
Political science after Foucault

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Abstract

This article concerns the relevance of postfoundationalism, including the ideas of Michel Foucault, for political science. The first half of the article distinguishes three forms of postfoundationalism, all of which draw some of their inspiration from Foucault. First, the governmentality literature draws on Marxist theories of social control, and then absorbs Foucault's focus on power/knowledge. Second, the post-Marxists combine the formal linguistics of Saussure with a focus on hegemonic discourses. Third, some social humanists infuse Foucauldian themes into the New Left's focus on culture, agency and resistance. The second half of the article then describes a research program that may bring together these varieties of postfoundationalism. This research program includes aggregate concepts that overtly allow for the constitutive role of meanings in social life and the contingent nature of these meanings. The concepts are: situated agency, practice and power. A postfoundational research program also needs concepts that demarcate a historicist form of explanation, that is, concepts such as narrative, tradition and dilemma. Finally, this research program contains specific empirical focuses to link these aggregate and explanatory concepts back to governmentality, post-Marxism and social humanism.

Keywords

cultural studies, Michel Foucault, governmentality, New Left, postfoundationalism, post-Marxism

What is the relevance of postfoundationalism, including the ideas of Michel Foucault, for political science? One might address this question by deducing the logical implications of postfoundationalism. However, because I doubt that an epistemological doctrine such as postfoundationalism leads inexorably to a clearly defined research

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agenda in political science, I will proceed in a more piecemeal manner. In the first half of this article, I will distinguish varieties of postfoundationalism, all of which draw some of their inspiration from Foucault. In the second half of the article, I describe a research program that tries to bring together these varieties of postfoundationalism. I hope thereby to allow for the differences among political scientists inspired to a greater or lesser extent by Foucault while encouraging them to seek the synergies and strengths that come from a shared set of concepts and empirical focuses.

So, this article is neither an interpretation of Foucault nor a reception history that traces his impact on political science. It is an attempt to identify and promote a research program in political science based on postfoundationalism. Attempts to craft this kind of research program are, in my view, often hindered by the Foucault industry. Parts of the Foucault industry have got bogged down in tedious quibbling over the meaning of his texts. Other parts are trapped in a type of piety in which Foucault's word is lore and any criticism of him is heresy. The result is the impoverishment of debates about issues such as the nature of agency, the importance of intentionality, and the kinds of explanatory concepts appropriate to social phenomena. It is time for postfoundationalists to confront issues such as the following. If we bring the subject back in (as Foucault clearly did), how should we account for the ways people modify beliefs, discourses and practices? If genealogy overturns the archaeological idea that epistemes structure the thought and practice of an age (as Foucault rightly implied that it did), can we still cling to aggregate concepts such as 'regime of truth' and if so how are we to reinterpret these concepts? There are, of course, other equally compelling questions. My general point is that if postfoundationalists are to develop a vibrant research program, they will have to pay less attention and show less fidelity to authors – and it is ironic that Foucault has become the kind of author whose existence he challenged – and give more thought to the clarity and development of their theories and concepts.

Varieties of postfoundationalism

There are at least three strands of postfoundational political science. Table 1 provides an overview. The governmentality literature draws on Marxist theories of social control and absorbs Foucault's focus on power/knowledge. The post-Marxists combine Saussurean linguistics with a focus on hegemonic discourses. Social humanists infuse Foucauldian themes into the New Left's focus on culture, agency and resistance.

Obviously these three traditions are not rigidly separate. Themes often flow from one tradition to another, and individual postfoundationalists often combine themes from different traditions. To offer one example: Stuart Hall's work combined the New Left's emphasis on the sociology of culture with a concept of hegemony around the same time as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe combined the concept of hegemony with a poststructuralism linked to Saussurean linguistics (Hall, Lumley and McLennan, 1978; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Similarly, to offer a more personal example: my work on New Labour instantiates a social humanist concern with ideologies and agency, but one of its main focuses is on how discourses from the social sciences have created a new governmentality (Bevir, 2005).

