for which there was little scope for competition. No matter. The Commission has become a policy entrepreneur. We enter the era of the 'straightjacketed state'. Similarly, Richardson (2012: 12) argues that the EU has 'acquired quite a high degree of sovereignty and by so doing has begun to look very state like'. Morphet (2013: 201) concludes that the EU has 'shaped key areas of British public policy ... and as the extent of pooled powers has increased, then so has the level of influence.' Britain remained a defensive, semi-detached member of the EU until Brexit. In Morphet's (2013: 209) characterisation, Britain received policies made in the EU rather than engaging with the process. That was not the statecraft of a strong state.

The New Public Management of the 1980s and 1990s became so all embracing it lost any distinctive meaning (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). It became a synonym for public sector reform. Such reform was a constant as successive governments sought for the ever elusive solution they could not articulate to problems they could not define with precision and accuracy. A former senior civil servant opined:

Blair confuses the civil servants around him: On the civil service, he doesn't know what he wants. They say, in effect, 'Tell me what *you* want and *we'll* do it.' But he keeps saying different things. Richard Wilson finds it very difficult the way the Prime Minister jumps around' (cited in Hennessy 2000: 9).

So, initiatives come and go. Hood and Lodge (2007: 59) suggest we have created the ‘civil service reform syndrome’ in which ‘initiatives come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind residues of varying size and style’. Tony Blair famously remarked on public sector reform:

You try getting change, you know, in the public sector and public services and, you know, I bear the scars on my back after two years in government and heaven knows what it’ll be like if it was a bit longer (Blair 1999).

His question was probably rhetorical because over the ensuing years there was yet more frustration over the pace of change. If the aim of managerial reforms was to reduce civil service discretion and increase their responsive to their political masters, then the conclusion is probably, ‘job done’. If the aim was the ‘3Es’ of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, then, at best, the case is non-proven. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 155) describe the results of reform as a ‘half empty wineglass’ because we don’t have the data about efficiency or outcomes.

Whether the preferred term is the franchise state, the straightjacketed state, or the hollow state, there is a common thread linking these terms. It is the debate about the consequences of neoliberal economic ideas. So, privatisation in all guises, membership of the EU, new ways of delivering public services, and public sector reform all change our understanding of the state, and of the capacity of the central state to govern. The reform blueprint for the both Coalition and Cameron’s Conservative governments once again emphasises the salience of these trends for our understanding of the roles and boundaries of the state. Longstanding concerns about the centre’s capacity to steer persist. In the 1990s,

Kettl (1993: 206-7) argued that, as a result of contracting-out, government agencies found themselves 'sitting on top of complex public-private relationships whose dimensions they may only vaguely understand'. They had only 'loose leverage' but remained 'responsible for a system over which they had little real control'. The same fears lie at the heart of the debate about the franchise state in the 2010s.

It is clear from my account of the hollowing-out of the British state that there is a new meta-narrative around austerity and 'the new governance'. Today's neoliberal states have come into being, and are perpetually reconstituted, through constant reform initiatives. Many of the individual reform initiatives have their roots in neoliberal ideas about increased privatisation, deregulation, and reductions in government spending. A recurrent theme in my work is the changing role of the state, asking whether the state has been rolled-back to create the minimalist state or whether it is rolling-out to extend its influence by outsourcing and incorporating others in public governance. Of course, it is both, and my original version of hollowing-out did not allow for *both* these trends. Neither did my critics.

## Governance

In *Understanding Governance* (1997a: chapter 3), I noted the term governance has many meanings, referring to, for example, the minimal state, corporate governance, and the new public management (see also: Kjaer 2004). However, I stipulated one meaning to show how the term can contribute to the analysis of change in British government. So, *governance refers to self-organising, inter-organisational networks* characterised by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state. To distinguish my use from the others, I adopted the shorthand phrase 'network governance'. Responding to the critics of network governance is not as straightforward as it might first appear because the subject moves on. There are now three main approaches to, or waves, of governance: network

governance, metagovernance, and decentred governance. I consider each in turn, focusing on the effects of governance on the role of the state.

### *Network governance*

There is an odd challenge to the network governance narrative that questions whether it is an accurate description (Colebatch 2009; Hughes 2010). Whether the number of networks has grown or whether such networks are new are, frankly, no longer interesting questions. They miss the point. My main concern is the spread of new ideas about markets and networks and the consequent changes in the role of the state. Such sceptics are dealt with brusquely and briskly by Torfing et al. (2012: 31-2). They argue there have been three ‘irreversible changes’: in the expectations of stakeholders about their involvement in collaborative policy making; in the shift of public bureaucracies to ‘open organisations ... engaged in joint problem solving and collaborative service delivery’; and in the belief that network governance is ‘a legitimate alternative to hierarchy and markets’. The new ideas had consequences.