Table 1. Varieties of postfoundationalism

	Governmentality	Post-Marxism	Social humanism
Historical background (1) Thinker(s)	(1) Louis Althusser	(1) Antonio Gramsci	(1) New Left – Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson
(2) Key concept	(2) Social control	(2) Hegemony	(2) Radical cultures and traditions
Theoretical themes	Power/knowledge	Semiotic code – relations among signifiers	Agency situated in cultural practices
Empirical focus	Technical discourses as ways of making subjects through public policy	Collective identities – especially those of gender, race and sexuality	Ideologies and resistance
Examples	(1) Rose (1999) (2) Barry, Osborne, and Rose (1996b)	(1) Laclau and Mouffe (1985) (2) Smith (1994)	(1) Hall (1983) (2) Bevir and Trentmann (2007)

Governmentality

Foucault introduced the notion of governmentality in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978 and his essay on the topic was first made available in English in a collection of essays, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Foucault, 1991). The Anglo-Foucauldians have since gone on to develop governmentality as a distinctive approach to politics (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996a). Many of the Anglo-Foucauldians were attracted to Althusser's Marxist theory of social control, and this theory inspired many themes in Foucault's work (Resch, 1992; Stedman Jones, 1996). Foucault deployed structuralist and poststructuralist ideas to imply that distinctions such as those between madness and sanity or sickness and health were products of particular epistemes or discourses rather than neutral or rational ways of capturing reality (Foucault, 1989, 1973). He suggested that the function of institutions such as asylums and clinics was not the scientific and humanitarian promotion of health, but rather social control and the normalization of deviant individuals. Governmentality takes a similar approach to the study of modern politics.

Anglo-Foucauldians often deny that Foucault provided a theory that constitutes the best way of understanding politics. They take him instead to have sketched out a mode and field of inquiry. The mode of inquiry is genealogies of the power/knowledge that informs current practices. These genealogies reveal the contingency of contemporary political practices, undermining any sense that they are neutral or inevitable. The field of inquiry directs us away from an excessive focus on the state and toward the study of the diverse processes by which subjects are normalized. This field of inquiry includes the diffuse ways in which government and social power impact on populations. It draws attention to the way conduct is shaped to certain ends by discourses and practices. As Nikolas Rose explains, 'the state now appears simply as one element – whose functionality is historically specific and contextually variable – in multiple circuits of power, connecting a diversity of authorities and forces, within a whole variety of complex assemblages' (Rose, 1999: 5).

The literature on governmentality portrays modern politics as being composed of various technologies that have arisen since the early 19th century, as liberalism passed through welfarism on into neo-liberalism.¹ Initially 19th-century liberalism was less a rejection of state intervention than a positive political rationality by which to manage complex interactions in both society and the economy. Liberalism attempted to generate its preferred outcomes through dynamic interactions in society and the economy rather than by state activity. Later welfare states arose as a result of changing dynamics within liberalism. Modern industrial society gave rise to new social problems. Liberalism then tried to guarantee the security of the economy and state by responding to these social problems with new technologies that collectively constituted the welfare state. In this view, public housing, unemployment insurance and nationalized health care appear as technologies of power that normalize subjects. Finally neo-liberalism arose as a response to problems in welfarism. New rationalities were promoted on the grounds that the welfare state and Keynesianism relied on unproductive interferences with market relations. Neo-liberalism consists of governmental technologies that actively foster competitive market relations, simultaneously shifting responsibility to the individual and

increasing social efficiency. Under neo-liberalism, 'it was the responsibility of political government to *actively* create the conditions within which entrepreneurial and competitive conduct is possible' (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996b: 10).

Anglo-Foucauldians also extend Foucault's concern with the ways apparently neutral, scientific discourses establish particular subjectivities (e.g. Rose, 1999). They often conceive of liberalism, welfarism and neo-liberalism as composed of policies that seek to normalize subjects by drawing on technical discourses from disciplines such as medicine, social science, statistics, and public health. Initially liberalism did not try to manage individual morality so much as to guarantee the security of economic relations. Then, in the middle of the 19th century, liberal governments began to regulate the morals of particular segments of the population, with institutions such as the poorhouse disciplining people who had perceived pathologies of character. In the 20th century, the welfare state and Keynesianism arose as technologies by which experts attempted to govern subjectivities to manage pathologies made visible by new social statistics. Finally, neo-liberalism has brought an individualization of responsibility. Where the welfare state embodied a collectivist ethos, neo-liberalism constructs individuals as responsible for their own conduct. Neo-liberalism promotes freedom understood as personal choice at the same time as it uses psychology to create new forms of control. Psychological technologies increasingly influence how individuals think about every aspect of their lives, including sex, consumption, work and health. Neo-liberalism is thus a form of governmentality in which individuals discipline themselves to use their freedom to make responsible choices. Individuals are expected to analyse themselves and then to improve all aspects of their lives in ways that benefit themselves, their community and the state.

Post-Marxism

Post-Marxists modify Gramsci's idea of hegemony by infusing it with Saussure's structuralist analysis of language as reworked by poststructuralists such as Foucault. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe analyse discourses in terms of the quasi-structural properties of signs, tracing the relations and properties of signs and discourses not to class relations but to a quasi-structural psychology that they adopt from Jacques Lacan. Laclau and Mouffe set out to dissociate Marxism from foundationalism and essentialism. They rejected theories that privilege the economic over the ideological and social class over discursively constructed identities. Gramsci used hegemony to refer to class domination through ideology, suggesting bourgeois hegemony explains why the workers consent to capitalism and so why there has not been a revolution. Laclau and Mouffe, in contrast, use the concept of hegemony to dismiss social theories based on economic and class analysis. In their view, 'the search for a "true" working class and its limits is a false problem, and as such lacks any theoretical or political relevance' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 84).

Laclau and Mouffe conceive of a discursive formation as 'a configuration, which in certain contexts of exteriority can be *signified* as a totality' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 106). Their language and approach derive from Saussurean linguistics. Saussure argued that the relationship of a signified (or concept) to a signifier (or word) is an arbitrary one

(Saussure, 1966). Any signifier can evoke any signified provided only that it differs from other signifiers. The value of any signifier derives solely from relations of difference in a system of signs. Poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida are often read as having argued that the relation between concepts and reality is similarly arbitrary: concepts can be understood not as referring to the world but solely in terms of the relations of difference among them in a discourse.

A Saussurean legacy appears in three prominent features of Laclau and Mouffe's concept of discourse. First, Laclau and Mouffe dismiss concerns with the relationship of discourses to a putative extra-discursive reality, such as that of class struggle. Sometimes they imply that the world, including class antagonisms, is a product of discourses. At other times they appear to allow for an extra-discursive reality while contending that only signs in existing discourses can be comprehended. Either way, they rule out attempts to understand discourses as reflections of the world or responses to it. Second, Laclau and Mouffe stress the constitutive role of relations of difference both within and between discourses. They imply that in any given discourse a binary structure governs identities. All identities are necessarily defined in opposition to an excluded other. Third, Laclau and Mouffe are largely dismissive of agency. They argue that discourses fix or limit what individuals say and do, and they analyse discourses in terms of structural relations among signs, not the ways agents use language.