Most critics are more perceptive and have focused, correctly, on the changing role of the state but they see a transformation rather than a weakening of the state.<sup>4</sup> One example must suffice and I examine the critique by Pierre and Peters (2000: 78, 104-5 and 111; 1998; and 2009; Torfing, Peters et al. 2012). Their views are typical and, undeniably, they have been persistent. They argue the shift to network governance could ‘increase public control over society’ because governments ‘rethink the mix of policy instruments’. They continue, ‘coercive or regulatory instruments become less important and ... “softer” instruments gain importance’; for example, for steering instead of rowing. In short, the state has not been hollowed-out but reasserted its privileged position to govern by regulating the mix of

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<sup>4</sup> See also, for example: Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Jessop 2000; Kjær 2004; Newman 2005; Marsh 2011; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003; and Torfing et al. 2011.

governing structures such as markets and networks and deploying indirect instruments of control. There has been no decline of the state. They argue the changes are not a zero-sum game and governance has increased state control over civil society (Pierre and Peters (2000: 78).

It would seem I am a 'scriptor' again, and I am sorely challenged by some of the more egregious misrepresentations. There is some ground clearing to do before we can move forward.

First, I agree with Scharpf (1997: 38 and 40) that, although hierarchical coordination 'remains a relatively rare phenomenon', self-coordination among units takes place in 'the shadow of hierarchy' because, for example, hierarchical structures 'define the context within which negotiations take place'. There is nothing new here because I rehearsed this argument about the continuing importance of hierarchy in Rhodes (1986: 4-7) as well as arguing for the continuing importance of bureaucracy in Australian (Davis and Rhodes 2000) and British government (Rhodes 1994).

Second, some claim my views are 'extreme' (Torfing et al. 2012: 3). It is difficult to reconcile such assertions with what I said. In Rhodes (1997b), I argued that governments had to choose between the three main governing structures of bureaucracy, markets and networks. This article was one of a series of articles written in the mid-1990s and, frankly, I should have included it in *Understanding Governance* (Rhodes 1997a). It would have avoided several misunderstandings of my argument. So, to clear up those misunderstandings, I restate my case:

British government is searching for a new ‘operating code’ , and ‘this search involves choosing not only between governing structures but also the mix of structures and strategies for managing them’ (Rhodes 1997b: 48).

No governing structure works for all services in all conditions. The issue, therefore, is not the superiority of markets and hierarchy over networks, but managing networks in the conditions under which they work best (Rhodes 1997b: 48-9).

Indeed, the title of the 1997b article, ‘it’s the mix that matters’, might suggest that I saw the state’s key task as steering through some mix of markets, hierarchies and networks. Torfing et al. (2012), Pierre and Peters (2000 and 2009) find it impossible to get beyond the eye-catching phrase ‘from government to governance’ to grasp the essentials of my arguments. For example, Torfing et al. (2012: 14) define interactive forms of governance as:

the complex process through which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact in order to formulate, promote, and achieve common objectives by means of mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules, and resources.

The definition accords no special place to command and control despite their stress on the core role of the state. Rather, they stress that complexity, common objectives and decentring are the three key features of this definition. Governments ... ‘often play a crucial role as facilitator and manager ... but *there is no privileged centre* in public policy making, but a number of competing actors and arenas’ (Torfing et al. 2012:15, emphasis added; see also Peters and Pierre 2009: 92). Moreover, Ansell and Torfing (2016: 552) concede that the argument about self-organisation is a common theme, not an extreme position. Given that I

also said the state does not occupy a privileged sovereign position, that the relationship is asymmetric, that centralisation must co-exist with interdependence; and that the state can imperfectly steer (Rhodes 1997a: 199), it is difficult to see how their account differs from mine. Frankly, it would be hard to get a slip of Rizla paper between my views and those of many of my critics (cf. Peters 1994), although I concede that my emphasis fell on the role of non-state actors because others focused on the state to the exclusion of all else.