Laclau and Mouffe tie their concept of discourse not to pre-discursive social facts but to Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. In their account, the subject desires 'fullness', conceived as psychological stability based on the integration of the self with the other. Yet, this desire for fullness is thwarted structurally by a primordial 'lack' since there is always doubt as to whether the 'other' has recognized the self. This lack then leads to the other's getting blamed for blocked identity. A quasi-structural antagonism between self and other is thus integral to the process of identity formation.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the same quasi-structural logic applies to discourses. On the one hand, discourses exhibit a logic of equivalence in that they try to integrate many views into one worldview and to stress commonalities in contrast to an other. On the other hand, discourses thus exhibit a logic of difference in that they are constituted by an antagonism to the other – an antagonism that always limits the extent to which they can achieve integration. The interplay between equivalence and difference in discourses constitutes hegemonic struggles. Laclau and Mouffe argue that a hegemonic discourse increases its bloc of control through the logic of equivalence but its ability to do so is limited by a logic of difference that precludes its achieving full closure and so creates a space for counter-hegemonic discourses to emerge.

Most applications of post-Marxism concentrate on discourses connected with identities of gender and race. Post-Marxists argue that subject positions are the constructs of contingent discourses, not natural or biological givens. The subject positions that a discourse creates derive not from pre-discursive social relations or biological facts, but from political strategies and the structural relations between concepts in discourses. The appearance of normality that attaches to some subject positions is merely an effect of the hegemonic status of the relevant discourse. A good example is Anna-Marie Smith's *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality* (1994). In the 1950s Enoch Powell opposed the retreat from imperial power on the grounds that

Empire was integral to British identity. Later, after decolonization seemed inevitable, he promoted a new British identity distinct from Empire. Powellism used race as a 'nodal point' that constituted the 'other' it needed in order to postulate an internal space destroyed by decolonization. Smith also shows how Powellism constructed black immigrants as predatory, masculine subjects. In Powell's famous 'rivers of blood' speech, he read from the letter of a 'white woman old-age pensioner' portraying her as the victim of a black invasion taking over the once 'respectable' street on which she lived.

Social humanism

The New Left preceded Laclau and Mouffe in attempting to liberate Marxism from authoritarian politics and economic determinism. Many members of the New Left responded to the Soviet invasion of Hungary and knowledge of Stalinism's brutalities by leaving the Communist Party and championing an indigenous tradition of radical cultural and moral criticism (Dworkin, 1997; Kenny, 1995). Raymond Williams provided arguably the most influential theory of culture from within the New Left. He appealed to culture to explain aspects of social and political life that did not fit with an economic reductionism. At the time culture was associated almost exclusively with high culture. Williams added a sense of mass culture as a site of political dissent and struggle. In *The Long Revolution*, he argued that political battles could get fought out in the world of art and ideas, rejecting the idea that the economic base determines the cultural superstructure, and arguing that because dominant groups can never entirely control social processes, subordinate groups can always contest ruling ideologies (Williams, 1961).

Although Williams made culture a prominent concern for the New Left, the rise of cultural studies owed much to Stuart Hall and his work from 1968 to 1979 as director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Hall followed the New Left in conceiving of culture as a form of expression also found in the everyday life of subordinated groups. Equally, however, an encounter with Foucault and poststructuralism led Hall to modify the New Left's appeal to lived experience.² Williams tended to describe cultures of resistance as responses to experiences of the brutal realities of capitalism. In contrast, Hall now paid more attention to the way in which ideological traditions constructed people's experiences (Hall and Jefferson, 1993). The point was not to return to the old view that ideologies represented a false consciousness that hid the reality of the class struggle; rather, the point was to insist on the importance of ideology as a site of struggle for social change.

To bridge the gap between culturalism and postfoundationalism, Hall turned to Gramsci's concept of hegemony. For Hall, hegemony is a specific process of ideological struggle – a process that he understands in terms of a humanist historicism rather than the quasi-structural psychology adopted by Laclau and Mouffe (Hall, 1988, 1986). Culture is, in this view, a site of hegemonic control and struggle: it reinforces power relations while allowing space for dissent and resistance. Popular culture can reinforce hegemonic ideas and identities, notably by representing them as natural, inexorable, or rational. And

popular culture can be a site of resistance by subordinated groups. Hall's concern with agency and resistance spills over into an emphasis on the consumption as well as the production of culture. Subordinate groups can resist cultural discourses and symbols by consuming them in ways that draw on local patterns of dissent.

Social humanists characteristically explore ruling ideologies and resistance to them. The most obvious examples have been studies of Thatcherism and New Labour. In the 1980s, Hall offered an account of Thatcherism as a hegemonic project characterized by 'authoritarian populism'. Thatcherism developed a right-wing populism that aligned the neglected workers with anti-collectivism, presenting neo-liberal ideas as the common sense of the British people. This right-wing populism combined themes from a tradition of 'organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism' (Hall, 1983: 29). In addition, Thatcherism was authoritarian, intensifying state control over economic life, eroding democratic institutions and even curtailing formal liberties. The tensions between Thatcherism's populism and its authoritarianism provided a space for resistance in which the left might recoup its ideological losses.

No doubt New Labour likes to think it recouped these losses. Social humanists generally disagree. Hall himself portrays New Labour as little more than a continuation of neo-liberalism. He argues that New Labour is a hybrid regime, combining a dominant neo-liberalism with a subordinate social democratic notion of active government, and able to hold these two discourses together only through the constant use of 'spin' (Hall, 2003). Other social humanists have been more attentive to New Labour's transformation of both social democratic and neo-liberal traditions. Some suggest that New Labour has given up on grand visions of a transformed society, turning instead to modernization in accord with social theories (Finlayson, 2003). Others argue that the social theories on which New Labour most relies are communitarianism and new institutionalism (Bevir, 2005).

A research program

There are several postfoundational approaches to political science. The literature on governmentality draws heavily on Foucault's own work. Post-Marxism and social humanism treat Foucault instead as just one among several influences – perhaps a more central influence, perhaps a more marginal one. How can political scientists identify and develop a shared research program among the various postfoundationalisms? I would suggest that the varieties of postfoundationalism share a commitment to studying meanings (power/knowledge, discourses and beliefs) as being constitutive of political practices. A focus on meanings requires an interpretive political science. If we are to understand actions and practices, we have to offer interpretations of the meanings that inform them.

I would also suggest that the varieties of postfoundationalism all treat meanings (and so actions and practices) as being contingent, not natural, inexorable, or inherently rational. This focus on contingency requires a historicist political science. If we are to explain actions and practices, we have to show how they happened historically to arise.

A postfoundationalist research agenda in political science will be interpretive and historicist. More specifically, it will consist at a minimum of:

- aggregate concepts that avoid reification by insisting on the meaningful nature of actions and practices;
- explanatory concepts that eschew structuralist and formalist tropes in favor of a clear historicism;
- empirical focuses that bridge the aggregate and explanatory concepts to the varieties of postfoundationalism discussed above.

Finally, these concepts and focuses will have to differ from those that define alternative research programs in political science.

Aggregate concepts

To begin, let us consider concepts that refer primarily to the ontological nature of the state: situated agency, practice and power. Postfoundationalists may think about the self, social life and the state as being constituted by the meanings or beliefs of the people involved. They may then think of these beliefs as heavily influenced albeit not determined by a social discourse or tradition.

(1) *Situated agency.* A particular concept of the human agent constitutes the micro-level of most social theories. As postfoundationalists we will surely reject the possibility of autonomous subjects who form beliefs and act on the basis of their own pure experiences or pure reason. All experiences and all reasoning occur in a web of beliefs or, as others may say, a system of signs. However, to reject autonomy is not necessarily to reject agency. To accept agency is to imply that people have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can transform the social background. Agency is possible, but it is always situated in a particular context. The concept of situated agency has some echoes with the later work of Foucault. It recognizes that people make themselves, as he came to do, while still rejecting the autonomous view of the subject associated with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, the high romantic view of authorship, and liberationist theories of sexuality.