### *Metagovernance*

Metagovernance is ‘an umbrella concept that describes the role of the state and its characteristic policy instruments in the new world of network governance’ (Bevir 2013: 56). Because network governance stressed the self-organisation of networks and the erosion of state control, its critics looked for ways to bring the state back in. Metagovernance seeks to do just that. It refers to the role of the state in securing coordination in governance and its use of informal modes of steering. As with network governance, metagovernance comes in several varieties (Sørensen and Torfing 2007: 170-80). They share a concern, however, with designing the game of governance and setting its rules; with the varied ways in which the state now steers organisations, governments and networks rather than directly providing services through state bureaucracies, or rowing. These other organisations undertake much of the work of governing; they implement policies, they provide public services, and at times they even regulate themselves. The state governs the organisations that govern civil society; *‘the governance of government and governance’* (Jessop 2000: 23). Moreover, the other organisations characteristically have a degree of autonomy from the state; they are often voluntary or private sector groups or they are governmental agencies or tiers of government separate from the core executive. So, the state cannot govern them solely by the instruments that work in bureaucracies.

Torfining et al. (2012: 156-9; and chapter 7) suggest the traditional role of the public service is ‘supplemented’ (not replaced) with that of the ‘meta-governor managing and facilitating interactive governance’. Their task is to ‘balance autonomy of networks with hands-on intervention’. They have various specific ways of carrying out this balancing act. They become ‘meta-governors’ managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks.

There are several ways in which the state can steer the other actors involved in governance (see for example Jessop 2000: 23-4; Torfining et al. 2012: chapter 7). First, the state can set the rules of the game for other actors and then leave them to do what they will within those rules; they work ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’. So, it can redesign markets, reregulate policy sectors, or introduce constitutional change. It can supplement such hands-on measures with, second, hands-off steering through storytelling. It can organise dialogues, foster meanings, beliefs, and identities among the relevant actors, and influence what actors think and do. Third, the state can steer by the way in which it distributes resources such as money and authority. It can play a boundary spanning role, alter the balance between actors in a network; act as a court of appeal when conflict arises; rebalance the mix of governing structures; and step in when network governance fails. Of course, the state need not adopt a single uniform approach to metagovernance. Finally, public officials have a small p’ political role that can involve campaigning for a policy and forming alliances with politicians. The state can use different approaches in different settings at different times (and for a list of the more specific skills of network management see: 罗茨 2015; and Rhodes 2017a: chapter 5).

So, public servants of the political executive have a new skill set, They manage the complex, non-routine issues, policies and relationships in networks; that is, meta-governing, boundary spanning, and collaborative leadership. Their key task is to manage the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks. The public service needs these new skills, although it is a

step too far to talk of these new skills requiring ‘a full blown cultural transformation’ (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004, 178; cf. Rhodes 2016).

For all the different emphases, these two waves of governance share common features. First, proponents of metagovernance takes for granted the characteristics of network governance. They agree networks are characterised by trust. They accept that states are becoming increasingly fragmented into networks based on several different stakeholders. They agree the dividing line between the state and civil society is becoming more blurred because the relevant stakeholders are private or voluntary sector organisations. So, Jessop (2000: 24) concedes ‘the state is no longer the sovereign authority ... [it is] less hierarchical, less centralised, less *dirigiste*’. There is a shared modernist-empiricist description of the characteristics of governance.

Second, the analysis of metagovernance accepts that non-state actors are both important and self-regulating but it sees the state exerting macro-control over that self-regulation. The state governs the other actors involved in governance. In other words, metagovernance heralds the return of the state by reinventing its governing role; it is ‘bringing the state back in (yet again)’ (Jessop 2007: 54). This return to the state opens opportunities for policy advice on the practice of metagovernance. Network governance and metagovernance share a common concern to manage, directly and indirectly, the networks of service delivery. Whether these critics reinvent the state is a contentious point. The proponents of network governance clearly accepted that the state managed the mix of governing structures and used indirect, diplomatic strategies to steer networks (Rhodes 1997b: 50-51). The literature on network steering has proliferated over the past decade (see Rhodes 2017a: chapter 5). Both network governance and metagovernance treat government departments, local authorities, markets and networks as fixed structures that governments can manipulate using the right

tools. Both seek to improve the ability of the state to manage the mix of hierarchies, markets and networks and of state managers to steer these structures.

Finally, both narratives rely on a reified notion of structure. The proponents of first-wave governance are self-confessed modernist-empiricists with a reified notion of structure rooted in an explicit social science theory of functional differentiation. The proponents of metagovernance also continue to claim the state is a material object, a structure, or a social form. They draw on critical realist epistemology and such notions as ‘emergence’ and ‘mechanisms’ ostensibly to guard against the charge of reification (see for example Jessop 2007; and Rhodes 2017b: chapter 12).