Some readers may mistake this talk of agency in context for the institutionalist claim that actors are rational in given institutional settings. Here postfoundationalists may differ from institutionalists in two respects. First, whereas institutionalists conceive of the context in terms of external institutions, postfoundationalists may think of it as the wider web of beliefs of the actor, where this wider web of beliefs reflects a historical tradition. Second, whereas the institutionalists appear to define rationality in terms derived from rational choice theory, postfoundationalists may emphasize local reasoning.

Reasoning is always local in that it occurs in the context of agents' existing webs of belief. The adjective 'local' refers, in other words, to the fact that reasoning always takes place against the background of a particular subjective or intersubjective web of beliefs. While the content of the relevant web of beliefs varies from case to case, there is no possibility of reasoning outside of any such background. To insist on the local nature

of reasoning is thus to preclude the autonomous and universal concepts of reasoning and subjectivity associated with much rational choice theory. Whereas rational choice theory often gestures at a view from nowhere – as if people could adopt beliefs and make decisions in ways that do not depend on the prior views they hold – local reasoning occurs in the specific context of just such prior views. Similarly, whereas rational choice theory often gestures at an assumption of perfect information, local reasoning recognizes that agents can use only the information they possess, and they do just that even when the relevant information happens to be false.

While the adjective ‘local’ captures the fact that reasoning only takes place against the background of prior beliefs, it need not have a spatial content. Local here means ‘local to a web of beliefs’, not necessarily ‘local to a geographical area’. Thus local reasoning differs importantly from the cognate concept of local knowledge (Geertz, 1983). Local knowledge refers to people’s grasp of their own experiences, circumstances and locality, and it is taken to be specific, concrete and practical, rather than general, abstract and theoretical. Usually local knowledge is thus contrasted less with an autonomous view from nowhere than with expert knowledge based on technical or professional training.

(2) *Practice*. Once postfoundationalists leave the micro-level for the mid-level and macro-level, they may conceive of social objects as practices, rather than institutions, structures, or systems. A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Practices often give us grounds for postulating beliefs, for we can ascribe beliefs to people only in interpreting their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions since people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about the practice, and, of course, these beliefs need not be accurate.

There is a sense in which practices can constitute the consequences of actions. The effects of actions often depend on the responses of others. So, if we equate a practice with the set of actions by which others respond to an act, then, by definition, that practice constitutes the consequences of the act. Still, we should remember here that the practice is composed solely of the contingent actions of individuals. Thus, it is these actions in their diversity and contingency that constitute the consequences of the action, and we explain these actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, rather than by reference to the practice itself.

When political scientists appeal to ‘institutions’, they often evoke something akin to a practice, while ascribing to it a constraining power greater than my analysis allows. If they do want to ascribe such constraining power to practices, they need to specify what they mean by constraint and how exactly practices constrain actions. Clearly practices – or at least the actions of others – constrain the effects, and so effectiveness, of an action. What remains unclear is how practices could constrain the actions people might attempt to perform.

(3) *Power*. No doubt postfoundationalists will avoid a concept of power that refers to social relations based on interests that people allegedly have outside of the particular traditions by which they make sense of the world. They will argue that people always

construct their understanding of their interests against the background of a tradition. Nonetheless, there are, as Foucault emphasized, other ways of conceiving of power.

For a start, power can refer to the way in which traditions impact on individuals' beliefs thereby helping to define them, their actions, and so the world. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving us our beliefs and actions, and so in making our world. A postfoundational approach is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contingent beliefs formed against the background of traditions.

In addition, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what we can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as elected politicians, senior civil servants, doctors, police officers and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, a postfoundational approach shows how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. Interpretive studies can show how local actors – Whitehall bureaucrats, doctors, police officers, etc. – are able to draw on their own traditions to resist policies inspired by the narratives of others in the policy cascade.

Explanatory concepts

Let us turn now to the kind of concepts required by historicist explanations. Historicist narratives work not by referring to a reified process, mechanism, or norm, but by describing contingent patterns of action in their specific contexts. Such narratives are not only temporal in that they move through time; they are also historical in that they locate the phenomena at a specific moment in time by using explanatory concepts such as tradition and dilemma (Bevir, 1999).