### *Decentred governance*

The decentred governance approach offers a fundamental critique of both network governance and metagovernance by challenging all three shared characteristics (see: Bevir and Rhodes 2003; 2010; and Rhodes 2017b). It argues that governance does not have essentialist features like trust or reciprocity, only family resemblances that are constructed, contested, and contingent. Instead of looking for recurring patterns or creating typologies, it focuses on the everyday practices of agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by traditions. In a phrase, it shifts away from a top-down focus on the intentions of central elites to a bottom-up analysis of the beliefs and practices of citizens, street-level bureaucrats and the like. It explains shifting patterns of governance by focusing on the actors’ own interpretations of events, not external causes such as a global financial crisis. It explores the diverse ways in which such situated agents change the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to dilemmas. Decentred theory rejects the notion of the state as a material object and governance as an emergent structure. It is a ‘stateless’ theory in the sense that it rejects the idea of the state as a pre-existing causal

structure that can be understood as having an autonomous existence and causal effects over and apart from people's beliefs and actions. The state is just an aggregate description for a vast array of meaningful actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting, and contested practices. It highlights a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise by recovering the contingent and contestable narratives or stories that people tell about.<sup>5</sup>

So, the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society was always a myth. The myth obscured the reality of diverse state practices that escaped the control of the centre because they arose from the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors at the boundary of state and civil society. The state is never monolithic and it always negotiates with others. Policy arises from interactions in networks of organisations and individuals. Patterns of rule traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The boundaries between state and civil society are blurred. Trans-national and international links and flows always disrupt national borders. In short, state authority is constantly being remade, negotiated, and contested in widely different ways within widely varying everyday practices

When a decentred approach provides a definition or general account of governance, it should be couched as a set of 'family resemblances'. Wittgenstein (2009 [1953]: 17-20) famously suggested that general concepts such as 'game' should be defined by various traits that overlapped and criss-crossed in much the same way as do the resemblances between members of a family – their builds, eye colour, gait, personalities. He considered various examples of games to challenge the idea that they all possessed a given property or set of properties – skill, enjoyment, victory and defeat – by which we could define the concept.

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<sup>5</sup> On decentred theory see Bevir and Rhodes 2010; and Rhodes 2017b. Its critics include: Finlayson et al. 2004; McAnulla 2006; and Hay 2011.

Instead, he suggested the examples exhibited a network of similarities, at various levels of detail, so they coalesced even though no one feature was common to them all.

We do not master such family resemblances by discovering a theory or rule that tells us precisely when we should and should not apply it. Our grasp of the concept consists in our ability to explain why it should be applied in one case but not another, our ability to draw analogies with other cases, and our ability to point to the criss-crossing similarities. Our knowledge of 'governance' is analogous to our knowledge of 'game' as described by Wittgenstein. It is 'completely expressed' by our describing various cases of governance, showing how other cases can be considered as analogous to these, and suggesting that we would be unlikely to describe yet other cases as ones of governance.

Some of the family resemblances that characterise governance derive from a focus on meaning in action and apply to all patterns of rule. A decentred approach highlights, first, a more differentiated view of state authority and its exercise. All patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents.

A decentred approach suggests, second, these everyday practices arise from situated agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by traditions and expressed in stories. In every government department, we can identify departmental traditions, often embodied in rituals and routines. For example, British civil servants are socialised into the broad notions of the Westminster model, such as ministerial responsibility, as well as the specific ways of doing things around here. For example, they are socialised into the idea of a profession, and learn the framework of the acceptable (Rhodes 2011: 59-61; 284-5; and chapter 7). Governance is

not any given set of characteristics. It is the stories people use to construct, convey, and explain traditions, dilemmas, beliefs and practices.

A decentred approach also might help to highlight a third family resemblance that characterises British governance but might not be found in patterns of rule in other times or places. In Britain, the neoliberal reforms of the Conservatives and New Labour have brought about a shift from hierarchy to markets to networks. While this shift is widely recognised, a decentred approach suggests, crucially, that it takes many diverse forms; it is a contingent mix that can and does vary between state traditions.

A fourth family resemblance is that the central state has adopted a less hands-on role and a more varied toolkit. A decentred approach suggests, crucially, that steering, co-ordination, and regulation take many diverse hands-off forms and involve many non-state actors. Governance is found in many and new forms.

A decentred approach highlights the resemblances that contribute to a general characterisation of governance and a more specific characterisation of governance in Britain. It highlights plurality, the constructed nature of the state, the oscillating mix of governing structures, and self-organizing networks. Nonetheless, it disavows any logic to the specific forms that governance takes in particular circumstances. So, a decentred approach resolves the theoretical difficulties that beset earlier narratives of the changing state. It avoids the unacceptable suggestion that institutions fix the actions of individuals in them rather than being products of those actions. It replaces unhelpful phrases such as path-dependency with an analysis of change rooted in the beliefs and practices of situated agents. Yet it allows political scientists to offer aggregate studies by using the idea of tradition to explain how people come to hold beliefs and perform practices.

A decentred theory of governance challenges the dominant mainstream academic and the official view of networks as structures to be managed by the state, and as a tool for greater state control. Rather, it focuses on local networks and local knowledge. It argues that local networks cease to be local networks when they are centrally manipulated or directed. In effect, when networks are centrally managed, horizontal relationships are transformed into vertical relationships. Such relationships are better described as exercises in official consultation; at least this phrase does not imply any local discretion or local ownership. But the effect is that central management of local networks threatens their autonomy, distinctiveness and effectiveness. This threat arises because any pattern of governance is a product of diverse practices that are themselves composed of multiple individuals acting on all sorts of conflicting beliefs which they have reached against the background of many traditions and in response to varied dilemmas. So, a decentred approach sees governance arising from the bottom-up and suggests that central intervention will undermine the bottom-up construction of governance, provoking resistance and generating unintended consequences.

### **Conclusions: the differentiated polity revisited**

The differentiated polity identifies important empirical gaps in the Westminster model and key changes in British government. It focuses on the dilemmas that arise as the ideas and practices of the centralised Westminster government conflict with the ideas of practices of the differentiated polity. It opens new avenues of exploration on key issues confronting policy making and policy-implementation. The differentiated polity narrative is best seen as a corrective to the traditional Westminster model. I use it to develop a new way of seeing state authority in its relationship to civil society. In a phrase, *Understanding Governance* was edifying and many of the questions it raised continue to occupy scholars and practitioners alike because this narrative is not just a story that academics tell to one another. It is hard to

draw a clear-cut distinction between academic commentators and elite actors. They share ideas and assumptions about how the system works. These images or organising perspectives are common currency. Such is the case for governance; elite actors talk of holistic governance and of joined-up government (see Bevir 2005: 29-30 and 48-51). It was edifying for practitioners too.

I have made it clear throughout this article that my analysis focuses on British government. However, the approach travels well to the advanced industrial democracies of Western Europe and to Westminster democracies such as Australia and Canada (see Elgie 2011). However, does it travel well to China? In its details, my account of the differentiated polity is irrelevant. But if, as I claim, the approach is edifying, the details matter not. The key issue is whether the study of governance poses new questions about the government of China.

The study of governances poses questions directly relevant to Chinese governance because it highlights a differentiated view of state authority and its exercise. In a country as vast as China with many ethnic groups and languages, what works in Beijing may well generate unintended consequences elsewhere. Are there implementation deficits within and between provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions? Are such changes valuable local 'correctives' or 'errors'? Governance poses questions about the shifting boundaries between state and civil society. Governance has no essential characteristics; it is a contingent mix of resemblances that can and do vary between state traditions. So, the relevant question is not whether governance in China resembles governance in Britain. Rather, the issue is how the notion of governance is constructed in China, by whom, and against the backcloth of which traditions. Such questions about the boundary between the state and civil society are relevant because of China's experiment with local deliberative democracy. With its focus on the mix of governing structures, governance explores the conditions under which hierarchy, markets

and networks work best. Given that the Chinese government is concerned with effective public service delivery, exploring when (say) networks work is as relevant in China as in Britain. If networks are seen as an effective mechanism for delivering services, then the efficient management of those networks is again of interest. How do you steer a network (罗茨 2015)? If effective management requires local knowledge, what is the best way of collecting and using that knowledge? If effective network management requires indirect, hands-off steering can the CCP stand back and rely on light touch regulation. If local networks have greater discretion, what are the implications for official corruption? In short, the governance perspective poses potentially edifying questions about Chinese governance. Beyond dispute, it provides a lengthy research agenda for specialists in Chinese public administration.

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