(1) Narrative. It is often claimed that positivist political science provides causal explanations while postfoundational and other interpretive approaches provide understanding of beliefs, discourses and actions. The problem with these definitions is they suggest that political scientists using an interpretive approach try only to understand or reconstruct objects, not to explain them. Yet interpretive political scientists often write as if their narratives explained actions by pointing to their causes. Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word 'cause' to describe the explanatory relationship between people and events. When they do so, they typically use the word 'cause' to indicate the presence of a significant relationship of the sort characteristic of explanation in their discipline. Narrative is a form of explanation that works by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them.

Narratives depend on the conditional connections between beliefs, desires and actions. These conditional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Because they are not necessary, political science differs from the natural sciences. Because they are not arbitrary, we can use them to explain actions and practices. Conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. They condition each other, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship. Equally, the one does not follow from the other, so they do not have a necessary relationship. They embody contingency.

Although narrative explanations also appear in works of fiction, we need not equate political science to fiction. Postfoundationalists offer us narratives that strive, to the best of the narrator's ability, to capture the way in which events did happen in the past or are today, whereas writers of fiction need not do so. Political scientists cannot ignore the facts, although we must accept that no fact is simply given to them.

(2) *Tradition*. The concept of a tradition overlaps with others such as discourse or power/knowledge, but it explicitly allows room for situated agency. A tradition is the ideational background against which individuals come to adopt an initial web of beliefs. It influences (without determining or – in a strict philosophical sense – limiting) the beliefs they later go on to adopt. The philosophical justification for this definition of tradition derives from a postfoundational rejection of autonomy with a defense of situated agency. Traditions help to explain why people hold the beliefs they do; and because beliefs are constitutive of actions, they also help to explain actions. Traditions cannot fully explain actions partly because people act on desires as well as beliefs, and partly because people are agents capable of innovating against the background of a tradition. While a tradition explains why an agent adopted an initial web of beliefs, it consists solely of the beliefs of other actors.

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

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

Positivists sometimes adopt concepts such as 'dilemma' or 'pressure' to refer to the sources of change, but they appear then to equate such pressures with objective facts about the world rather than the subjective beliefs of policy actors. If they are to define pressures in this way, they need an analysis of how these pressures lead people to change their beliefs and actions. They need to argue either that people are bound to experience a pressure as it is, or that a pressure leads to new actions (and so presumably beliefs) even though the actor has no subjective awareness of it.

Empirical focuses

To conclude, let us look briefly at the empirical focuses that bridge these aggregate and explanatory concepts to the varieties of postfoundationalism discussed above.

(1) *Elite discourses and narratives.* A postfoundational approach suggests that political scientists should pay more attention to the traditions against the background of which elites construct their worldviews including their views of their own interests. Work on governmentality often relies heavily on official policy documents to postulate the forms of knowledge that govern conduct. Post-Marxists also explore the dominant discourses in society, often by looking at official texts and discourses. Social humanists typically examine ideological traditions and the narratives they tell. Yet, the central elite need not be a uniform group, all the members of which conceive of their interests in the same way, share a common culture, or speak a shared discourse. A postfoundational approach suggests that political scientists should ask whether different sections of the elite do not draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about the world, their place within it, and their interests and values. In Britain, for example, the different members of the central elite are inspired by Tory, Whig, liberal and socialist narratives. The dominant narrative in the central civil service used to be a Whig one, but a liberal managerial narrative has clearly made headway in recent years.

(2) *Social Science in policy-making.* Even as the central elite may well use diverse narratives, so they often turn to forms of expertise to define specific policies. Nowadays different traditions of social science influence public policy. A postfoundational approach may draw attention to the varied governmentalities that inform policies across different sectors and different geographical spaces. Governmentality refers here specifically to the scientific beliefs and associated technologies that govern conduct; it captures the ways in which governments and other social actors draw on knowledge in order to construct policies and practices, especially those that regulate and create subjectivities. Britain, like much of the world, has witnessed the rise of governmentalities based on neo-liberal knowledge of the markets and more recently institutionalist knowledge of society, networks and legitimacy. In my view, Foucault's single greatest insight was recognition of the ways technical forms of knowledge influenced the organization of social life including norms of conduct.

(3) *Popular resistance.* When political scientists neglect agency, they can give the impression that politics and policies arise exclusively from the strategies and interactions of central and local elites. However, other actors can resist, transform and thwart the agendas of elites. A postfoundational approach draws attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inspire street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Policy cascades are sites of struggles not just between strategic elites, but between all kinds of actors with different views and ideals reached against the background of different traditions. Subordinate actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by consuming them in ways that draw on their local traditions and their local reasoning. For example, police officers are often influenced by cultures and

traditions that encourage them to prioritize combating crime and so to neglect community policing even when it is supported by elite policy-makers. Likewise, citizens may continue to act on territorial loyalties and identities that bear little resemblance to the administrative units crafted by policy-makers. Although Foucault's historical writings are replete with references to humble agents, work on governmentality has been slow to follow. Official texts and discourses are assumed to provide an accurate picture of policy and its workings. Little effort is spent on the kind of ethnographic work that would be needed to discover how people throughout the policy cascade actually read, implemented, resisted and transformed the official policy.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to think of this research agenda as representing an overlapping consensus among the different varieties of postfoundational political science. To the contrary, the research agenda deliberately takes sides on some of the issues that divide the varieties of postfoundationalism. For example, the inclusion of situated agency embraces some of the humanism of the New Left, challenging lingering structuralist themes in some of the literature on governmentality. The clear emphasis on historicist explanations fits the genealogical stance of governmentality more comfortably than it does the formal modernism of the linguistic and psychological theories that lurk in much post-Marxism.

I have taken sides on these issues because I want to carve out a research agenda that clearly avoids the reification and determinism that characterize most other approaches to political science. A lingering structuralism can lead poststructuralists to privilege formal, synchronic approaches at the expense of humanism and historicism, thereby coming perilously close to reification and determinism. Some poststructuralists appear to reify language; they reduce the meaning of people's contingent speech-acts to unstable relations among signs. Likewise, some poststructuralists appear to neglect agency for something like a linguistic determinism. Of course, the poststructuralists themselves often criticize structuralists for exhibiting such determinism while implying that they have now come to conceive of change, chance and transformation in terms of instabilities inherent within structures – instabilities that threaten the structure and put it into contradiction with itself. However, they thereby elide instead of answering questions about whether we are to understand such instability, contradiction and transformation as necessary qualities of a disembodied quasi-structure or as contingent properties and products of situated agency.

When postfoundationalists define a research agenda that avoids reification and determinism, they clarify the philosophical differences between their position and most other approaches to political science. Most modernist political science relies on formal and synchronic explanations couched in terms of systems, correlations, or models. These formal explanations contain or hide the conflicts and contingencies produced by situated agency in specific historical settings. If postfoundationalists clearly reject formal forms of explanation with their tendency toward reification and determinism, then they will be better able to adopt a research agenda that privileges conflicts and contingencies.

Notes

1. For Foucault's own discussion of liberalism, especially German postwar liberalism and the Chicago School, see Foucault (2004); and for comment Lemke (2001).
2. Hall identifies with an 'eclecticism' that has little concern for coherence. Typically, he flirts with a range of fashionable Marxist terms – from the Althusserian 'articulation' to signification – inserting them into a broadly constructivist and yet sociological approach to ideologies and cultures of resistance. His lingering debt to the New Left appears in his constant return to agency, practice, resistance and (in my view rather problematically) modernist sociological categories. Compare Proctor (2004).

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